

THE MOST GRACIOUS PRESENCE
SRI MA ANANDAMAYEE



Bithika Mukerji

THE MOST GRACIOUS PRESENCE

SRI MA ANANDAMA YI

Volume Two : 1939-1959

BITHIKA MUKERJI

Publishers

Shree Shree Anandamaye Sangha

P.O. Kankhal, Hardwar-249408

Deepavali, October, 2011

ISBN 81-89558-30-7

Price : Rs. 275/- or US. dollars 8/-

Printed at :

Ratna Offsets Limited

Kamachha, Varanasi

Ph. 2455742



CONTENTS

	<i>Page No.</i>
1. Sri Jamnalal Bajaj comes to Ma and stays near her	14
2. Ma's visit to Sevagram and one memorable night with Mahatma Gandhi	16
3. Uday Shankar, the dance maestro, gets attached to Ma	48
4. In the midst of leading <i>Mahatmas</i>	55
5. The new ashram at Varanasi and the first Vasanti Puja	64
6. Last visit to Dhaka Ashram	107
7. Final meeting with Mahatma Gandhi	110
8. Three year long <i>Mahayagna</i> begins in Varanasi	116
9. New lease of life for Ramlal	117
10. Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, the first Indian Governor of U.P. invites Ma to Raj Bhawan	169
11. Commencement of 15 minute's silence	177
12. Inauguration of Annapurna Temple in Varanasi and starting of annual Annakut festival	192
13. Visit to Morvi - royal reception to Ma	195
14. Ma's first visit to Ananda Kashi	198
15. Elaborate Birthday celebrations in Punjab at the request of <i>Mahatmas</i>	200

16. Ceremonious visit to Mandi State	202
17. Inception of Anandamayee Karuna	205
18. The story of two trees in an unknown village & Ma's special care for them	209
19. Singing by Ma of the divine song in Simla	216
20. Formation of "Shree Shree Anandamayee Sangha"	221
21. First Samyam Saptah in Varanasi	222
22. Swami Shankar Bharati meets Ma on Devi's bidding	231
23. Trip to South India alongwith <i>Mahatmas</i>	235
24. Purna Kumbh Mela in Allahabad — The great tragedy	298
25. Gopalji comes to Varanasi Ashram	311
26. The High Commissioner of Pakistan comes to Ma - Dy. High Commissioner's unusual trance	318
27. Visit to Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi on Dr. Radhakrishnan's special request	343
28. Diamond Jubilee Celebration of Ma in Varanasi	351
29. Reception in Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi by the President Dr. Rajendra Prasad and his wife	388
30. Daya Mata, President, Self Realization Fellowship of Sri Paramahansa Yogananda comes to Ma	410

*Dedicated at the feet
of
Shree Shree Ma Anandamayee
in memory of a very staunch devotee
and renowned philanthropist
Lokumal Kishinchand Chellaram
by
Lokumal Kishinchand Charity Trust*

CHAPTER ONE

During The Years of Turmoil

From Mataji one can but rarely get a definite decision on any problem that is why I wondered of what use it was to write down her utterances? I asked Mataji about it.

Mataji : At least you have understood that there is a state where problems are no longer settled in any particular way. In the course of your life you have after careful consideration come to a decision on many questions, have you not? But now you have to realize that no solution is ever conclusive; in other words, you will have to go beyond the level where there is certainty and uncertainty. The resolution of a problem arrived at by the mind must of necessity be from a particular point of view; consequently there will be room for contradiction, since your solution represents but one aspect. What then have you actually solved? You will find a complete and final solution of each particular question from its own particular angle of emergence; and you will also find that there is a place where all problems (actual and possible) have but one universal solution, in which there is no longer any room left for contradiction. The question of solution or non-solution will then cease to arise: whether one says 'yes' or 'no'-everything is That.

-Atmananda

Sri Ma Anandamayi continued to travel. In retrospect the travels appear as a harmonious flow of action, a seamless

weaving of many variables. After leaving Dhaka in 1932, Sri Ma had travelled with Bholanath, Bhajji, Didi, Akhandananda (Didi's father) and a few other very close associates. They were mostly Bengalis. After the passing away of Bholanath a major change which came to the fore by imperceptible degrees was the gradual disintegration of the close-knit family type set-up. Sri Ma wandering among strangers acquired a retinue of Kashmiris, Punjabis, and hill-folk from surrounding mountain regions. The word "stranger", however, is not right. Nobody was ever a stranger to Sri Ma. All newcomers became as if family from day one. The newcomers did not ask questions about her early life. They accepted her as they found her—a miracle in herself (as stated by Mahalakshmi), a radiant taintless being, whose loving glance of welcome and acceptance called forth an allegiance at once undemanding and fulfilling.

Sri Ma accompanied by only Ruma Devi and Abhaya went up to Simla in July 1939 to attend the annual event of the *nāma-yajña*. Since Sri Ma was without her retinue of long-time companions she seemed more accessible to local people who now had the privilege of looking to her simple requirements. They could mix more freely with her and found it to be a charming experience. This happened in all the places she visited such as Moradabad, Bareilly, Lucknow, Faizabad and Burdwan.

In the beginning of August 1939 Sri Ma came to Kolkata. She went first to the house of Jatish Guha (Bunidi's father). She stood outside the closed gates and with the help of Abhaya sang a few lines of *kirtan*, in the manner of street singers. The family recognizing Sri Ma's voice tumbled out of the house in great joy and excitement. Accompanied by this

group Sri Ma went on to other houses to announce her arrival in the city in this endearing way. The welcome news spread to all concerned like wild fire. Within a short time, Birla Mandir, where Sri Ma had put up, was teeming with a happy crowd of men, women and children.

After a few days in Kolkata, Sri Ma travelled to Dhaka. Outwardly many things had changed round her. The absence of Bholanath was felt keenly by such devotees as had known him for as long as they had known Sri Ma. But they also realized that Sri Ma's luminous personality was her very own and that she was entirely sufficient unto herself.

Surrounded by a large contingent from Kolkata and Dhaka, Sri Ma proceeded to Kheora, the village where she was born nearly 43 years ago. Even in these remote villages, people had heard about "Sri Anandamayi Ma" who used to be their little Nirmala, a well-beloved slip of a girl, so endearingly charming toward one and all.

People from nearby villages came to Kheora to greet and welcome the village girl who had become so famous. Sri Ma accompanied by her retinue paid visits to all the families who had known her in her childhood. She recalled many incidents of those early days. The village folk were delighted to be remembered so well. Summing up the general impression Sri Ma's childhood friend and namesake Nirmala Devi exclaimed in wonder, "Why, you haven't changed at all!"

In fact Sri Ma was now middle-aged! Her social status had changed from that of a married woman to widowhood; far and wide she had been recognized as a Teacher who spoke from a position of authority; yet the spontaneous remark highlighted the essential timelessness of this most gracious presence!

Lakshmikanta Bhattacharya had donated to the devotees a piece of land in Kheora. A small building had been constructed on it. On 29th August, 1939, it was inaugurated as an Ashram. All devotees were pleased to have a temple in Kheora to be cherished as an important site for future pilgrimages. From Kheora Sri Ma travelled to Sultanpur and other nearby villages. Accompanied by an ever swelling crowd of companions she travelled leisurely in small boats, threading their way through the shallow waterways around rice-fields, halting occasionally when the sun became too hot under the overhanging branches of big trees. In this fashion she arrived at Vidyakut on September 10. Sri Ma had spent much of her childhood at Vidyakut, especially after her marriage and before she went to stay at Revati Mohan's, her eldest brother-in-law. All the elders of the village greeted her affectionately and lovingly, addressing her in the familiar second person (*tui*) and then became a little self-conscious wondering if the devotees from Kolkata and Dhaka would take it amiss.

In a couple of days, a change came over the people of Vidyakut. They were in a quandary. They could not keep up the tone of familiarity although Sri Ma did nothing to dissuade them. Speaking diffidently, they sought her guidance in spiritual matters. Even the elders asked her to say something to them. Sri Ma was quick to respond to the changed mood of the people. She spoke to them about the *samyam vrata* of one day, her usual response to large groups of people eager to make a beginning in *sadhana*.

The *samyam vrata* of one day :

Sri Ma said. 'If possible make a resolve to dedicate one day in one week (or one month) to the spiritual quest. The

should be devoted to *japa*, *pāth* (reading of scriptures) *dhyana* and *kirtan* (if one is so inclined). On the day, eat sparingly, speak only when necessary. Watch your own actions and words to avoid the least wrong-doing or incorrect statement. Emotions should be under control. One should look upon children as child-manifestations of the Divine. (*bāl-Gopāla*), one's husband or wife, not only as an object of love but reverence as well. Try to render service to all members of the family including servants, in a spirit of humility (*sevā-bhāva*). Even if there should be occasions for anger or other provocations, one should respond with calmness and not be jolted out of a tranquil frame of mind. There will be failures in the beginning but one should persevere till the goal of perfect *samyama* (control) in thought, speech and action is achieved. Even if one member of the family practices this *vrata* the entire family will feel the calming effect of that one day."

After a pause. Sri Ma added amidst laughter, "Maybe some naughty children would seek to take advantage of you, but it will pass. If you feel confident you may increase it to twice a week or even more. The aim is for it to become a way of life, rather than a special occasion. On this day, give maximum time to the study of sacred literature, practise a little meditation and also *nāma-japa*. You can draw up a schedule which suits you best. This *samyama vrata* will help you to turn inward, to be in tune with the rhythm of your own life-breath which links you to the cosmic breath (*visvaprāna*). In this way you may hope to realize your own Self because who knows at what auspicious moment you may not get caught up in that universal rhythm of Perfect Harmony!"

After this delightful interlude with the villagers of rural Bengal Sri Ma left this part of the country altogether and came

to the foothills of the Himalayas. She visited Solan for a while and from there she travelled to Suket, another hill state about a hundred and fifty miles from Pathankot. The Raja of Suket had been very pressing in his requests for Sri Ma to visit his state. He was one of those rulers who had the welfare of his people closest to his heart. It was his belief that the presence of Sri Anandamayi Ma in his state would sanctify it and be of immense benefit for its people.

Sri Ma's companions were impressed by the lavish arrangements for ceremonial receptions as soon as they crossed over into the state of Suket. The Raja, who was himself driving Sri Ma's car, would stop at key points to enable his subjects to gather round and pay their respects to the guest of honour.

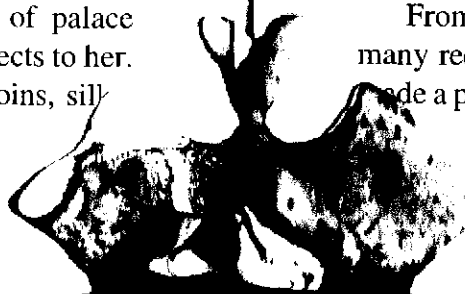
Sri Ma's room inside the palace grounds had been prepared with as much care, concern and splendour as if it were the temple of the presiding deity of the state. After a few days of joyous activities which characterized Sri Ma's presence anywhere, it was time to leave. On the day of departure the Raja placed before Sri Ma a heap of costly farewell gifts. Sri Ma looking upon the rich and glittering collection said to him gently. "These things that you have presented to me are now mine, so I should be free to bestow them on anybody I choose? I shall entrust them to worthy people who will take good care of them on my behalf." Saying so Sri Ma started distributing the gifts to the distinguished company assembled in her room to bid her farewell. She did not discriminate between the members of the Raja's family, important officers of the court and the group of palace servants who also had assembled to pay their respects to her. The heap of costly ornaments, gold and silver coins, silk

brocades, etc, vanished in moments. The Raja of Suket, an extraordinary devotee that he was remained totally obedient to Sri Ma's expressed *kheyala* about his princely gifts as about everything else.

Sri Ma at times described herself as an *udā pākhi*, that is a bird on the wing, a bird which perches on a random branch for a while and then flies off to alight on another. After leaving Suket Sri Ma passed through Baijnath and Amritsar. She made a short stay at Bareilly on her way to Almora. The well-educated, sophisticated and affluent ladies of Bareilly had their own special way of celebrating Sri Ma's presence in their midst. At Almora, the scene was different. The simple highland women clustered round her singing and dancing to the tune of "*ambe gauri maiya*". A group of eight of these women were known as Sri Ma's *asta-sakhis* (the eight friends). From the villages of Bengal, to the palaces of ruling princes, to the interior of Himalayan hill-towns, the perches of the "bird on the wing" were indeed many and varied.

Sri Ma came away from the high mountains to the hilltop ashram of Vindhyachal on November 4, 1939. The war had been declared. Although India was not directly involved, it felt the impact in many ways. The political struggle for independence gathered strength. The Indian leaders said, in effect, that a free India would join the Allies but the British Government had no moral right to deploy Indian troops to different theatres of war without the consent of an Indian Government. All this was brushed aside by the War Cabinet. It was not yet time for the "liquidation of the Empire."

From Vindhyachal Sri Ma went to Kolkata in response to many requests from anxious devotees for her presence. She made a prolonged stay in the city over the Christmas holidays



of 1939. The political turmoil augmented by news of the war receded to insignificance when Sri Ma was near. Her serene mien had calming effect on all agitation.

The devotees of Kolkata soon had cause for real worry and concern. Sri Ma herself began to show signs of ill-health, so much so, that many sought her permission to call in doctors. Sri Ma, ever amenable to the suggestions of her companions, acquiesced, saying 'Now I shall have the *darshan* of many doctor *pitajis* and *kaviraj pitajis*.'

A few eminent doctors of the town as well as well-known *kavirajas* (practitioners of Indian medicine) came for consultations and treatment. After a few days of examinations of their extraordinary "patient" they acknowledged that they were baffled by the sudden appearance and disappearance of symptoms. How should they prescribe medicines when there was nothing to prescribe for! They appealed to Sri Ma to cure herself by her own *kheyala*. Sri Ma now had acquired a new group of devotees namely the medical practitioners of Eastern and Western medicines. One day she spoke to them, "The fact of the matter is that this body does not always follow the usual rules of good health. Sometimes, due to a lack of *kheyala* the body tends toward quietude. At such times if it is obliged to take in food, then the food may act as an impediment. So you may see symptoms of liver or stomach disorder. But since they are not diseases as such, they disappear when my *kheyala* is engaged toward a normal health condition. This is why you are unable to diagnose a disease or prescribe a treatment."

The doctors had come to the same conclusion already so they had no difficulty in understanding what she was saying. Sri Ma added rather mischievously, "You may have given rise to a new problem. People have seen so many doctors and

kavirajas visiting me, they will think that Ma is suffering from some terrible disease, but her companions are trying to keep it secret from the public!"

Sri Ma however, in response to the appeal by her new devotees, made a swift recovery by herself. The cloud of despondency was dispelled and all was joy again. It may be recalled here that a year earlier she had been ill in Hardwar at Dr. Pant's house and had recovered by yogic *kriyas* after her host had prayed to her to do so.

While Sri Ma was ill, Didi had written to all devotees to pray for her recovery. In response to this letter, Birendra C. Mukerjee (Didi's eldest brother) had written back giving a very scholarly and penetrating exegesis on Sri Ma's "illness". He had reminded Didi very gently not to forget that Sri Ma's body was not an ordinary one. The composition of elements of this particular advent was beyond the grasp of human intelligence. It was for Sri Ma's attendants to abide by the *kheyala*, be it for what may look like illness. Sri Ma was not limited by her surroundings. Who could tell if she were not responding to events taking place elsewhere and taking upon herself the sufferings of people we know nothing about. "To us her illness may seem odd or erratic but we may be sure it had a good reason and was effectively beneficial for humanity." Obviously Birendra Chandra had related Sri Ma's physical disorder with disastrous events taking place elsewhere in the world.

Didi was a bit consoled by this letter but for her not to be disturbed by Sri Ma's palpable discomfort was scarcely possible. Throughout the ensuing many years Sri Ma was often seen as if to right herself by yogic *kriyas*. While her body was assuming yogic postures she would pronounce

mantras or strings of words in Sanskrit. These manifestations were isolated events and did not interfere with her usual way of life. As always the yogic *kriyas* seemed to happen to her, a spontaneous rhythm activated a series of movements beautiful to behold. Her face would be luminous with an inner light and yet she would be quite her normal self. These were not *bhāvāvasthās* i.e. not like the states which her companions had seen in Dhaka in the early days of her public appearance. As always the supra-normal and the normal were so intermingled in her that all that was extraordinary seemed commonplace. Sri Ma returned to Vindhyachala in January, 1940.

The Coming of Paramananda :

After the death of Bhaiji Sri Ma had "seen" the face of a young *sadhu* in a vision. It had seemed to her, "One has gone, another is coming". She sometimes visualized future events in this way. In the summer of 1937 Bholanath had met Paramananda on the road in front of the Kishenpur Ashram. Bholanath recognised him as the young *sadhu* he had met previously at Uttarkashi. Bholanath invited him in and introduced him to Sri Ma. She recognised the face of her vision. She said, "If you ever feel inclined you may come to me wherever I am". Paramananda acknowledged the gracious invitation but right then he was not prepared to settle down anywhere. He went back to Uttarkashi. He had lived for many years in Gangotri (summer) and Uttarkashi (winter) practising his *sādhana* and studying the scriptures with the learned *mahatmas*, notably Devigiriji Maharaj. Sri Ma had met him again at Gangotri (May 1939). After about six months of this meeting Paramananda came in search of her to Vindhyachal (January 1940) and quietly joined her entourage.

Swami Paramananda in time became one of the manar

of Sri Ma's hectic and confusing affairs. It became his onerous duty to create order out of chaos, make impromptu arrangements at odd camping sites, provide provisions and if necessary cook large meals for the ever increasing crowds milling round Sri Ma. He had an uncanny knack of overcoming obstacles and making something out of nothing. Swamiji was always gratefully remembered by Sri Ma's entourage of young women as the last resort when it came to putting up the mosquito net for her at the end of a long day and very often in a very inconvenient place, as for example, an open terrace, the roof a barge, a lawn near a devotee's house. Swamiji would come and somehow find supports where none were visible before.

Bhaiji in his time had sometimes taken the initiative and suggested modes of travel or courses of action to Bholanath. Unless Sri Ma had a different *kheyala* these would be carried out. Now Paramananda waited on Sri Ma's *kheyala* never putting himself forward for any decisions big or small. Lately Sri Ma had got into the way of saying, "Go and ask Paramananda." Swamiji would listen to the proposal or controversy and give his opinion (as far as he was able) trying to align it with Sri Ma's *kheyala* for or against it. Very rarely he suggested disciplinary action against a few of Sri Ma's wayward retinue but she was either too kind-hearted or it was not in her *svarupa* to take offence or find fault. Once she had said, "If I were to take note of shortcomings none of you would be able to stay here (in her vicinity). But *karma* takes its own toll."

The political scene :

The decade of the forties was crucial for India as well as the world. Europe suffered the Second World War and India was ravaged by the waves of political unrest, riots, the truncating of its land

and its aftermath. Sri Ma's presence on the soil of India at the time exercised a calming and benign influence, the magnitude of its effects, no doubt will be appreciated by later generations.

Sri Ma went back to Bengal in February. She came to Puri where a new Ashram had been built near the beach at Swargadwar. She also went to Kheora later in the year; from there she went to Siddheshwari to grace the occasion of the installation ceremony of a Sivalingam in the Ashram. The "hollow" was now hidden completely under the Sivalingam.

From the villages of Bengal Sri Ma again came away to Raipur, Dehradun. She visited nearby places. The Zamindar of Doonga, Chaudhury Sher Singh was a devotee. She visited this remote estate with a small group of people. Doonga was like a forest retreat for everyone.

Indian leaders intensified their demand for freedom. All political leaders of the time, sooner or later, came to know Sri Anandamayi Ma and to a lesser or greater degree carried away the memory of her vibrant presence. In retrospect, one factor emerges distinctly with regard to Sri Ma's reception of politically important people. Some of her devotees had hoped that she would speak to them about national or international affairs. But we see that Sri Ma never deviated from her main theme of engaging everyone's attention on God-remembrance, the highest calling for man. She listened attentively to everyone, was quick to appreciate the various aspects of a political situation, showed care and concern for the efforts made by patriotic men and women. She, however, remained singularly untouched by the eddying forces of temporal power. The Oneness she spoke of was not a message. It was she herself. She saw no other, neither as a person,

province or a country; how should she then address herself to a conflict situation?

It so happened that during the War, an old gentleman asked her about it and whether it would affect the fortunes of India (Kishenpur Ashram 1941). Sri Ma broke out in one of her loud ringing peals of laughter (*attāhāsa*). She said, "Is there a war? It requires two to fight, does it not? How can there be a war without an enemy? Is there more than One, that there should be two contestants? The war you describe is a clapping of hands by the same Person. Pitaji, why do you worry? Try to accept whatever happens as a manifestation of the Divine!"

The decade of the Forties saw an unprecedented influx of young men and women in the Ashrams being built all over the country by devotees for Sri Ma. Many of the future ascetics and office-bearers who were close to her came around this time. Swarup Bhai (Swami Swarupanandaji) and Prakash Bhai (Swami Prakashanandaji) were two friends who came to visit and stayed on. Shailesh (Sivananda) Kusum (Nirvanananda) Subodh and Bhupen, the four brothers from Allahabad, joined Sri Ma's entourage from time to time. Bharatbhai (Swami Bhaskarananda) came as a young man and stayed on. Tapan (Nirmalananda) began as a student of the Vidyapeeth. Panuda and Mrinmayda originally came as tutors in the Vidyapeeth. They were all followed by others. Bibhuda and his sister Bindudi were seen in Sri Ma's company regularly. Bibhuda became well-known as the singer who could nearly always invoke Sri Ma's *kheyala* to sing for the congregations.

Other names which should be recorded here are Shobhan Brahmachari and Hiru Brahmachari who were both fine teachers.



Among Sri Ma's earliest girl companions was young Buni to begin with. Buni was soon joined by Bilas (Udasji), Swarnalata (Billoji), Savitri (Kshamadi) and Renu. The younger sisters of Renu, Kawna and Bithu, were soon joined by Chhabhi, Moni, Gini, Tara, Buba and Sati and many others.

All these students clustered round Sri Ma during vacations. All visitors gradually began to become familiar with Buni and Renu as Sri Ma's regular companions.

During the years 1941-42 Sri Ma also came in close contact with many people who were totally involved with their country's affairs. She displayed the same equable acceptance of their total devotion on the one hand as in the case of Jamnalal Bajaj or just respectful obeisance on the part of many others.

Seth Jamnalal Bajaj

Seth Jamnalal Bajaj was one of the very notable leaders of those times. He was known to be the powerful right hand man of Mahatma Gandhi. In the summer of 1941 he came to Dehra Dun to meet Jawaharlal Nehru who was in jail in this town. He also went up to Mussoorie to enquire about the welfare of Indira, a young school girl at the time. After discharging these duties on behalf of Gandhiji he came to meet Sri Ma at Raipur Ashram. For some time he had been struggling with inner doubts and wrestling with spiritual disquiet. Gandhiji unable to answer his questions satisfactorily had said, "Go and meet Kamala's guru Anandamayi Ma, while you are in Dehra Dun. Maybe she will help you."

This meeting proved to be of momentous significance in Sethji's life. He had found his haven of peace. His surrender at her feet seemed total and unqualified. He talked with Sri

for long hours in private as well as in public. Once in a reminiscent mood, he began to say, "When I was in jail.." Sri Ma interrupted him to say, "Do you think you are not in jail now? There are bondages you are not aware of, that is all". He laughed with the other members of the congregation. His sense of home-coming in the Ashram affected Sri Ma's companions also. They knew him to be one of them. At his request they began to address him as "Bhaiya" (brother) rather than by any of his titles.

Jamnalal, in many ways, reminded the Ashram people of Bhaiji. His total self-surrender to the *kheyala* of Sri Ma was exemplary. He was ready to give up his work in the service of his country and wished to write to Gandhiji to this effect. Sri Ma dissuaded him. It was difficult for him to wrench himself away from Sri Ma's vicinity. He sent wires to Gandhiji to extend his stay. Even so, a time came when he was obliged to bid farewell and leave for Wardha. It was his dearest wish that Sri Ma should meet Mahatma Gandhi. He invited her to come to Wardha and wrote to Gandhiji to endorse the invitation. Gandhiji promptly wired back to say, "Bring her with you".

Sri Ma had no *kheyala* to travel at this time, so Jamnalal left for Wardha by himself. From his private conversations with Sri Ma he had come to believe that maybe his days were drawing to a close. On returning home he was seen to be withdrawing himself as far as possible from unnecessary engagements. He settled his family affairs. He had moved to a small place called *Gopuri* where he had a small hut made for his use only and spent as much time as he could spare in this retreat, practising his *sadhana*. Sri Ma had said to him once interrupting his elaborate plans for the future, "Who knows how much time a man has at his disposal? It may be six months, it may be six years. One should always be prepared."¹

The summer months were spent in Raipur and Kishenpur Ashrams. The Vidyapeeth for boys was housed in Kishenpur Ashram. The Raja Sahab of Solan had assumed charge of all expenses for this school. Hari Ramji was always ready to help. Sachikanta Ghosh of Kolkata came to live in the Ashram as an ascetic. He also lent his valuable support to the school. The boys dressed in yellow like brahmacharis settled down to a routine of studies, prayers, games, etc. in the company of their dedicated teachers and under the guardianship of elders in the Ashram.

The beginning of the year 1942 found Sri Ma on her travels as usual. She was actually travelling by train (from Lucknow to Jhansi) when the sad news of Jamnalal's demise was conveyed to her (February 10, 1942)

Didi, Abhaya and others were shocked and saddened by the news. Didi looking upon Sri Ma's calm countenance said in a little hurt tone, "You are so unconcerned. He wanted you to visit him at Wardha so much and now he is no more." Sri Ma said, "You talk nonsense. Who has gone where? Nobody is lost to me!"

Sri Anandamayi Ma visits Sevagram :

Sri Ma however came to Wardha about a week later, accompanied by Paramananda, Didi, Abhaya and Hari Ram Joshi.

Ma in her inimitable style assuaged the grief of Janakiben, Jamnalal's wife. To her lamentations that Sri Ma had come when he was not there to greet her, she said, "Why do you think he is not here? I have come to meet him as well as all of you. You must all behave as he would have wished you to do."

Perhaps Sri Ma had chosen the best moment for her visit, when all was in disarray. Jamnalal had taken refuge at her feet. So she came to uphold his family at their time of utter distress. Sri Ma took up her abode in the tiny hut where Jamnalal had spent much of his time in the last six months. Janakiben came to join her there. Ma lightened the burden of grief weighing on the heart of the poor lady. Her son Kamalnayan was constantly in attendance. Sri Ma answered their anguished questions and smoothed over their state of bewilderment; she conversed with them for long hours about the beloved departed one. In time Janakiben and Kamalnayan began to look more settled and at peace. Sri Ma's benign presence exercised its usual effect of spreading peace and tranquility. The people who came on visits of condolence sat near her and found peace.

While Sri Ma was there a small *satsang* was held in front of the hut by the young girls of the local Mahila Mandal. After the *satsang*, one of the young girls asked: "Mataji, tell me please, how does God appear to you?"

Sri Ma (smiling): "Just as close to me as you are now." After a while she addressed the girls, "You are truly fortunate. You are engaged in dedicated service from this early age. But try to remember that service cannot be rendered unless you keep Him in constant remembrance. All young people are my friends and their parents are my parents. You are my friends. Please always remember that there can be no peace without God-remembrance. This is *dunia* (world), *du-nia* twofold. Sorrow is endemic to it. But if you stay with Him then you need suffer no pain. Peace comes only with complete surrender to God."

Question: "Mataji, how did you gain this state of love for God?"



Sri Ma "The question of this body need not arise. It is this body's nature."

Question: "Mataji, tell us who you are."

Sri Ma "What do you think I am?"

Question: "I think you are God!"

Sri Ma "Whatever you think I am, I am that. If you say I am an insect or something bad, I am that too. Or if you say that I am your friend, that also I am."

Sri Ma continued to talk at length with the girls who were reluctant to leave her presence. They indeed had acquired a "friend"!

Mahatma Gandhi had been away in Kolkata. Now he returned to Wardha and called a meeting of all his people in the afternoon asking Janakiben especially to bring Sri Ma with her. The meeting was arranged to re-allocate the various responsibilities that Jamnalal had carried single-handedly. When Janakiben conveyed Gandhiji's invitation, Sri Ma said. "A small girl needs no invitation to visit her father. I shall run along to meet him whenever I feel like it."

Sri Ma, however, did not go to the meeting. On her return Janakiben was taken aback to find that Sri Ma was preparing to leave by the evening train. Janakiben exclaimed in great agitation, "How can this be! We were expecting you to stay here for a month at least. We told Bapuji so; you cannot leave without meeting him. Many people will come here for evening prayers. They will all want to have your *darshana*."

Mahatma Gandhi :

It did not seem that Sri Ma's *kheyala* was being deflected but luckily for them news was received that the evening train had been cancelled for public use due to troop movements. Sri Ma said she would take the next train in the morning. Babu Rajendra Prasad and Acharya Vinoba Bhave came to Gopuri and sat with Sri Ma for a while. They also requested her not to leave so soon. When everyone had settled down for the evening prayers, Sri Ma came out of the hut and sent for Kamalnayan. Kamalnayan was preparing to go to Sevagram to fetch Gandhiji knowing he would want to come himself to meet Sri Ma if she did not wish to go to Sevagram.

Sri Ma said she would go with him in the car. Most gladly Kamalnayan drove her to Sevagram accompanied by Didi, Paramananda, Abhaya and Hari Ram Joshi. Babu Rajendra Prasad also went back with them.

Gandhiji was sitting in his room, surrounded by his entourage. Sri Ma while mounting the steps of the verandah called out. "Pitaji, Pitaji" like a little child. Gandhiji spread out his arms and received her in a close embrace and made her sit beside him. He spoke to her very affectionately as if she were well-known to him. He said, "Do you know who sent Jamnalal to you? It was I. He told me very frankly that the peace and serenity of spirit he had not received from me, he had in full measure from you. He was beside himself with joy after meeting with you. You know. I heard about you first from Kamala (Nehru). She had also wanted me to meet you."

Sri Ma nodded, without speaking.

Gandhiji then looking around at his people said in introduction, "Kamala looked upon her as her Guru."

Sri Ma spoke up "Pitaji, I am nobody's guru. I am a little girl only." Gandhiji smilingly endorsed this statement saying. "Yes, yes, you are my little girl."

After some light conversation he said, "You must not talk about leaving so soon. Stay here with me for at least a couple of days."

Sri Ma said "Pitaji, you should know that this child of yours is wayward and not always able to heed requests. After all children do inherit their father's trait. I am like you in this." Everyone laughed. An atmosphere of gaiety prevailed. But gradually it dawned on everyone that Sri Ma was steady in her *kheyala* of leaving Sevagram by the early morning train.

Abhaya expressed his disappointment by saying that he had hoped for some fruitful dialogue on spiritual matters, but there was not enough time for any such conversation. Gandhiji said, "You are travelling always with Mataji. Bring her to Sevagram again sometime."

Gandhiji made another effort to persuade her. He said, "If you do not listen to me, everyone will make fun of me. They will say. 'He could not persuade a small girl, how will he prevail upon the Chinese minister!'"

Sri Ma said, "As if Pitaji cares about such things. Moreover, what harm if people were to enjoy themselves at Pitaji's expense."

Kamalnayan said he would leave Sri Ma with Gandhiji to see if he would be able to change her *kheyala* in the morning. Gandhiji said. "Yes, yes, my little girl will spend the night here with me". He asked his people to make all proper arrangements for them.

Gandhiji had not rested since his return from Kolkata or the meeting. Now he retired within the cottage for a refreshing rest and to eat a light meal. Sri Ma's light repast had been prepared for her at Gopuri. Kamalnayan drove back with Paramananda, Abhaya and Hariram for their evening meal and also for fetching their baggage and the dish of a little sago boiled in milk for Sri Ma. All the while Sri Ma sat quietly awaiting Gandhiji's return. Dr. Sushila Nayyar took this opportunity to say, "He is very tired. It will be better if there is no more talk tonight." Sri Ma assured her that she had nothing to say.

Gandhiji returned to the front room. As before he made Sri Ma sit very close to him. He spoke a little about Jamnalal. He said, "Jamnalal had hand-spun a lot of thread while he was in jail. He had a set of *dhotis* made out of this thread for Mataji (Anandmayi). Mataji had this cloth divided into four pieces. She has given one piece to me, one to Vinoba Bhawe, one to Janakiben and has kept one piece for herself."

Sri Ma said, "Pitaji, at one time I also used to hand-spin a lot of thread. Once when you were visiting Dhaka, I went to see you and stood with the crowd." There was a little desultory conversation like this. Then Gandhiji lay down still keeping Sri Ma close to him. Didi writes in wonder that she had never before seen Ma resting so close to anyone, truly like a little girl with her father.

When the party returned from Gopuri, Didi quietly asked Sri Ma to come to the verandah where she was given a little of the food brought for her. After this quick meal Sri Ma again went back and lay down as before next to Gandhiji. Didi and Janakiben also made their own arrangements for the night in the same room. Gandhiji's attendants were rendering him some little services. A number of them were also in the room.

Sri Ma said suddenly addressing one of them. "If I take Bapuji away from you what will you do?" They answered promptly. "We shall all come with him!" Sri Ma then said very quietly to Gandhiji, "Pitaji, I shall fetch you away when it is time. Right?" Gandhiji in as quiet and grave a voice said. "Yes," Sri Ma said again, "Pitaji will remember this pact between us, won't he?" Gandhiji nodded assent.

Didi and Hari Ram exchanged a quick glance, taken aback by the odd exchange of words. Hari Ram wanted to ask something but Didi signalled him not to speak. The room grew quiet. Hari Ram, Abhaya and Paramananda were accommodated in other rooms.

Everybody got up before dawn. Sri Ma said gently, "So many people abide by Pitaji's wishes- here I am being so disobedient. Pitaji will not be cross with me, will he?" Gandhiji said. "What do you care! You are my clever girl." Sri Ma said, "Whenever I have the *kheyala* I shall come and enter your house. What do you say, Pitaji?" Gandhiji, "Yes so do thieves come unasked and unannounced."

Sri Ma "Fine! Pitaji has called me a thief. I shall steal everything from you. You agree?" Gandhiji looked upon her radiant countenance and nodded quietly. He said, "Where can I get such a thief who appropriates everything? Such a thief has now come to me from Dehra Dun. So be it!" It did seem that Gandhiji had caught a glimpse of the unfathomable nature of Sri Ma.

Soon it was time to go. Kasturba Gandhi met Sri Ma and said she had for a long time wanted to have her *darshana*. Farewells were spoken. A small crowd accompanied Sri Ma to the railway station. Sri Ma spoke to Janakiben, "T

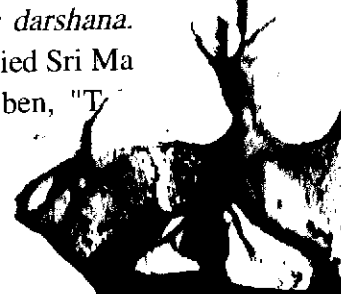
Mahatmajji to make preparations for returning home-it is time." Janakiben was taken aback. She exclaimed, "Is that so?" Sri Ma played down her message a little, saying, "I am not speaking of the immediate future, but after all he is getting on in years, isn't he?"

It is true that Sri Ma did not have the *kheyala* to lend the support of her presence at Sevagram at this time but she did promise Gandhiji that she would abide by him at his crucial hour of need. After all Gandhiji was a great soul. May be he understood her and was content to leave things to her all-seeing *kheyala*.

On leaving Wardha Sri Ma continued to travel in her usual unplanned and erratic fashion. She would break her journey at odd places, electing to stay on railway platforms, if waiting rooms were not available. She apparently experienced no sense of discomfort. Her retinue was happy enough just to be able to stay near her wherever she might be. Didi writes in her journal that it so happened that at every stage somebody would come forward to make arrangements for their comfort.

From Wardha Sri Ma came to Saugar via Nagpur. Fortuitous circumstances brought her to a small *dharamshala* on the banks of the holy river Vyas (March 1942). The tiny inn was situated in the middle of a wide open space surrounded by deep forests. There was a gigantic banyan tree near the cottage. Sri Ma would often sit under this tree quietly for many hours. Only Didi and Abhaya remained with her. Swamiji and Hari Ram, after settling them in, proceeded on to Dehra Dun on business.

Although Didi was used to a special aura of the supramental emanating from Sri Ma at times even she was amazed



to see its manifestations during this interlude. Sri Ma seemed somehow in a different dimension than theirs. Didi writes, "Ma remains withdrawn and quiet—(Yesterday) Ma sat up on her bed. Abhaya and I also sat up on our bed-rolls on the floor. She sat very still for more than an hour. Thereafter we heard her pronouncing beautifully what seemed to be *mantras* in Sanskrit. They were enunciated clearly but I couldn't retain them in my memory. Abhaya tried to write them down but his effort was not too successful as he lost many words."

Once Didi saw her in a strange solemn mood while her eyes filled with tears. She sat aloof and uncommunicative for a long time. On such occasions Didi kept up her vigil but did not dare to disturb her. One day Didi and Abhaya were astonished to hear her sing a song in a strange language which sounded foreign to them. She clapped her hands rhythmically and seemed quite engrossed in the musical venture. Sri Ma's moods were quite approachable at times and at times unfathomable, not in contradiction, but in complete harmony. There would be times when she would seem not to be with them at all but in regions unseen and unheard of by them. She would pronounce strange words at times and once she suddenly called out, "I am coming, I am coming," as if in answer to a prayer.

The arrangement for their stay at this small place called Chitora was made by a devout lady of Saugar. She was a distant relation of the ruling house of Nepal. She was always requesting Sri Ma to take up residence in the grounds of her own mansion but Sri Ma had the *kheyala* to move further away from cities. After a fortnight at Chitora Sri Ma moved on to another *dharmashala* situated in a remote village at a distance of 65 miles called Barmanghat on the bank of the holy

Narmada. The entire region is considered hallowed and sanctified and is beloved of pilgrims and *sadhus* desirous of practising rigorous *sadhana*. One may meet well-known *mahatmas* living incognito in quiet retreats. Sri Ma, Didi and Abhaya were invited by an elderly Rani of Nepal to stay in her Palace for as long as they liked. But she soon realized that Sri Ma had the *kheyala* to live away from towns. So she provided them with a car and a driver and told them about a little *dharamshala* in the interior of the forest.

The driver Gauri Shankar drove along a forest track and soon came to a place where it petered out. Stopping the car, he guided them through the forest to the *dharamshala*. It was a beautiful quiet place. The river flowed nearby. They found that only two rooms were in good repair but under the occupation of a *sadhu*. He pointed out a set of dirty and dilapidated rooms to them evidently apprehensive that he would be dispossessed of at least one of his rooms. Gauri Shankar, the driver, knew Sri Ma to be an honoured guest of his mistress and he himself by now had become a staunch devotee. He said to Didi that he only had to inform the villagers who would make all suitable arrangements for them and find some other accommodation for the *sadhu*. Sri Ma dissuaded them saying she would not like to cause any disturbance to the *sadhu*. One of the rooms available would suffice for her. The driver then fetched a villager who cleaned up the dirty room as best as he could. He fetched them water from the river and some provisions and milk from the village. After spending the night in these singularly beautiful surroundings, Sri Ma left for the other bank of the river in the morning. She said she would leave the *sadhu* to enjoy his solitude. By this time the *sadhu* had changed his attitude and made moves of welcome but Sri Ma had the *kheyala* to leave

him to enjoy his own way of life.

Sri Ma wandered around, staying under trees or on temple verandahs. Wherever she sat for a while, she would attract some visitors. The pilgrims who came to bathe in the river came up and sat near her. Didi wondered at Sri Ma's strange ways. When she could stay in comfort at the residences of princesses she chose to live like a homeless mendicant. Didi and Abhaya however were content to follow and make the best of these odd camping sites.

Once Sri Ma accompanied by Didi and Abhaya strolled along the moonlit sandy shores of the quietly flowing Narmada. They came across a *sadhu* sitting alone by the river bank. They recognised him as an ascetic of some repute, a person who was held in great esteem by the local people. He greeted them and with his consent they sat down near him on the sandy beach. For sometime there was utter silence. Then Sri Ma said, "How can the mind be brought under control?"

The *sadhu* : What should I say to you? You are yourself Perfection!

Didi said, "Please speak for us?"

The *sadhu* answered : "By moral behaviour in and out. By constant practice one can attain control. To think that I shall not ride lest I fall off is not right. One should be determined to hold the reins under control. But as far as you are concerned you should not worry; you are in the company of Sri Ma. The scriptures say that such company is *durlava*, *agamyā* and *amogha*. *Durlava* means a rare privilege, *agamyā* means difficult to sustain because the mind is overcome by doubts and *amogha* means it is not to be gainsaid. Once you have taken refuge your success is assured. The *sadhu* was silent again. After a while he said, "It is my good fortune that I have

experienced your presence here on the bank of holy Narmada".

There was utter silence thereafter. The lonely beach was bathed in moonlight. They sat there for a long time, quiet and at peace.

After a while Sri Ma returned to Chitora, to the little cottage on the bank of the river Vyas. They had spent a fortnight here earlier. Sri Ma was mostly quiet. Didi took the opportunity to read out letters to her and send off answers. Somebody had asked, "While doing *nāma-japa*, is it necessary to think of the Form and the characteristics of the Divine Person?"

Sri Ma said, "Write to him that the Name and Form are identical; characteristics are also inseparable. While you are repeating the Name, the Form and characteristics could also be meditated upon. But if you cannot do this then you can separate them. As a matter of fact the *nāma-japa* alone is sufficient for illumination. The Name alone is self-sufficient. What is necessary is truth, celibacy and dispassion (*vairāgya*). Take the shelter of the Name, obey your guru's instructions implicitly and give as much time as possible to *satsang*."

The elderly princess from Saugar came every day to sit with Sri Ma. She asked questions about her own *sādhana*. Once Sri Ma said to her, 'See, you and I are two persons. Then again you and I are One. The space between you and me is also the One. The question of the other doesn't arise. All feelings of anger, jealousy etc. arise out of a sense of separation. Consider one's own hands, feet, fingers etc. Can anyone hate his own limbs?-the entirety is One only."

The lady listened to Sri Ma with rapt attention. She could hardly tear herself away when the time came to leave. But Sri

Ma herself brought the session to an end because the road back to Saugar was through a dark forest.

Kanti Bhai Vyas

One morning Sri Ma suddenly pronounced what seemed to be a name : "Kanti, Kanti". Didi asked if Sri Ma was referring to Kantibhai Vyas, a young man they had met one year ago. Sri Ma did not say anything. This young man had left his home and had adopted a renunciate's life. He had approached Sri Ma for guidance in his spiritual quest. Sri Ma had said he should go on a pilgrimage first, he should meet all the *mahatmas* of good reputation and see if he found any place which would be congenial for him. Kantibhai in obedience to this suggestion started on an extensive tour of the country visting the *ashrams* of well-known *mahatmas*. After six months or so he again sought permission to return to Sri Ma but she wrote back to say that he should spend some more time in his search for a guru. Travelling around South India, Kantibhai came up to Santiniketan and wrote again to Sri Ma. He received Didi's postcard in Santiniketan but there was no return address on it since Sri Ma was constantly moving from place to place. Kantibhai was now ready to return to Sri Ma. His urgency was so great that he started for an unknown destination putting his faith in Sri Ma's *kheyala* for him. The tale of his search for Sri Ma in odd retreats was fascinating to Didi and Abhaya when not too unexpectedly he arrived in this remote place the same evening. Kantibhai said to Sri Ma that his search was over and that he would like to stay under her guidance only. So a permanent member was added to her entourage.

The time was the middle of April 1942. One day while Sri Ma was sitting on the verandah of the cottage, she exclaimed. "Rout (total debacle in war), rout, rout....the game is ended."

Abhaya said, "What game? Do you mean our sojourn in Chitora?" Sri Ma said. "My games are not limited by immediate space and time. There can be so many other forms." Didi also did not understand the reference to the rout in battle. After a few days they left Chitora for Saugar. The Nepali lady made all arrangements for them. When Sri Ma was ready to leave Saugar she requested her again and again not to forget them and bade a tearful farewell.

Sri Ma journeyed to Jhansi where she spent some time at a devotee's house. From Jhansi, she came to Varanasi, via Lucknow. A crowd was awaiting her arrival at the house of Bacchu in Ramapura. This was the house of Nimala C. Chatterji, the eldest brother-in-law of Didi. He had built a mud-hut for his own *sāadhanā* in a secluded part of the extensive gardens. Sometimes Sri Ma stayed in this hut when she was visiting Varanasi. It was convenient for the devotees because a large number could be accommodated in the big sprawling house. Bacchu's mother (the widow of Nirmal Babu) was a very gracious hostess.

The sacred thread ceremony for seven brahmin boys had been arranged for this time so that it could be performed in Sri Ma's presence. Five boys belonged to the Vidyapeeth, Navakumar, Tapan, Kalishankar, Gourishankar and Dashu. Two other boys Madan and Bindu were joined to the list, the sons of two of Sri Ma's devotees, Hari Ram Joshi and Niraj Nath Mukerji.

After the elaborate ceremony all the boys dressed in new and bright ochre robes of the *brahmachari* came to Sri Ma and received their first ever alms from her. She also visited them in their room, where they were to live in retreat for eleven days. After the function Sri Ma left the house and went to live on a big river-barge for a few days.

CHAPTER TWO

Sojourns in Dehradun and Almora

If Sri Ma were to take up her residence even in a desert, she would soon be surrounded by crowds."

-Dr. P. Pant

Raipur (Dehradun) April-November 1942:

The barge on the river became a focal point of convergence for all the devotees in Varanasi. The four brothers from the prestigious Mitra House at Chaukhambha came daily to hold their very typical session of Scriptural Recitations near Sri Ma in the evenings. Ajitda, Habulda, Patalda and Neruda were joined by Abhayda and Shobhanda (if he were there) and others to make these evening *kirtans* very rewarding. For many years this remained a regular feature of Sri Ma's presence in Varanasi.

After leaving Varanasi, Sri Ma travelled around in her usual haphazard manner. Finally she arrived at Raipur Ashram, and as things turned out she made a prolonged stay here for a few months. She did visit many nearby places in response to pressing invitations but she returned to Raipur after these short trips.

Raipur Ashram, situated on a hill-top, was no longer the same derelict temple and its precincts of Sri Ma's first visit in 1932. Now it had many rooms for visitors, as well as a big *satsang* hall and a couple of large terraces. The buildings were arranged in tiers against the steep mountainside. The Siva

temple was in good repair and occupied a central position. The majestic grandeur of the foothills of the Himalayas imparted to it a meditative quietude felt immediately by all visitors. The times were unsettled. But in Sri Ma's vicinity no one could be anything but at peace or joyous. People became increasingly aware of Sri Ma's unique way of being in the world and yet away from it. Her vision was apparently all-inclusive and not confined to conditions at home only.

In general Raipur was inhabited by Sri Ma's ascetic devotees only. It was a place for their *sādhana* away from the world. They, however, looked forward to her visits and hoped for her prolonged visit as keenly and eagerly as the villagers of Raipur who knew her very well.

Sri Ma's room adjoined the hall. One day, as she lay on her *chowki*, she spoke to Swami Paramananda, who was sitting a little way off busy with some work of the Ashram. Sri Ma said, "Some people were here just now to perform *arati*. Some sparks from their lamps fell on this body" Swamiji made no comment because this scene obviously belonged to a dimension not visible to him. But later when Didi was helping Sri Ma to change her *dhoti* she was surprised to see a few brown burn marks on the cloth. There was a spattering of tiny blisters on Sri Ma's soft skin as well. Evidently the line dividing the physical sphere and the supra-natural was tenuous in Sri Ma's vicinity.

Sri Ma seemed to continue in the same unearthly level of being in two sorts of circumstances simultaneously as some time back in Chitora. She would sit quietly while strange words and phrases came out of her mouth spontaneously. She offered no explanations. Didi sometimes made a note of these words but more often they remained unrecorded. Once Sri Ma

exclaimed "An attack! (*ākraman*) an attack! Weepings!" No one dared to ask her for references. Sometimes she was seen to perform yogic *kriyās* to the accompaniment of mantras in Sanskrit pronounced in grave and clear accents. Notwithstanding all this Sri Ma always was in full possession of herself, so everyone got used to her universal vision unbound by a particular place or time.

On May 3, 1942 (19th Vaisakh) Sri Ma's birthday was celebrated with suitable rites, *kirtan* and a lavish feast for the assembled throng of devotees.

Dr. P. Pant had settled at Bhimtal, a small township near Nainital, after giving away his house in Hardwar. He had been repeatedly requesting Sri Ma to visit him at Bhimtal. In the second week of May Sri Ma undertook the complicated journey (up and down the mountain ranges) to Bhimtal. After a few days, bidding farewell to the saddened Dr. Pant, she proceeded toward Nainital by slow stages stopping at many townships on the way. She was very well known throughout these hilly regions. The highland people gathered round her, wherever she stopped for a day or even a few hours. Sri Ma most graciously and untiringly mingled with them, answering their questions or just sitting under a tree in the open so that the ever growing crowd could have access to her. Once a tent put up for her rest and convenience remained unoccupied while Sri Ma made herself available to all by sitting out in the open.

In this way Sri Ma came to Nainital on June 3 via Bhowali to be received by Chintamani Pant. After gracing the reception he and his friends had arranged for her, she came to the Temple of Naina Devi where again she was well known. She stopped here for a few days.

One day she spoke to a small group of men sitting in front of her. "About the religious way of life....it is not being said that one must renounce the world and go away somewhere to live a life of asceticism. Stay where you are and do whatever you are doing. Just try to keep alive the flame of the remembrance of God's Name (*nāma-japa*). Carefully tend the flame-maybe this little spark will burn out all your impurities and make you clean and pure enough to take you to God. The Name and the Named are identical.

"You are a member of a household. Look upon your wife as the manifestation of Divine *Sakti*, (not only an object of love but reverence as well); or alternately, your husband as the personification of the Supreme Person. The children also are sparks of the Divine given to you for rendering love and service to the One only. Render service to God by considering all those who you come in contact with as so many images of the Supreme. Transform your perspective. Your life in the world itself may become a process of *sadhana*. What do you say? Can you make an effort?"

The small group of people expressed their concurrence. There were many men who had never even thought of leading a devout way of life. They were men of the world finding fulfilment in their professional careers. A new vision opened out for them. They looked upon Sri Ma's radiant countenance and were easily diverted to giving some thought to the finding of God in one's everyday life.

From Nainital Sri Ma, accompanied by her large entourage, came down to Delhi and took up her abode at Sri Hanuman Temple. The *pujari* (priest) of the Temple had long desired her visit. He now joyfully made arrangements for the comfort of his guests. Gradually other devotees came to know

of Sri Ma's advent in their town. In the evening Sri Ma was invited to the new house of the widow and sons of the late Haran Chandra Banerjee. As he had been one of the pillars of the famous *nāma-yajna* of Delhi, it was right that his sons Lal, Nani, Tulu, Khokon and daughter Saroma should arrange for this function in their house in honour of Sri Ma's presence. It was performed the next day with the usual fervour and enthralling music of unique quality.

Sri Ma also attended another *kirtan* session at the Kalibari (Temple of Kali). Sudhir Sarkar was a noted exponent of the episodic type of *kirtan* and was happy to have Sri Ma as an honoured auditor. Sudhir Sarkar became a devoted member of Sri Ma's ever expanding family.

Sri Ma returned to Raipur via Bareilly. Within a few days she left it again to make two quick trips to Doonga and to Meerut at the pressing invitations of the devotees of these places.

Maunima

Maunima was one of Sri Ma's devotees who had left home (with her husband's permission) for a life of *sādhana*. She had lived as an ascetic for some time and attained a state of tranquility. She had been *mauni* (silent) for the duration of her *sādhana* and hence came to be known as 'Maunima'. She seemed to be in communication with a region from where she received profound words of wisdom and beautiful expressions of spiritual experiences. (These had been compiled and published in a booklet called *Kanikā-Mālā*).

Maunima had joined Sri Ma's entourage in Raipur. Sri Ma made much of her. She would ask her visitors to go and sit near Maunima and listen to her advice. Maunima was like a child with her own awareness of the supra-natural. She would

quite innocently take pride in her yogic powers but always deferred to Sri Ma as the Supreme Person.

There were other ochre-robed ascetics in Raipur. Swamis Dharmeshananda. Shashwatananda, Mukti Maharaj, Akhandananda. Paramananda and a few others. Bishu Maharaj was in over-all charge of the Ashram. Abhaya would tease the Swamijis by saying that they would lose sight of the goal of their ascetic life if they succumbed to the fascination of living in Sri Ma's charming presence. He blamed Sri Ma also, saying she was distracting the ascetics away from their mantra of *tattvamasi* (That Thou Art). The swamijis smiled at him but did not enter into any arguments. Sri Ma herself spoke up in defence of her ochre-robed devotees. Very unexpectedly she said, "How would they deviate from their chosen path by focussing on this body with the *mantra* of *tattvamasi*?" The swamijis were well pleased by these self-revelatory words which was very rare with Sri Ma.

Maunima, so far the only lady in ochre robes (excepting Didima), was now again ready to live in retreat. In time everyone got used to Maunima's periodic attempts at living away from Sri Ma's proximity. Ma always made elaborate arrangements for Maunima to reside at any place of her choice, no matter, if they came to naught very often. This time Maunima wished to stay in Solan. Raja Durga Singh (or rather Jogibhai as he was known in Sri Ma's circle) always provided gracious hospitality to all who came to reside in his State. Sri Ma sent Didi to escort Maunima to Solan. Didi was made welcome by the various members of the princely household. She had a most interesting conversation with the *Raj-mata* (the queen mother). The elderly lady told Didi about her own experiences. She said that some years ago she had said to Sri

Ma "Ma I hear so much about *nirvikalpa samādhi*. I so much wish I could attain to that state-but I am old now, there is no hope for me." Sri Ma had said to her, "Why should it not happen to you? Continue in your *sadhana*. Sit still to meditate adopting the *padmāsana*. Everything is possible." The *Raj-mata* had replied sadly. "Ma I cannot sit up straight because of my backache. I am so old." Sri Ma put her hand on the old lady's back and said, "Of course, you will be able to sit up straight. Try to do so." The *Raj-mata* said to Didi, "Since that day not only can I sit up straight in *padmāsana* for many hours, but I see that my breath also flows in a slow rhythm. It is all Sri Ma's *kripa*!"

On her return to Raipur Didi related to Sri Ma all that the *Raj-mata* had said to her and expressed her wonderment that such an old lady was now engaged in such *sādhana* hoping for fulfilment in this very life. Sri Ma said, "There are so many incidents happening all the time. You are not always at hand, so you do not know about many of them and are surprised."

Gurupurnima at Raipur :

The devotees of Dehra Dun were keen to take full advantage of Sri Ma's presence in their midst on the occasion of Gurupurnima. They assembled in Raipur the previous day. It was well-known that Sri Ma did not countenance worship of her person. Neither did she make any prohibitions. She had her own way of dealing with such situations. Now as she entered the *satsang* hall on Gurupurnima day and saw the assembled people with all the paraphernalia of *puja*, she beckoned to two of the small girls of the *Kanyapeeth* who were staying in Raipur at the time. to come close to her. She sat in her place with the little girls next to her on either side. She said. "We shall now participate in *kumari-puja*; it is an auspicious day!"

The devotees fulfilled themselves by offering *puja* to Sri Ma as well as the *kumaris*. Nobody minded the extra effort when it included the worship of their own *ista-devatā* as well. So all was joy and the festive occasion was enjoyed fully by everyone.

In the evening Sri Ma said to Didi, "The Swamijis were saying the other day that it would be nice if I were to wear ochre-robos". (Probably in response to Abhaya's teasings for their allegiance to a person who was not a *sadhu*).

Sri Ma asked Didi to procure a set of newly dyed ochre-coloured *dhotis*. She put them on over her white dress and covered her head also. In this disguise she entered the *satsang* hall some time before the hour of *maunam*, and took her seat in a middle position. Didi according to her instructions sat in her usual place at the foot of Sri Ma's *chowki* (wooden cot). The residents came to the hall and were disappointed not to find Sri Ma in her usual place. Some went back. Mukti Maharaj strolled outside, glancing at the empty *chowki* from time to time.

After the hour of *maunam*, Sri Ma revealed herself as nobody had seen through her disguise. There were a few shame-faced acknowledgements of guilty behaviour. Sri Ma said, "It is best to abide by rules on your own. My presence or absence should not affect your routine of *sadhana*."

Kawna

Kawna was a young girl of nineteen, a niece of Sri Ma's devotee Niraj Nath Mukerji. She had been ailing for some months and was very keen for Sri Ma's *darshana*. She

and her sisters had spent the summer holidays, the previous year, in Raipur with Sri Ma and had become very devoted. She had actually wished to stay on with Sri Ma while her family returned home. But this had not been possible at the time. Next year she became ill. Because of Gandhiji's "Quit India" Movement in August, 1942 Niraj Nath could not leave his post. Sri Ma herself arranged for Kawna to come to Raipur. Unfortunately she continued to be ill instead of recovering her health in the mountain climate. Sri Ma seemed to assume full charge of the patient. She visited her room often making suitable arrangement for nursing and medications. Kawna was being looked after by her aunt and cousin Renu. Didi writes in her journal that she had not seen Sri Ma concern herself as much even over Bhajji's illness as over Kawna's. The young girl on her part won over the hearts of all the residents of the Ashram, as well as of visitors. Her patience and total dedication to Sri Ma were exemplary. She made nothing of her suffering but greeted everyone with her own special dazzling smile. Sevaji said that she came everyday to see Kawna's smile of utter joyousness, as if she were truly happy to be where she was. Sri Ma unobtrusively and by very gradual degrees effected remarkable changes in her. She was given an *alkhallā* (robe worn by *sadhus*) to wear. Kawna was an educated girl. Sri Ma spoke to her often of the unity of Atman and Brahman. Kawna was very receptive of the teaching. According to Sri Ma's *kheyāla*, she was initiated into *sannyāsa* mantra by Swami Akhandananda a short while before she breathed her last. Ma sat in her room surrounded by ochre-robed *sannyasis* who blessed the young girl one by one. Abhaya and his group sat outside the room singing *kirtan* extolling the name of Sri Krishna, Kawna's *Ishta-devata*.

Before leaving her room Sri Ma blessed her by passing her hands from head to toe three times. As she walked to the door she looked back at the girl. The bright eyes followed her. It was Didi's impression that Sri Ma took away Kawna with her. Rather than a death it seemed Kawna was received in the region of Grace coveted by all devotees (September 14th, 1942).

Sri Ma spoke for days of Kawna; her purity, her dedication, her cheerful nature, her total dependence on Sri Ma. Many people were affected by this profuse eulogy and said they were envious of Kawna's fate and wished they could also become worthy of such a way of departing life.

Durga Puja was celebrated in Raipur in 1942. Raipur also became the venue of the subsequent *pujas* of the Goddess Lakshmi and later, Kali, on the occasion of Deepavali.

In between Sri Ma visited Doonga, the Ashram built by Zamindar Sher Singhji. One day (probably November 3). Sri Ma was strolling on the verandah while her companions were having their midday meal. She was heard to pronounce many *sannyāsa* mantras as well as other aphorisms and words in Sanskrit. She seemed withdrawn but would smile graciously if people spoke to her. After a while she sat on her *chowki*. Somebody remarked that all these mantras of renunciation could be for Nepalda, one of her close lay devotees from Varanasi. A new ochre robe was fetched and laid on Sri Ma's lap in case she should have the *kheyāla* to give it to somebody. But apparently such was not her *kheyāla*.

It was apparent that although physically present she was in herself somewhere else. The mood of being elsewhere persisted. Once she said "*vivāda band karo*. (Put an end to controversy) or be *vi* without *vāda* conflict, *vi-vāda*. He (God)

to be found where there is *vi-vāda*. He Himself is Reality. Have faith and stop the conflict."

Sri Ma went on in this style for sometime, smiling at her audience the whole time. The people did not understand her reference to *vivāda* but did not dare to ask for an explanation either.

After a few days Sri Ma returned to Raipur. Kali Puja was celebrated in the Ashram. The majority of the devotees were people of mountain regions. They were not familiar with the *pujas* of the Goddess in this Form which is in the tradition of Bengal. But now, because of Sri Ma's presence a mingling of traditions happened to the enjoyment of the entire congregation. The highland people for the first time in their lives not only witnessed but also participated joyfully in the worship of the Images of Durga, Lakshmi and Kali.

In November 1942 Sri Ma left Raipur for an unknown destination. Her people were reluctant to see her embark on journeys which were uncertain and hazardous because of the war situation and the aftermath of the "Quit India" movement. All the leaders of the country were behind bars (August 1942). An atmosphere of uncertainty and unease prevailed. Troop movements were given priority so that civilians often had to cancel their journeys.

Sri Ma set out from Raipur accompanied by a few of her ascetic devotees. She left all the womenfolk in Raipur so that they would be safely away from any possible inconvenience. She travelled through various towns of Punjab. Sometime in late December she arrived in the village of Pundri in Uttar Pradesh. The Zamindar of Pundri was Lalloo Singh, the son-in-law of Chowdhary Sher Singh of Doonga. He was

delighted to see Sri Ma arrive with her few companions. Sometime previously he had entertained her on a lavish scale as the guest of honour on the occasion of the sanctification of a temple in the village. This time Sri Ma was suffering from a stomachache. Her companions sent word to Didi, who arrived in Pundri and was glad to assume her position near Sri Ma. Sri Ma usually did not allow her occasional ailments to interfere with her ongoing programmes. The hosts or congregations were not aware that she was suffering any discomfort. She always looked serene and untroubled. When she was in her own room, with her close companions, she would sometimes describe an ailment. Didi knew she would right herself in her own time, so there was nothing for anyone to do but await her *kheyāla* for her recovery.

The entire village of Pundri was devoted to Sri Ma. On the day of departure it started to rain. Laloo Singh and his wife Sudarshi began to pray to the rain-god for a deluge so that Sri Ma would be forced to cancel her journey. But, alas for them, the rain petered out. Sri Ma walked out amidst the crowd of villagers. She did not use the car brought for her but climbed on to one of the bullock carts of the village folk. Within a short while the entire population embarked on this journey to the railway station in a convoy of nine bullock carts.

Sri Ma spent the night in a *dharamshala* near the railway station with her companions, as well as the entire retinue of villagers. Bidding farewell to them she boarded her train early next morning for Vindhyachal, detraining at Mirzapur around 1 a.m. They spent the night in the railway station waiting room. Sri Ma and her few companions arrived at Vindhyachal Ashram on January 5, 1943.

It so happened that many distinctive events took place during the following weeks. Firstly Sri Ma's residence in the

Ashram attracted visitors from all nearby towns. The evenings saw groups of devotees from Mirzapur, Varanasi and Allahabad, clustering around Sri Ma. One of the local ladies, whose husband being a political agitator was behind bars at this time, was in a rebellious mood. She said, "Ma, why should anyone pray to God?"

"Because prayers establish a relationship with Him. It helps in the attainment of the goal which is to find Him in your life."

"I do not feel at all that I want anything to do with God."

"Look, before you were married, you had no feelings for your husband. Now that you know him well, you are concerned and are thinking of him constantly. So establish a relationship with God first. Prayers are for that. Once contact is established, then you will feel an involvement. This is to be cultivated to a greater degree."

"The husband you are concerned about has been a source of happiness for you and now he is a source of sorrow. But the Supreme Lord is ever a source of bliss, never does he forsake you once you know Him for what He is. I am not asking you to forget your concerns; it is right that you should worry about your husband. But if you learn to pray, it may become a supportive way of life."

It was in Vindhyachal Ashram at this time that Sri Ma was seen to perform beautiful yogic *kriyas* for a prolonged period of time—almost more than two hours. Her movements were smooth, graceful and perfect in their interlocking positions. Her breath was synchronised to the movements of her body and limbs. There was a radiance on her face and she seemed to be within an aura of effulgence altogether awe-inspiring.

There were five young women in her room, when Sri Ma entered into this transcendental state. As written before, the lines of demarcation between her various states of awareness were very tenuous. She would be with her audience quite normally, in one moment she would be transformed and apparently be in some other dimension of existence, but her return to her audience was as natural as her withdrawal. When asked about this phenomenon, Sri Ma had said once. "It is you who are describing the various stages of this body. I am always as I am."

One of the five witnesses (Sidhu, Renu, Buni, Udas and Kshama) of this phenomenon was Sidhu, the elder sister of Kawna, the girl who had died in Raipur a few months earlier. Sri Ma was very kind to her. The time was approaching for the annual *puja* of the Goddess Saraswati Devi. Sidhu happened to say, "How nice it would be if we could perform this *puja* near Ma, at this time." Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to grant her wish. It was as if a magic wand had been waved. The lonely rather inaccessible Ashram became a place of festivity almost overnight. The image of the Goddess was brought from Varanasi. By a coincidence Atul Thakur, a well-known savant arrived to visit Sri Ma. He agreed to perform the *puja*. Other arrangements happened smoothly. A large congregation witnessed the invocation and worship of the Goddess of Learning. Truly, one of Sri Ma's titles "*Jangal me mangal karani*" (One who transforms desolation into auspicious festivities) was well deserved.

Prabhudattaji Maharaj

Sometime in the first week of March. Protima Devi of Allahabad arrived in Vindhyachal Ashram accompanied by

the eminent *sadhu* Prabhudattaji Maharaj. This visit proved to be of great significance for later events. Prabhudattaji was a *mahātmā* of reputation in this part of the country. So far Sri Ma had not come in too close a contact with the ascetic orders of our tradition. All the monastic orders are bound by the rules of asceticism. The basic common rules would be not to mingle familiarly with the general public and to avoid altogether the company of women. The few *mahātmās* that she had come across on her travels had kept their distance. As far as our *sadhu-samajis* concerned, the credit for "recognizing" Sri Ma as the Teacher for the modern age must always belong to Prabhudattaji. He without any hesitation prostrated himself at Sri Ma's feet and asked for her blessings. The *mahātmā* seemed to have penetrated the many disguises behind which Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to dwell as an onlooker only. Her ordinary white clothes, her mode of abiding by the wishes of her chance-met entourage, her aloofness from any particular religious order yet her endorsement of all devotional attitudes indicated a personality which was enigmatic to say the least.

Sri Ma, in her turn, bent low to return the obeissance of the *mahātmā*. Her joint palms, her greeting of "*Nārāyana! Nārāyana!*", her welcoming smile, were the usual reciprocal greetings she accorded her distinguished visitors. A time came (in the last years of Sri Ma's presence on earth) when each head of every prestigious monastery acknowledged her as the personification of *brahmavidyā* (Supreme Knowledge). They gave her recognition and reverential treatment on all occasions of a gathering of *sadhus* and *mahatmas*. But for now Prabhudattaji was the first eminent *sadhu* to visit her and acknowledge her Divine presence.

Prabhudattaji was a cheerful, fun-loving person. He created an air of jollity wherever he was. Although he spoke no words but a mantra of God's names, he managed to convey every nuance of fun and frolic by his mode of accenting these words. He was invited to a midday meal. Didi was serving the food. Very soon everyone realised that Prabhudattaji was bent upon finishing some items so that Didi would be put to the embarrassment of saying there was no more! But he had reckoned without Sri Ma. Unknown to Didi, she had procured a lot of the preferred items and Didi seemed to have an unending supply. The *mahātmā* acknowledged his defeat amidst a lot of laughter.

He went away the next day inviting Sri Ma to visit him at his Jhansi Ashram on the other side of the Ganges from Prayag (Allahabad).

The second week of March saw Sri Ma travelling to Kolkata at the earnest invitation of Benoy Bhusan Sen, a devotee of long standing. As usual a crowd gathered round her within minutes of her arrival in the city. From Kolkata Sri Ma paid an unexpected but long-desired visit to Baharampur. The devotees of Baharampur had been praying for a visit so that they could perform a *nāma yajna* in her presence. Now they ecstatically set about the performance of this function which gave delight to all participants, hosts as well as visitors.

From Baharampur Sri Ma went to Dhaka for a short visit. She returned to Kolkata and was prevailed upon to stay till the festival of Holi (c 23rd March, 1943). Bengal being close to the Eastern front was under some pressure from a threat of war. Kolkata had already experienced bombings by Japan the previous year. Sri Ma's presence allayed all anxieties and

apprehensions for the future. She would say to the people who spoke of such matters. "All situations must be faced bravely and with confidence. Put your trust in God and know that whatever happens is the expression of God's will and nothing else."

Holi was performed with great enthusiasm and the colourful festival achieved perfection in Sri Ma's presence as was usual with all such celebrations. There was another feature which occurred regularly near Sri Ma whether she was on her travels or staying in one place. Her entourage was augmented by people who came to join her on a permanent basis or spend a few days in her company. At Dhaka this time Chhana and her little son Kanti had joined Sri Ma's party. They had left home to come away with her. (Her husband Anath was already an ashramite). Professor Nalini K. Brahma, an eminent philosopher of Kolkata travelled with her for a few days. He went with her to Baharampur and then on to Deoghar for a day. At Deoghar her host Mohanananda Brahmachariji was taken aback to learn of her short visit. Prof. Nalini K. Brahma was very appreciative of Sri Ma's way of forestalling requests for a longer stay. She said to Mohananandaji. "Whatever other people might say, I know Baba will never raise obstructions to my way of doing things. He knows how I am!"

Sri Ma returned to Vindhyachal via Varanasi at the end of March. After a few days she set out again on her ceaseless travels. She came to Lucknow and went on to Sitapur at the invitation of Hari Ram Joshi who was staying there at this time. She went on to Nimsar, a place of pilgrimage. Nimsar being a holy place, she was visited by many of the local people who were following an ascetic way of life. One ascetic asked her:

"How to get rid of sorrow? There seems no end to the sense of deprivation and want!"

Sri Ma: "Don't you know why this is so? Because you are on alien soil; if you find your way to where you belong, you will be at peace."

The ascetic: "Where is my home country (*svadesh*). How should I search for it?"

Sri Ma: "As a matter of fact there is no coming or going. It is all within you. One suffers from wants because it is believed that fulfilment will come from some place or some one else. Once you realise that fulfilment is within you, you will attain peace. The alienations are created by the wants and cravings which are not intrinsic to your real identity (*svabhāva*). So try to find your true self and learn to abide in it."

Question: "How?"

Sri Ma: "Your guru will guide you. He has already done so. Perseverance and honesty of purpose alone are required of you."

Sri Ma visited Delhi for a while at this time. She paid quick visits to many neighbouring places. Wherever she went a crowd would gather and since they did not know what else to do, they would organise *kirtans* for everyone.

The Dance Maestro Uday Shankar

Sometime at the end of April 1943. Sri Ma arrived in Almora via Bareilly. A very small Ashram had come up near the *Samadhi-mandir* of Bhairji constructed by Raja Durga

Singh (Yogibhai). Sri Ma took up her abode in this cottage. Since it was inevitable that devotees would gather as soon as the news of Sri Ma's sojourn in one place became known, some houses were taken on rent for the summer. Parashuramji, a devotee of Dehradun and a man of means immediately undertook the job of constructing a set of rooms for Sri Ma at one end of the plot of ground near the Samadhi-mandir which had been acquired for a spacious Ashram.

The Culture Centre of the world famous dance-maestro Uday Shankar was nearby. He had chosen this remote region for his training school because of its magnificent scenic beauty and ambience of meditative silence. Very soon Uday Shankar with his entire family of staff and students became a frequent visitor to Sri Ma's Ashram. All of them seemed to feel Sri Ma's enchantment. Uday Shankar, his wife Amala Devi, his brother Rajendra Shankar and Rajendra Shankar's wife, Lakshmi Shankar, his staff consisting of Simkie, a dancer of international fame, her husband Prabhat Ganguly, the well-known singer, Sati Devi and many others, within a short while became members of Sri Ma's extended family. Uday Shankar was pleased and honoured to celebrate Sri Ma's Birthday (3rd May 1943) at his school premises by putting on his magnificent shadow-play of the Ramayana. Uday Shankar and his troupe were in a way pioneers of the modern dance-form as a mode of public entertainment.

Uday Shankar was a devout person and brought a quality of reverence to this art form. He told Sri Ma that he had been very pleased to discover a Sivalingam buried in the land he had acquired for his school. The image was now housed in a Temple.

Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to speak at length on rhythm to these deserving auditors. She said "There is naught else but

the primal vibration. All is centred in rhythm or a concordance of movement and stillness.

"You plant a seed. There is latent vibration in it. So the seed sprouts forth and breaks out of the covering soil. The rhythm continues.

"Baba, this body for a few years went through a vast rhythmic coordination of body, mind and breath known to you as *sadhana*. I call it a play of *sadhana* since there was no will to perform or a progressive awareness of achievement. I was always as I am, a witness to the happenings. It was as if the entirety of man's endeavour towards enlightenment, endemic in all faiths was spread out before me to be experienced as genuinely as one's own. Sometimes people of other faiths are surprised by my understanding of their problems. But for me one way is as vividly present as any of the others.

"*sādhana* is the concretization of man's aspirations for Divine Grace. By *sādhana* one learns to be in tune with cosmic movements of the universe. The whole universe is strung together by this dance of vibrant movements—a cosmic play consisting of creation, preservation and annihilation.

"Baba, shall I tell you of an incident in Bajitpur? (During the play of *sādhana* 1918-1924). One day Bholanath came in while I was sitting in a corner of the room engrossed in my *sādhana*. I got up and said to him, "Sit here on the *chowki*, I shall perform *ārati* to you. He indulged me by taking his seat on the *chowki*. My body went through what can only be called a dance sequence (as I have witnessed here in your school). Up to that time I had never seen anybody dance, not even any pictures of such actions. I had no outward paraphernalia. It

was done by movement and *mudrās* only. Bholanath was amazed. He exclaimed, "Where did you learn all this!" But he knew of course that I had not learnt anything from outside.

"So you see what you are trying to enact here I understand fully. I would say a harmonious blending of utter stillness and vibrant motion is dance."

Abhaya inserted a question, "Can you feel devotional awareness when you dance?" Prabhat Babu said, "Yes".

Sri Ma endorsed this saying. "I heard Bābā (Uday Shankar) telling his students to hold on to a happy frame of mind while dancing. The harmony achieved by the perfect concordance of immobility and mobility is *spandan* (vibration). Both are simultaneously present. As for example the still waters of a pond. They look still, yet there is movement which may be seen if a breath of wind passes over them. One needs to go beyond the utter stillness of immobility and the rhythm of movement to that from whence everything comes. What do you say Baba?"

Uday Shankar listened to her in bemused fascination. He said, "This is all written in the sacred literature of our tradition. Isn't it wonderful the way Sri Ma explains in simple language the philosophy of the Dance Treatises we are required to study!"

Sri Ma started on her travels again in the beginning of June. Prabhudattaji persuaded her to visit Sahasradhara near Dehra Dun to attend an assembly of *sadhus*. Here she met Haribabaji Maharaj and the blind Sadhu Shri Sharananandaji. She visited Raipur and Nainital before returning to Almora, this time accompanied by Prabhudattaji around the middle of June.

It may be written here that all these hill-towns were situated on different mountain ranges. Sri Ma made nothing of going up one mountain range (Raipur, Mussoorie), coming down to the plains (Bareilly) to go up again to Nainital or Almora. Her entourage also made nothing of this alternate experience of the heat of the plains and the cool of the mountains. All was joy in her company.

Swami Akhandananda became slightly indisposed. Sri Ma realized that all these hectic travels were becoming too much for the old man. She herself travelled down to Vindhyachal to escort Swamiji to this ashram where, in general, he could stay in comfort.

Jhoolan Purnima (middle of August) was celebrated at Vindhyachal. After this function Sri Ma returned to Almora. The time was approaching for the celebration of the annual Durga-puja. Uday Shankar and his troupe had made arrangements for observing the *puja* of this magnificent icon at his school. But unfortunately his guru passed away and they were all in mourning. He requested the management of Sri Ma's Ashram to hold the function near Sri Ma on their behalf.

In Sri Ma's vicinity, there was no question of inconvenience, lack of facilities or want of enthusiasm. The annual Durga-puja of 1943 was celebrated with great eclat at the erstwhile small and quiet Ashram. Uday Shankar and his troupe of musicians mingled with the family of devotees. The gathering had the rare chance to see the "Ramlila" dance-drama in shadow play, which had been made famous by the dance-maestro.

On conclusion of this *puja* the entire congregation was treated to a feast on the wide open terrace in the middle of the

Ashram. One of the women workers, with a pitcher of water balanced on her hip stood in front of Sri Ma saying "See Ma, I am so tired. I cannot even stand straight!" Sri Ma said, "You are tired- give the load to me". She indicated her lap and asked the woman to put the receptacle of water there. The woman without much ado dumped the vessel on Sri Ma's lap. Ma asked Didi to put all the food stuff left over from the *bhoga* in the water receptacle. With a spoon she mixed up the various items with great concentration. She withdrew one spoonful and offered it to Paramananda saying, "See how does it taste?" Swamiji, after swallowing the morsel of food pronounced it to be very good. Other people began to stretch out their palms. Sri Ma with total absorption began to distribute the "*prasād*". Once or twice she would put a spoonful on her own head. Within a short while it became a "*Jagannatha kshetra*". All barriers of caste were broken. Those who had believed Sri Ma to be totally orthodox were amazed to see her mingling with everyone in the ritual of the partaking of "*prasād*".

CHAPTER THREE

The *Satsang* At Jhunsi

Sri Ma Anandamayi is "the finest flower that the soil of India has produced."

-Swami Sivananda

(Divine Life Society)

In response to Prabhudattaji's persistent appeals Sri Anandamayi Ma came to his riverside Ashram at Jhunsi in the third week of January 1944. She was received at the station by a great crowd of people singing *kirtan*. There was a formal band at the back of the crowd. The Ashram had been decorated with flags and festoons of garlands. Sri Ma was escorted by Prabhudattaji to all the important sites in the spacious Ashram. In the centre was an ornamental lotus pond, surrounded by a profusion of *hasil* plants (*tulasi*). He recited a Sanskrit couplet which meant. "(The Lord says) I reside permanently where there is daily reading of the *Bhagavata* near a lotus pond surrounded by a forest of *tulasi* plants". He said, "So I have ensured that the Lord would abide here always".

Sri Ma was shown the large *satsang* hall where a number of eminent *mahatmas* were expected to give discourses to a devout congregation. The simple people from surrounding villages were ever in attendance, ready to serve Prabhudattaji and his distinguished guests. Prabhudattaji brought Sri Ma and her attendants to the neat and pretty cottage specially made for her accommodation. He said. "Stay as long as you



Ma with some of the principal Mahatmas of those days.

like, I can make provisions for a thousand of your devotees if they should like to come here to be with you".

The extensive Ashram consisting of simple buildings was situated amidst a well-kept garden. It was for many an imaginative replica of an ancient hermitage as described in our scriptures. The atmosphere was calm and peaceful. The evening *kirtans* were rendered memorable by the leading golden voice of Ramji, a favoured disciple of Prabhudattaji.

Prabhudattaji was a pioneer among the *mahatmas*. He was very concerned about the people of the country. In August, 1942, the political leaders had been jailed by the Government. Prabhudattaji had felt that citizens should come forward to fill this lacuna in public life and provide some guidance to the people. Assemblies were forbidden under the Law. Code 144 was clamped on towns. So Prabhudattaji had begun to organise *kirtan sammelans*, that is congregational singing of devotional songs. *Satsangs* also were exempt from closure. *Satsangs*, therefore, were organised by him for group meetings as well as for listening to religious discourses. On this occasion he had invited many well-known ascetics with large followings to Jhuni prominent among them being Haribaji Maharaj of Vrindavan.

Satsang: An assembly of devout people

In the evenings the villagers assembled in the big *satsang* hall. People from the city across the river also came to participate in the proceedings. Eminent *mahatmas* were already staying at Jhuni at this time. Special seats were arranged for them at one narrow end of the hall, facing the assembly. Sri Ma's *asana* (seat) was so positioned in front of the group of women devotees that when seated she could turn to face the community of men as well as the *mahatmas* at left angle to her.

For a long time this remained the pattern of such assemblies. Very soon crowds increased; the *mahatmas* also, when they could be prevailed upon to leave their monasteries, came to grace such *satsangs*. To accommodate large congregations new arrangements were adopted. Platforms were raised at one end of the hall for the *mahatmas* so that they would be visible to all. Sri Ma was also given a place on the dais. Microphones and loudspeakers came into use. But this was yet to happen. For the present Sri Ma sat in front of the small group of women listening quietly to the discussion being conducted by the *sadhus*. When it was decided that a mammoth gathering would be organized for the purposes of religious activities, Prabhudattaji turned to Sri Ma and asked her to choose a site or venue for the function.

Sri Ma very unexpectedly broke out into a loud peal of ringing laughter. Didi only among the assembly had earlier heard this "*attahāsa*" (loud laughter).

A description is attempted here which will ever fall short of the reality. Sri Ma's whole body seemed to radiate this sound. When the present author, sitting next to her, heard the laughter she immediately understood the meaning of the word *attahāsa* used in the Durga Saptasati to describe the laughter of the Goddess. The sound was a high-toned *ha-ha* which burst forth like a sudden clap of thunder. There were no smiles or grins on anybody's face as generally happens when somebody laughs. The assembly sat in petrified silence. The volume and pitch of this laughter was totally awe-inspiring. Although very, very loud it was totally melodious. It did not suggest merriment which could be shared. By this sudden, spontaneous and miraculous display, Sri Ma at once put herself beyond the reach of the people surrounding her. She

was a being apart and beyond the ordinary norms of human judgement. The echoes of the ringing laughter eddied away leaving behind an utter stillness and silence in the hall.

Haribabaji broke the silence by saying softly. "It was thoughtless of us to ask the question to Sri Ma. She who belongs everywhere and to everyone, how should she 'choose'?" Other *mahatmas* also spoke interpretations of the "laughter" they had heard. The blind *mahatma*, Sharananandaji, who was greatly respected by the others as a scholar, said, "I now understand something of Sri Ma's *svarupa* (nature) of *ānanda*. This outpouring of *ullāsa* (divine joyousness) is possible only in her."

Other *mahatmas* also exclaimed at this phenomenon and seemed awakened to a new awareness of Sri Ma's enigmatic personality. They had met her earlier in Sahasradhara very briefly. Sri Ma now spoke in her usual gentle voice: "The decision my *pitajis* (the mahatmas) arrive at will be my decision". Quickly Jhuni itself was chosen as the most suitable site for this mammoth gathering of people which took place in due time.

Sri Ma continued to stay on in the ancient hermitage-like atmosphere of Jhuni. She attended the daily *satsangs*. For the rest of the day she was free to stroll around or to sit in her room holding conversations with visitors from Allahabad. At this time Dr. Pannalal* became a frequent visitor. He would come sometimes attended by his daughters and their families. As was usual in Sri Ma's vicinity, Dr. Pannalal's entire family became devoted to Sri Ma and remained so as time went by.

*. Dr. Pannalal D. Litt. I.C.S. Chief Secretary U.P., later became Principal Advisor to the Governor.

One day Sri Ma spoke at length to his daughters who were somewhat upset by the sufferings of their mother in the last months of her life. Their mother had been a very devout and God-fearing person. Sri Ma said, "You are not aware of reasons which shape and guide a person's life. When a mother recalls her child from play in order to give him a cleansing bath, she does not heed his reluctance. She does not clean his arm one day and his head the next day but gives him a full bath even if he is struggling to escape! So God in His unbounded mercy decrees suffering which will cleanse the accumulated *karma* of so many past lives. You cannot know the burden of *samskāras* which is laid on one. God not only ordains the necessary cleansing but bestows the capacity to abide by the hardship. He truly is the auspicious one. Whatever happens, know it to be His mercy and concern for you which is operating for your ultimate good."

Another question was put to Sri Ma very seriously and in all humility. "Can God be ever seen?" Sri Ma responded, "Yes indeed! Just as you see me in front of you; truly and really you can be as aware of God as any flesh and blood person!" The interlocutor gazed in awe at her radiant and gracious countenance and seemed convinced of the truth of her simple words.

Sri Ma's haphazard mode of travel became somewhat modified. Prabhudattaji had accepted an invitation to a very prestigious religious function being organized by the eminent scholar and renowned ascetic Karpatriji Maharaj at Delhi. Sri Ma had also been invited. Now Prabhudattaji escorted Sri Ma and Didi to this *yajna* in Delhi. They went by plane from Allahabad. This was Sri Ma's first air-flight. Didi writes in her journal that she and Prabhudattaji's attendant were overcome by nausea. Prabhudattaji also looked slightly comatose. Sri Ma sat in her seat looking her usual serene self.

After attending the function in Delhi, Prabhudattaji escorted Sri Ma and Didi to Vrindavan to Udiya Babaji's Ashram. Udiya Baba and Haribaba were two eminent *mahātmās* of this part of the country. They were friends and resided in the same Ashram although each followed a different tradition of *sādhana*.

They arrived in Vrindavan in the second week of February. Prabhudattaji, Haribabaji and Udiyababaji assembled in Sri Ma's room. Prabhudattaji acknowledged frankly, "I have brought away Anandamayi Ma from Almora because I feel strengthened in my purpose if she is with me. I feel encouraged by her gracious presence. She is kind and indulgent toward my importunities."

The *mahātmās* also acknowledged the importance of Sri Anandamayi Ma's presence and expressed their sense of obligation. Sri Ma replied in her usual self-effacing words. After some discussion the details of the coming big function at Triveni were settled.

Sri Ma was invited to the daily *satsang* in this Ashram. She witnessed for the first time a special feature of this place known as '*rāslilā*'. A troupe of small boys trained in dance and music and dressed up as *gopas* and *gopīs* of ancient times enacted some of the incidents from the life of Sri Krishna in the middle of the hall. Haribabaji was a devout spectator. When two little performers sat on a throne-like seat as Radha and Krishna, he stood behind wielding the *chāmar* (a large whisk-like fan for *aratis* in temples) for the entire duration of the play.

This troupe of musicians travelled with him so that he could attend the *Krishna-lilā* every morning. In due course all the Ashrams where Sri Ma entertained the *mahātmās* as guests became venues of this daily *rāslilā*. Gradually Sri Ma's

travels and programmes acquired a stability most unusual for her. For the time being, however. Sri Ma could not be persuaded to prolong her visit. She left Vrindavan for Varanasi accompanied by Prabhudattaji. They missed the connecting train at Mathura. Sri Ma herself guided them to a temple where she had stayed once before. The attendants of the temple recognised her and were happy to look after the small party. The next day they came to Mathura, where they again missed the train to Varanasi.

Prabhdattaji was able to persuade Sri Ma to change her destination and go straight on to Allahabad.

The devotees of Allahabad had organised a *nāma-yajna* at Krishna Kunja. Sri Ma was received with due ceremony at this hall in the city. The devotees of Delhi were already in town to celebrate their own special mode of this musical function.

Allahabad saw the first performance of the *nāma-yajna* at Krishna Kunja (mid-February). The continuous singing of the Names of God in a variety of tunes based on classical *rāgas* created the usual ambience of spiritual ardour. *Kirtan* is a celebration of God's immanence among his people. According to Gaudiya Vaisnavism, the incarnation of Lord Gauranga in the Iron Age of Kali took place just to show people the easiest mode of *sādhana* suitable for busy and hard times. It is easy to assemble and sing the praises of the Lord. He promised to be with his devotees whenever they gathered for the purpose of a community *kirtan*. So this formalised *kirtan* was as good as the *yajna* of earlier times and was known as *nāma-yajna*. On the eve of the *nāma-yajna* the presence of the Lords Gauranga and His main disciple Nityananda was invoked, the resolution (*sankalpa*) taken for a

dawn to sunset *kirtan* on the morrow. The last rite consisted in going out on the streets singing *kirtan*. Lastly the group assembled in front of the altar, and sang the concluding songs of farewell.

The new devotees of Allahabad learnt the ways of the *nāma-yajna*. The devotees of Delhi found hospitality and friendship. The family of Sri Ma continued to expand by leaps and bounds in this way.

The *Kirtan* festival at Triveni—February - March 1944 :

The *kirtan* festival arranged by Prabhudattaji took place with great enthusiasm at the site of the confluence of the holy rivers at Prayag-Triveni. Many temporary cottages and huts had been built for the accommodation of the visiting *mahātmās* and also Sri Ma and her retinue. A big *satsang*-hall saw the gathering of the eminent heads of ascetic orders who gave discourses to the public in the evenings.

Sri Ma gave a new dimension to the local standard of *kirtan*. She sent Didi to Navadweep to invite the noted *kirtaniyā* Haridas to come and participate in this function. When he arrived with his troupe of singers and players of the *khole* Sri Ma walked over on to the *bandh*² and received him there. She became the centre of a huge concourse of people immediately. On one side were the local people singing simply to the rhythm of clapping of hands and on the other the melodious rendering of *kirtan* was accompanied by the deep and sonorous sounds of a dozen *kholes* played in perfect unison. A pioneering in the mode of an amalgam of musical styles was accomplished by Sri Ma to the great enjoyment of all participants. Ramji was quick to pick up the tunes and rhythms of the Bengali style.

The festival caught on. It was a success fulfilling

Prabhudattaji's dream of a concourse of people one-pointedly pursuing religious ideals, although in a variety of ways—*kirtan*, *satsang*, *puja* or *yajna*. He in fact was so encouraged by this success that he postponed the concluding ritual by one extra day. When Sri Ma heard about this she said to Didi, "It is not right to change one's resolution (*sankalpa*). I hope nothing untoward will happen."

But something untoward did happen. By the time of the last and concluding oblations a storm had arisen creating havoc in the camp. The people feared that all cottages would be razed to the ground or blown away altogether. Sri Ma stood out in the rain and walked around the camp. Her clothing became wet and mud-spattered. But she steadily toured the camp and took up her position near the *yajna mandapa*. The fire from the receptacle was rising in huge flames. The combination of high wind and flames seemed to be poised on the brink of total disaster. Sri Ma directed the pundits to pour water around the *kunda*. This strategy somehow controlled the fire. The storm abated and the long-drawn-out function was completed amidst the chanting of appropriate hymns.

Sri Ma at last returned to her *kutia* for a change of clothes. People congratulated themselves on escaping the full fury of the storm by suffering a few minor damages only.

Didi and a few others who knew Sri Ma's ways believed that she had contained the forces of nature by exposing herself to its inclemency. Didi had experienced this phenomenon many times. Many a function had been saved from ruin by a storm or heavy rains by Sri Ma in this way. She would go out under the skies and stand in the rain or storm. Gradually the skies cleared against all normal expectations. Prabhudattaji agreed wholeheartedly with Didi that Sri Ma's grace had saved the concluding ritual of his function.

During the function at Jhuni Sri Ma made one or two short trips to nearby places as well as the city. At Allahabad she visited the aged savant Pt. Madan M. Malaviya at his residence at his request. He and his family made her welcome. All his nieces came to touch her feet and asked for her blessings (c 14 February).

For some time past Didi was trying very hard to buy a plot of ground in Varanasi on the banks of the river in order to build an Ashram for Sri Ma. It troubled her that Ma had no proper places to stay in any of the towns she visited so often. At about this time a plot of ground had been purchased near Janaki Ghat.

Didi wanted Sri Ma to see the new site at Varanasi. Sri Ma went there for a day's visit. She stayed at the spacious railway quarters of Nani Bhattacharya, a devotee of much generosity of spirit, who extended hospitality to all those who clustered round Sri Ma. Large meals were cooked to feed all who were in her retinue. Sri Ma went to visit the new site of the future ashram and returned to Nani Babu's residence for the night before returning to Jhuni.

At the conclusion of Prabhudattaji's function, the *mahatmas* accompanied by Sri Ma came to the hill-top Ashram at Vindhyachal for a couple of days. This was their first experience of being honoured guests at one of the Ashrams built by the devotees of Sri Ma. They were impressed by the very meticulous care taken by the people of the Ashram for their comfort. They were not aware that Sri Ma herself directed all efforts towards extending a gracious hospitality. The *mahatmas* were very pleased and accepted Didi's invitation to come to Varanasi on the occasion of Vasanti Puja in a few days time.

The New Ashrams

It was Didi's ardent wish that an elaborate Vasanti Puja should be performed on the plot of ground they had acquired for an Ashram in Varanasi. Very quickly all arrangements were put in train. Temporary structures were erected for housing the image of the Goddess and also kitchens and sundry other requirements. A few neighbouring houses were taken on rent for the accommodation of devotees coming from out of town. The *mahatmas* had accepted Didi's invitation to grace the occasion. This was a new challenge to the organising capacities of Didi and Swami Paramananda and their handful of helpers. Didi had realised that the *mahatmas* were prominent in Sri Ma's *kheyāla* so she gave them pre-eminence in the affairs of her own Ashrams. The *mahatmas* came with their own followers. Haribabaji would hold a daily *satsang* in the morning where *rāslilā* would be performed. During the evening *satsang* the saints would speak in turn to the assembled throng of listeners. All this needed to be organised over and above the exacting ritualistic observances which characterised any puja performed under Sri Ma's aegis. She herself directed Didi's efforts, gave advice when approached (which was almost constantly) pointed out loopholes and in her own inimitable style found forms of worship to suit groups of devotees coming from different parts of the country. Everyone had something to contribute toward the general effort.

The three days of the puja passed on a tide of joy. Triguna Banerjee (from Srirampur) had brought with him the *Rāma-Rasāyana* party of Kolkata. The "party" consisted of two brothers who sang and narrated in a dramatic fashion incidents from the *Rāmāyana*. They were so good that they held enthralled the congregation for two to three hours easily.



Ma in Varanasi Ashram in the forties.

Another attractive feature of this puja was the "fire-dance" *ārati* of Jotubhai who had come from Dhaka. So it was a marvellous mingling of old traditions and innovations.

Nobody at this time could imagine the future magnificence of this Ashram; for the time being all were happy at its festive beginnings. After the puja Sri Ma started on her travels. She came to Krishna-Kunja (Allahabad) for one day on her way to Delhi, Meerut and then on to Dehra Dun. *Nāma-yajnas* were performed both at Delhi and Meerut. All townspeople had come to believe that Sri Ma could be invited to grace such functions, so all those who desired her presence arranged for a *nāma-yajna* or a similar festivity.

In Dehra Dun, Sachi Babu had purchased a piece of land near Kishenpur Ashram. He wished to dedicate this land in Sri Ma's name. The foundation stone to the future Kalyanvan Ashram was laid on 26th April, 1944.

The people of Dehra Dun wished to celebrate the Birthday Celebrations which would start on May 2 and conclude on May 12. They appealed to Sri Ma to abide in Dehra Dun for the duration of the function. The *Rāma-Rasāyana* party had also come to Dehra Dun. They gave their enthralling recitations every evening to packed halls or *pandals*.

Much to the disappointment of the devotees of Dehra Dun Sri Ma left for Almora on 2nd May. She and her entourage came to Bareilly where they had to wait for a few hours for the train to Kathgodam en route to Almora. This was Sri Ma's birthday (Bengali calendar-19 Vaishakh). Didi procured some flowers, incense, sandalwood paste, a small lamp etc and awaited an opportunity for performing a simple *arati* and puja for Sri Ma. But Sri Ma was strolling up and down the

deserted platform oblivious of Didi's preparations for a puja. Just before signals were given for the incoming train, Sri Ma sat down under a tree at the end of the platform. Didi, accompanied by her eager helpers Renu, Buni, Gini, Dolly and Lily, rushed to perform *arati* and puja as best as she could. Then the train came and there was another rush toward picking up their baggage and boarding it. Such impromptu puja and *arati* were a far cry from the elaborate rituals which in later years effectively curtailed Sri Ma's free movements.

Almora

Parashuramji had contributed generously toward the construction of a spacious ashram at Patal Devi, near the small Samadhi Mandir of Bhajji. Swami Paramananda had supervised the constructions. Now they were happy to welcome Sri Ma to the new buildings. Sri Ma now had a suite of rooms overlooking an extensive terrace.

Parashuramji and other local devotees made preparation for celebrating Sri Ma's birthday (according to the lunar calendar) on 12th May.

The *mahatmas* came to Almora to participate in this function. A precedence was established. The saints were henceforth always invited to Sri Ma's Birthday celebrations which they attended in larger numbers as years went by. Sri Ma, mindful of their comfort and convenience, stayed in one place while they were in residence. So very gradually her erratic travels came to acquire some uniformity and predictability.

A couple from Agra, Sri and Srimati Verma, came on a visit. They were particularly assiduous in showing their devotion although almost strangers. Sri Ma said to Varmaji, "I saw you many years ago. I saw you in Lucknow, at the railway

station. You were suffering from a severe backache then". Verma recalled his journey and was astonished at Sri Ma's recollection of a fleeting glimpse of an unknown person.

Sri Ma's entourage continued to grow in this fashion. She left Almora in the first week of June. After visiting Dehra Dun for a while, she started on an unplanned journey. At Mughalsarai Junction she was seen as if to shake herself free of her attendants. Only Didi and a few girls remained. Although the new Ashram at Varanasi was so near Didi did not dare to suggest that Sri Ma should stay there awhile. Obviously it was her *kheyāla* to keep moving in a random fashion.

They came to Patna. Sri Ma had no fixed programme. They remained on the railway platform itself like pilgrims. A devotee from Danapur, Dr. Sudhir, now joined her party. He took her for a drive around the city and the banks of the Ganges. But she returned to the railway platform. After a couple of nights in Patna in this fashion Sri Ma asked Didi to take out tickets for Kiul. The girls Aruna, Buni and Maya were sent on to Kolkata to await Sri Ma's arrival later.

A gentleman met by chance said to Ma "I am going to Monghyr. Will you come too?" Sri Ma agreed. Didi and Sri Ma detrained at Jamalpur for the branch line to Monghyr. Arriving at their destination they did not see the gentleman who had invited them but another gentleman, also a stranger, came forward and introduced himself by name. He escorted them to the local Goenka *dharamshala*, Sri Ma and Didi took up their residence in a corner of the open courtyard as the *dharamshala* was full-up. It rained during the night. Didi gathered her few belongings together and somehow made a place for Ma on the covered verandah. The strangeness of this adventure impressed Didi. A person who was made so

welcome at palaces or renowned ashrams of saints or mansions of the rich and able was spending the night on the floor of a crowded verandah like a homeless mendicant. This *kheyāla* was unfathomable to her. But Didi would not have changed her place with anyone in the world. Whatever the circumstances to be in the company of Ma was pure joy. Ma directed Didi in the management of the minimal accruelements. They spent an agreeable morning in this new and strange place. But they had attracted the notice of the manager. He paid them a visit and provided suitable accommodation for her. Other residents came to pay their respects. There was an extensive garden presided over by a Shiva Mandir next to the *dharamshālā* belonging to its owner. The manager was the son-in-law of the owner. He escorted Sri Ma to the adjoining gardens and asked her to feel free to visit it as often as she liked. In a day or two a small group began to cluster round her. The manager asked her if she were practising any yogic *sāadhanā*. Sri Ma said, "Baba, what is known as yogic *sāadhanā* has happened to this body when it was young and engaged in the *lilā* of *sāadhanā*. *Kriyās* happened of their own accord sometimes. This body remains a witness now as it was then."

The manager said, "We are fortunate that you came to our city."

Sri Ma said, "I had no plans for going anywhere. A gentleman mentioned the name of this town, so we came here. It is all the same, is it not? The whole world is a home for all of us because it belongs to the one and only Father who looks after us. I wander around in the same house! Nothing is alien or nobody is a stranger. We all belong together, do we not?"

The manager seemed impressed by Sri Ma's manner and words. He became a regular visitor bringing others of his

family to have Sri Ma's *darshana*. In a day or two, other people started to come and sit around Sri Ma. Some asked questions and listened to her profound answers devotedly. Didi believed she saw a miracle at this time. One of the women in a neighbouring room was tending a sick child. She came to Sri Ma and begged her to cure the boy. Sri Ma accompanied by Didi went to see the sick child. Didi thought the child was about to breathe his last. He indeed seemed on the brink of death. She could not help adding her own prayers to that of the weeping mother. Sri Ma watched the child quietly for a while. He suddenly opened his eyes and looked at her. Then he tiredly closed his eyes again.

Next day also Sri Ma went to see the child. Didi had not hoped that he would have survived the night. He seemed to be in a high fever. Later in the day Sri Ma by herself entered the sick boy's room and held his hand in her own for a few minutes. The boy took a turn for the better and made a recovery.

In the evening Didi was surprised to see the whole family preparing to leave the *dharamshālā*. The mother, carrying the child, came to bid farewell. The little boy raised his head from the shoulder of his mother and stretched out his hands toward Sri Ma. She held his hands in her own, while they looked into each other's eyes. Didi watched this strange endearing scene. When the family walked away, the child was still looking back at Sri Ma. She said to Didi. "You wanted the child to recover. So at least you have seen him in good health."

Following Sri Ma's *kheyāla*, Didi had communicated with Abhaya regarding their whereabouts. Abhaya arrived at the *dharamshālā* on June 14 (or June 15). Sri Ma bade farewell to her newly acquired entourage and left for the resort town of

Shimultala. Didi following Sri Ma's instructions left for Kolkata leaving the minimum of effects with Abhaya.

Sri Ma continued in Shimultala. Abhaya managed to cook simple meals and do the best he could to make her comfortable under very rough and ready circumstances. Not that Sri Ma displayed the slightest awareness of discomfort. She accepted things as they happened with complete equanimity.

Didi was kept informed of her whereabouts. At this time Didi's father Swami Akhandananda was in Kolkata. He was not in good health. Sri Ma had sent Didi to be near him and see to the proper arrangements for his treatment and nursing.

Leaving Shimultala Sri Ma proceeded to Burdwan. She and Abhaya spent three days in a wayside *dharamshālā*, like other pilgrims on the move. She then came to a place called Triveni quite close to Howrah railway station. Here they came across a Bengali family who turned out to be related to Pankaj Sen of New Delhi, a devotee of long standing. She took up her abode in an unoccupied derelict house on their property. They tried to make the rooms as presentable and comfortable as possible. Sri Ma took no notice of the discomforts but praised the view from the open windows. The distant flowing Ganges was visible from the windows of her room.

The spell of wandering around amongst strangers was broken when Sri Ma came to Kolkata on July 12, but only for one day. Within a short while a crowd assembled near her. Many people wanted to spend the whole night near her. They clustered round her on the verandah where she had been accommodated. It started to rain. So all the devotees along with Sri Ma sat through the sprays getting wet. At dawn Sri Ma was driven to the railway station in a car. The devotees had taken her to visit the site of the planned new Ashram on

Ekdalia Road and now enroute to the station she was shown the piece of ground in Behala also purchased for a future Ashram.

Sri Ma accompanied by Abhaya returned to Triveni. She was as if lost to the older cadre of devotees but was found by a new cadre, who knew nothing about her early life or background. They were captivated by her radiant presence and her inimitable smile of total understanding.

One Bholanath Banerjee became close to her at this time. Another newcomer was Manoranjan Sarkar, who later on helped to build the first Ashram in Kolkata on Ekdalia Road.

Swami Akhandananda continued ill. Sri Ma paid them a quick visit. She asked Didi to make arrangements for taking him to Varanasi. He would stay at the rented house in Devnathpura. The little girls of the *Kanyapēeth* were then in residence in this house under the charge of Savitri Mitra (Kshamadi).

Didi heard a little of Sri Ma's itinerary from Abhaya. She had visited Kalna, Katoa and Srikhanda. The last place is a stronghold of the Vaishnavas. They came to Sri Ma without any reservations. Her female form was at first a deterrent but soon her all-seeing beautiful eyes of compassion were recognised as those of a person beyond classifications. One Vaishnava ascetic said to her in some agitation, "I have never so far been distracted by anyone from my chosen way of *sādhana*. But now whenever I sit in meditation, your image becomes superimposed on that of my guru. What am I to do?"

Sri Ma spoke to him these remarkable words. "Baba, believe that no harm to anyone can ever be caused by this body, never, never, never!"

The ascetic was not only reconciled to the identification

of his guru with the radiant vision in front of him but greatly encouraged. He realised that she was the Person worshipped in many forms by different seekers following their own individual paths to Truth.

Sri Ma returned to Kolkata on 8th August, 1944 from Navadweep. She was seen to be suffering from fever and stomach trouble. In spite of this she attended the religious dramas (*yātrā*) to which she was invited. The new devotees came to know that the only mode of recovery for Sri Ma was her own *kheyāla*. So they prayed earnestly to her to get well. After a couple of days Sri Ma told Didi that she would take a bath. She had a high fever but Didi, knowing better than to resist her *kheyāla*, helped her to pour buckets and buckets of water over her head. This odd treatment for high fever answered the purpose. The devotees were happy to find Sri Ma restored to her usual good health.

Sri Ma left Kolkata on August 23. She herself took Swami Akhandananda with her along with Didi, Manoranjan Sarkar, Govinda Pandey, Parashuramji and a few others. She came to Varanasi and settled Akhandananda in the rented house at Devnathpura. The girls of the Kanyapeeth were here in charge of Kshamadi. So the old man was in good company there and would be well looked after. After all arrangements had been made for his comfort and treatment she left for Dehra Dun.

Sri Ma proceeded on to Almora after a couple of days at Kishenpur Ashram. Didi was worried about her father but she abided by Sri Ma's *kheyāla*. In response to a message from Varanasi Sri Ma asked Didi to go to Varanasi to look after her father during what were evidently his last days on earth.

The passing away of Swami Akhandananda

Didi found her father in great bodily discomfort but his mind was clear and governed by his abiding faith in Sri Ma. The people clustering round him wanted to pray to Sri Ma to come to his bedside, knowing that would be his great wish of the hour. Didi's cousin J.C. Mukherjee took it upon himself to send a wire to Sri Ma in his name. "I am on my deathbed. May your *kheyāla* be fulfilled. May I be able to lay my head on your feet at the last moment."

When Swami Akhandananda came to know of this piece of officiousness, he was annoyed, saying "It is asking her to come here. Moreover, it is quite unnecessary." Didi and other attendants saw for themselves that he lived in the awareness of Sri Ma's presence. In the last hours of his life he was heard to murmur his *sannyāsa* mantra repeatedly. Once Didi asked him if he had anything to say or any message to give. He said "Nothing. What is there to say!" He did not seem to have any thoughts about the large family he was leaving behind or even Didi. His thoughts were focussed on Sri Ma; the few syllables that he uttered were his *sannyāsa* mantra.

On September 8, 1944 ended the life of one of the earliest and most devoted of Sri Ma's loyal retinue. He had blazed the trail to asceticism in a cross-section of society which was totally ignorant and unappreciative of its value. He had begun his *sādhana* at the age of 66 and he had remained steady, undeviating and true to Sri Ma's message of "To talk of God alone is worthwhile, all else is pain and in vain."

Within a few days Sri Ma came down to Vindhyachal. Didi in a saddened mood arrived in the little hill-top Ashram. In spite of herself she could not rid herself of a sense of hurt that Sri Ma had not attended the death-bed of so devoted a

man. Sri Ma looked tired and listless. She said these words to Didi, "It was here in Vindhyachal that I had said to Baba (Swami Akhandananda) that due to the utter uncertainties of my movements it is not advisable that he travel with me. He ought to take care of his health. Vindhyachal suited him so he should stay there and practise his *sāadhanā*." She had added, "Know that I am always with you even if this body is not at hand." Sri Ma continued, "Baba seemed overwhelmed by my assurance."

Sri Ma then proceeded to describe to Didi in graphic details the events taking place around Swamiji's sick bed in the last days. Didi realized that Sri Ma indeed had been present and why her father had behaved as if he was living and also dying in her presence. She was a little ashamed of her momentary lack of faith in Sri Ma's *kheyāla* but she knew that faith itself is a matter of the greatest *sāadhanā*. She also realized that it was very, very difficult to abide in patience without attempting to direct divine grace. The "wishfulness" of human behaviour forever seeks to dictate the ways of Him who is omniscient and knows best. But He is merciful and forgives this impertinence again and yet again.

Durga Puja at Krishna Kunja and Satya Gopal Ashram

Sri Ma had visited Allahabad many times during the past years. The proprietor of "Krishna Kunja" familiarly known as 'Buchun Bhaiya' had become a devotee.

He had invited Sri Ma to come to Allahabad for the annual Durga Puja festival in October, 1944. He got in touch with other local devotees (mainly the family of Niraj Nath Mukerji) who gathered together to make elaborate arrangements for this most spectacular of all pujas. Right at the beginning, they faced a hurdle. The big hall was the venue

of the puja. The image was installed at one narrow end of the hall. The organisers sought to put a barrier across the hall in front of the image so that only the priest and his helpers would enter the enclosure. The local people protested, saying everyone should be free to approach the image. Sri Ma said, "The clay-image which you have installed here will be sanctified by the priest. He will invoke the presence of the Goddess in the Image; thereafter you will have *darshan* of the Goddess. After three days, with due ceremony the Goddess is bidden farewell. Thereafter it again is a clay image which you will immerse in the Ganges. For the duration of the puja you must take care that nothing untoward happens near Her. The sanctity and purity of the place must be guarded by you. Would you like it if someone were to commit any act of disrespect or defilement? The Goddess is being invited and invoked by all of you. Should you not take care that her sojourn should be a matter of faultless celebration? It is true that nobody or nothing can do harm to the Supreme Person. But this time you have the responsibility of doing your best for keeping everything pure and auspicious."

The people listening to her changed their attitude regarding keeping an open house for all. They saw that the puja was a solemn religious rite and not just a festival for general enjoyment.

The Durga Puja in the bower of Krishna was celebrated with great dedication by Buchan Bhaiya, his wife and his friends. They were ably supported by the Bengali devotees of Allahabad. Other pujas were taking place in other parts of the town. One of the most prestigious pujas was celebrated at Allengunj in the Satya Gopal Ashram. The head of the Ashram, Sri Gopal Thakur, belonged to a distinct sect of worshippers of the Goddess. They observed the ritualistic proforma but enriched it by heartfelt devotional outpourings

in song and dance. Gopal Thakur used to be transported while he was performing the rites of the puja; the entire congregation would be affected by his emotional commitment. He would sing and dance, quite overcome to be invoking his *istadevatā* in the beautiful Image in front of him.

In response to his invitation, Sri Ma went to Satya Gopal Ashram on the third day. She stood unobtrusively at the back of the crowd but Gopal Thakur came to know of her presence. He was already in an ecstatic state. He took a big basket of red hibiscus flowers and approached Sri Ma saying "So you have come to see your own puja here!" He covered Sri Ma with those red flowers. Sri Ma broke out in one of her own inimitable loud peals of laughter, instantly distancing herself from her entourage and the whole company. The aura of divinity surrounded her. While the crowd stood bemused she backed away towards the gates and came away. Some time later, one of Gopal Thakur's disciples Jamunadidi told Didi "Our Gurudeva told us that if we were sincere in our prayers of invocation the Devi must reveal Herself. She will come. But I did not quite believe him. How can such things be in this age and time? But he was right. Due to the grace of our Gurudeva we have seen the Divine Mother with these mortal eyes!"

This was the beginning of a long and lasting relationship between Satya Gopal Ashram and Sri Ma's Ashram. Gopal Thakur with his family came to visit her on suitable occasions. In answer to their prayers, Sri Ma for many years continued to come to the Ashram in Allengunj for three days every year. In later years she could manage only one day or even just a passing visit of a few hours. After Gopal Thakur was no more his daughter Kalyani, assisted by her sisters and brothers and later nieces and nephews, maintained the high standard of worship and the aura of religious commitment

initiated by her father. Theirs is a unique family who while living in the mundane world, keep in intimate touch with the transcendental dimension due to the great tradition started by their founder Satya Deva Thakur.

Sri Ma returned to Krishna Kunja to be given an earnest invitation from Haribabaji Maharaj. He had sent Premraj to beg Sri Ma to come to Bandh. Premraj would escort her since Bandh lay in rather a remote region of Western Uttar Pradesh. Sri Ma with her usual numerous companions boarded the Punjab Mail for travelling to this completely new environment of the villages of Uttar Pradesh.

A rather interesting incident took place at this time. A new devotee Kamal Malaviya wished to travel with Sri Ma. Wishful of joining her entourage he boarded the same train. At the station just before Bareilly, he along with others clustered round Sri Ma's window. When the train was about to start he hastened back to his own compartment only to find that a group of rough-looking people had blocked the entrance to it. He tried to force an entrance. By this time the train was speeding away from the platform. He was repulsed so violently that losing his balance he fell from the steps and rolled down the embankment. He lay stunned for a while. Then he saw an indistinct female figure clad in white. It seemed to ask him to get up and start walking. He found strength to stand up and follow the dimly seen figure along the railway track to a small station. When he walked along the platform he saw the figure no more. The Railway staff were astonished to see him appear as if from nowhere. When they heard that he had fallen from the Punjab Mail which had thundered through the small station a while ago, they said rather disbelievingly "You must be a ghost, nobody could survive such a fall!"

Kamal Malaviya then produced his tickets to prove his tale. Thereupon the station-master gave him some medical aid and asked him to wait for the next train. This was DehraDoon Express, which would stop at Bareilly. The Express train was flagged down to an unscheduled stop and a place was found for Malaviya on it. When the train stopped at Bareilly he had succumbed to his injuries and was put on a stretcher to be taken to the Railway hospital.

Sri Ma and her people had detrained at Bareilly and were waiting for the branch-line train to Dhanari. Someone saw Kamal Malaviya being carried on the stretcher. Sri Ma sent Govind Pande to the hospital and render whatever help was required. On being discharged from the hospital Malaviya returned to the station with Pande. He was accommodated in Sri Ma's compartment when they entrained for Dhanari. At this time all of them heard the story related above.

Sri Anandamayi Ma's First Visit to Bandh

At Dhanari station a big welcome awaited Sri Ma. There were three caparisoned elephants for the guests to ride on and a number of bullock-carts. Sri Ma was persuaded to mount on to an elephant, so that she would be visible not only to the crowd at the railway station but the multitudes she would pass on the way to a village called Bhirauti, her destination.

Nearly 800 villages in this area owed their allegiance to Hari Babaji and Udiya Babaji. Every year the flood waters of the Ganges used to wash away hundreds of small villages situated precariously on its banks. One year, about 15 years earlier, two *sadhus* (Haribaba and Udiyababa) sought to organise the manpower of the villages for self protection as the government did nothing to help them. They were very successful. A high mud-rampart of almost fifteen feet was

built all along the curve of the river to act as the bulwark when the monsoon came. The villagers carried loads of earth on their heads to the site and thus raised the wall inch by inch. The two *sadhus* worked along with them teaching them to sing *kirtan* and lead a life of dedication and commitment to religious activities in their spare time. This area came to be known as Bandh (The Rampart). The villagers looked upon Hari Baba and Udiya Baba as their saviours and their reverence for these *mahātmās* knew no bounds. To them Hari Baba had talked about Sri Ma at length. He had so fired their imagination that they had determined to persuade Sri Ma to visit them so that they could have her *darshana*. With this aim in view they had started on an *akhand-kirtan* (non-stop *kirtan*). With the arrival of Sri Ma the villagers became jubilant. The procession of elephants was met by the *kirtan*-party of Haribaba. He welcomed her with flower garlands and made his *pranām*. Sri Ma also bowed low to return his obeissance. He then led the party along to the *kutia* that had been prepared with loving care for her residence.

There is a couplet by Sant Kabir:

Both Govinda (God) and Guru are here

Who should I bow to first?

Guru is all supreme, because he

indicates the presence of God!

Perhaps the villagers of Bandh experienced this sentiment because, although they came to look upon Sri Ma as the Divine Person, their allegiance toward their Guru remained steadfast.

Didi writes that the whole countryside seemed saturated in religious fervour. Haribaba used to visit one village

everyday to sing *kirtan* with them. In the evening the villagers came to the central site at Bhirauti where there was a spacious *satsang*-hall and also numerous *kutiya*s for the *mahatmas* and their guests.

Prabhudattaji also arrived to be with Sri Ma. Every evening there were *rās-lilās* and *Rāma-lilās* produced and orchestrated by Premraj. At this time the *lilās* were added on to by *Nimāi-lilā* as well written out in the dialect of the region by Haribaba himself. He was an ardent devotee of Sri Krishna Chaitanya of Bengal. He was well versed in the sacred literature of this sect of Vaishnavism. He translated these stories from the life of the Lord Gauranga from the original Sanskrit and Bengali into the dialect of Western U.P. . Premraj provided the music and the simple choreography for the *lilās*.

Haribabaji in this way pioneered the propagation of Bengal Vaishnavism in the remote villages and towns of Uttar Pradesh. He evidently looked upon Sri Ma as the personification of his *Ishta-devatā*. He behaved with impeccable courtesy, humility and reverence in her presence. His fame as an ascetic of high order was wide-spread. In later years other *mahatmas* followed his lead in visiting Sri Ma's Ashrams and participating in the celebrations organised by them.

Sri Ma was taken in procession to Bandh also. The rampart had been breached in places and needed to be repaired. The villagers appealed to Haribaba to lead them and guide them as before in this work. He said "I had undertaken this task to spread the habit of *nāma-sankirtana* amongst you. If Sri Anandamayi Ma would stay here then again I can find the heart to engage in this task-Udiya Baba and Prabhudattaji also should stay here with me."

The villagers prayed and pleaded with Sri Ma for her *Acheyāla* to abide in Bhirauti but inevitably the day of departure arrived. Haribaba had planned to accompany her but the entire populace appeared so inconsolable at this parting that he stayed back so that the villagers would not feel totally bereft. Truly their adoration of Haribabaji was admirable and awe-inspiring.

Sri Ma returned to Vindhyachal. The winter months from October to January were spent mostly in this Ashram. Many *sadhus* and V.I.P. guests were made welcome from time to time. What had been inconvenient and difficult somehow never happened to be so while Sri Ma was in residence. The remote hilltop Ashram became replete with all facilities for the accommodation of guests. Swami Premananda made a prolonged stay saying that he could not tear himself away from Sri Ma's presence. Gopal Thakur came with his family and devotees and performed the first Gita-Jayanti (A reading of the Gita and also a *puja-ārati* of the book as well as its Speaker) in Sri Ma's Ashram. This became a regular yearly feature. Gopal Thakur's two daughters Vani and Kalyani sang the accompanying hymns and devotional songs. Sri Ma was very gracious towards them, praising their singing again and again.

Sri Ma paid short visits to Allahabad and Varanasi during this time.

In Varanasi, the Railway engineer Nani Gopal Bhattacharya and his wife Kalyani were fortunate to have Sri Ma visit them many times. She would be made welcome in their nearby railway-quarter whenever she had to wait for her trains. Once Ma while walking to this quarter said "Look, Nani is looking so delighted; he thinks all of us are going to his

house. Not in the least. I am going to my own house! He can come along if he likes".

Nanibabu was indeed delighted to have the opportunity to entertain not only Sri Ma but her crowd of followers. A big feast was always cooked in this house for all visitors. He was one of the select coterie of devotees who always generously provided for Sri Ma's large retinue. Sri Ma never restricted anyone from following her to Nanibabu's house. She had a fine sense about this. Whenever the householder was annoyed at the onrush of a motley crowd Sri Ma was seen to shed her entourage and arrive with just perhaps Didi and Paramanandaji and one or two others. But such occasions luckily were rare.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sri Anandamayi Ma's Maunam

"Am I Mauni? It is the mind which requires quietude. Here there is no mind so there is no question of Mauna or speech. Even when I speak I am observing silence!"

-Sri Anandamayi Ma

Vindhyachal:

In early January 1945 Sri Ma became *mauni* (observing silence). The incidents leading upto it were entirely fortuitous. Some new devotees had offered *bhoga* to Sri Ma. Nepal Chakravarty (later Swami Narayananda) hearing of the items of food had wondered if they were not too heavy for Sri Ma who was always a very light and small eater. Nepal Chandra regretted his words as soon as they were uttered since the new devotees had meant well only. He being annoyed with himself adopted *maunam* as a way of doing penance for his uncalled for advice.

By the end of the day it became obvious that Sri Ma was observing silence. She had said to Nepal Chandra "Why should you keep *maunam*? I shall do it." At that time people had not taken her words seriously but she had truly adopted Nepal Chandra's *maunam*.

In the evening Sri Ma indicated that she was ready to leave Vindhyachal. Before any arrangements could be made for proper transport Sri Ma simply walked out of the Ashram gates and started to walk down the long mountain slope towards the public road. Didi and the girls quickly packed

their belongings and followed her down. At the bottom of the hill they got into a public bus and came to the railway station of Mirzapur. They spent the night on the platform boarding a train in the morning to travel to Vrindavan. Sri Ma had said one word "Vrindavan", so Didi purchased tickets for this destination.

Vrindavan

Sri Ma put up at the Temple of the Maharaja of Burdwan. She was well known here. The manager Jogen Babu was overjoyed at this unexpected advent. Soon Sri Ma was joined by a big group of people. Nanibabu had taken a month's leave in the hope of spending it at Vindhyachal. He and his wife together with Sri and Srimati Ghoshal, the new devotees, Chowdhury Sher Singh and his family, Govinda Pandey and a few others who had come to stay with her gathered at the Temple.

Haribabaji came as soon as he was informed of Sri Ma's arrival in Vrindavan. He and Premraj acknowledged that they were ardently hoping that she would come to Vrindavan but did not wish to invite her as it was already quite cold. Haribabaji was intrigued to observe Sri Ma's *maunam*. He said "Nothing is necessary for Ma. Perhaps she is doing it for us." To Didi he said, "It must be very difficult for you to know the best way to render service to her." Didi was grateful that the *mahatma* understood her predicament so well.

Sri Ma attended *satsangs* at Haribaba's Ashram but returned to the Temple. She paid a short visit to Mathura and then started on her long expected journey to Ahmedabad (Gujarat) on January 14, 1945. The trains were late; telegrams had been delayed, so there was nobody to receive her at the

station. Sri Ma took up her abode at the temple of Sri Samarthyanath.

Ahmedabad was full of Sri Ma's devotees ranking from very affluent mill-owners to humble simple people. Kanti Bhai Munshaw was by common consent the leader amongst them. His total surrender at Sri Ma's feet, his full-hearted support for her varied "concerns", made him acceptable to all, rich and humble alike. Kantibhai was not in town. He arrived the next day and pleaded with Sri Ma to come to his house. He would put up a Swiss-cottage on the lawn for her. Her retinue would be accommodated in the large house itself. Sri Ma being *mauni*, he could not know if his prayers were granted. Everyone, however was content to look upon her radiant countenance and cluster around wherever she was.

After a while Sri Ma seemingly went for a stroll. A crowd followed her. She slowly walked along the streets of Ahmedabad till she came to Kantibhai's house and sat down on an ornamental seat in the garden. None of her companions could have found the way to this house, so everyone was amazed that she had done so. Kantibhai swiftly and expertly made all arrangements for her and her entourage. But late at night Sri Ma came back to the Temple. After a couple of nights (probably because the residents of the Temple were reluctant to bid her goodbye), she came to reside at Kantibhai's house. Crowds assembled for her *darshana*. They prayed for her to speak to them, some of them offering to go on hunger-strike if they could not hear her voice. Chinubhai Mehta was specially importunate. He related that he had occasion to cross a sea in a steamer some weeks back. Midway they were overtaken by a fierce storm. They were afraid of capsizing. He had prayed to Sri Ma and felt that she

was with him in the boat. He had at once reassured the other travellers that they would be saved and so it was. The storm abated and they made a safe journey. Chinubhai had taken a resolve that he would go for a *darshana* of Sri Ma within three months of the incident. Now she herself had come to Ahmedabad to redeem him of his promise. He was doubly blessed.

On Thursday 19th January Sri Ma came among the crowd of women waiting for her and in a soft voice spoke in Gujarati asking "How are you?" (*kemcche?*). The women joyfully realised that she had broken her *maunam*. Sri Ma spoke the whole day long and the next day till the evening of Friday. By sunset she again became *maunam*. For quite sometime this was the pattern of this phase of *mauna*. Some of the women asked her, "Ma, why do you keep *maunam*, it is not necessary for you!" Sri Ma said "Am I *maunam*? It is the mind which requires quietude. Here there is no mind so there is no question of *maunam* or speech. Even when I speak I am observing silence! Such problems do not arise here!" The thoughtful amongst her audience tried to gauge the meaning of her enigmatic words.

From Ahmedabad Sri Ma paid a short visit to Dwaraka. Kantibhai made efficient arrangements for her along the route and back. The temple-*pujari* received her at the station and escorted her to the presence of Dwarkadheesh (The Image in the temple) Nanibabu and Kalyanidi, his wife, made elaborate *puja* offerings to the Deity.

Sri Ma's visit coincided with the passing away of the Shankaracharya of Sharadapeetham. Sri Ma was present at some of the funeral services. Didi felt that Sri Ma had come to Dwaraka perhaps for this purpose. The *pujaris* (priests) of the

Temple prayed earnestly to Sri Ma to say something to them. Their prayers seemed to be answered when Sri Ma uttered some *mantras* and hymns in Sanskrit. These recitations were spontaneous as always and profoundly awe-inspiring. The priests were happy to have elicited this rewarding response.

Sri Ma returned to Ahmedabad and to Kantibhai's house. She proceeded to visit various towns and villages of Gujarat. She travelled by boat on the river Narmada to the small Ashram built for her at Bhimpura. She visited Ganganath. Karnali, then returned to Chandod and Baroda. Didi got the impression that Sri Ma would go to Delhi and so Kantibhai on February 3 made reservations for her and her party. He was constantly pleading with her to break her *maunam*. He said, "We shall take vows of silence on your behalf but please speak to us". Since this was a Friday Sri Ma said gently to him. "Take your words back, do not use such obstructions-you know things happen of their own accord where this body is concerned - let things happen as they will." Kantibhai immediately said "Yes Ma, I take my words back. Please do whatever is your *kheyāla*".

It transpired that Sri Ma would visit Mumbai before going to Delhi. All reservations had to be changed. Kantibhai was bewildered at this upsetting of all his well-organised arrangements. Didi tried to explain to him that they had learned to keep all programmes fluid in Sri Ma's vicinity. As far as it was humanly possible they tried to keep in abeyance their own judgements about the best way of doing things. At this time Kantibhai was not too well-acquainted with Sri Ma's ways. In time he became very well versed in them.

Sri Ma travelled to Delhi from Mumbai. She visited Agra for a day to be with Dr. and Mrs. Verma. This unexpected and

yearned-for visit delighted the couple who had not dreamed that they would get an opportunity to have her stay with them for a whole day.

Sri Ma passed through Allahabad, Varanasi and Vindhyachal on her way to Kolkata. Gopal Thakur and his family accompanied her on her travels this time. In mid February, 1945 Sri Ma with her large retinue arrived in Baharampur- the devotees of this town had made elaborate arrangements for entertaining Sri Ma and her guests. The dais of the *satsang* marquee was ablaze with ochre robed men. Haribabaji Maharaj, Chakrapaniji Maharaj, Sharananandaji and Prabhudattaji were with Sri Ma as well as Sri Gopal Thakur. Sri Ma sat at one end of the stage. On her other side sat Muktananda Giri Maharaj or Didima, who in her saffron clothes looked serene and the very personification of asceticism.

Two marriages under Sri Anandamayi Ma's aegis

The *rāslilā* party always accompanied Sri Haribabaji on his travels. The Bengali populace could make nothing of the songs, dances or dialogues because they were in a dialect of Hindi. Haribaba himself was enthralled by the *yātrās* enacted by noted organisations. The *yātrā* is an open-air dance drama depicting various incidents from the life of Sri Gauranga Mahaprabhu or from other scriptures. Especially touching was *Nimāi-Sannyāsa* or the tragic episode of Gauranga leaving home to become an ascetic.

While the townpeople were all fully engaged in the ongoing *satsang*, two marriages were arranged and solemnised under Sri Ma's aegis. These very unlikely events were mainly managed by Didi, since she alone could interpret Sri Ma's *kheyāla* while she remained in *maunam*. Didi herself

did not know how she understood Sri Ma's expressions because she made the minimum of gestures while she was silent.

One of the marriages arranged between Abhaya and Yamuna was more or less a normal event, only people were astounded that Abhaya had at all agreed to it. Everyone was so used to his erratic ways. For nearly ten years or so he had been travelling almost constantly with Ma living as an ascetic. Evidently Sri Ma had persuaded him to give up this way of aimless wandering and settle down as a householder and assume the responsibility of married life.

If Abhaya's marriage was astounding the other was no less stupefying. It was Sri Ma's *kheyāla* that Renu (daughter of Niraj Nath Mukerji of Allahabad), who was travelling with her for quite sometime, should get married to N.P. Chatterjee (son of Manmatha Nath Chatterjee of Dehra Dun), at this time a high ranking government official and also a happily married man with two young children.

Sri Ma's *kheyāla* regarding Renu's marriage was invoked by the Mahatma Prabhudattaji Maharaj. V.I.P. guests were used to seeing Renu serve them food and in general assist Didi in serving Sri Ma herself. The *Mahātmā* one day said to Sri Ma that young girls such as Renu should get married unless they were going to take up a life of renunciation seriously. Sri Ma asked him if he would attend Renu's marriage if it were arranged immediately. The *Mahātmā* agreed saying he would even engage to adopt the role of the father to give away the bride. Sri Ma's Ashram was like the ancient hermitage. This marriage would be of an ashram-girl so he would have no hesitation in taking part in it. He enthusiastically settled even the date for it (after consulting the almanac) as March 2.

Didi was quite bewildered. She looked at Sri Ma's smiling countenance and asked "But where is the bridegroom?" Sri Ma continued to look at Didi steadily. Didi writes in her journal that out of the blue she thought of Narsingha (N.P. Chatterjee). She asked, "Can you possibly mean Narsingha? But he is already married!" However Didi was convinced that Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* that she should write to Narsingha to come to Baharampur immediately with his family. Renu's father had already been communicated with. Niraj Nath was at this time posted as District Judge at Mainpuri/Etawah. He made the long journey prey to confusing thoughts sustained only by his faith that whatever Sri Ma did could not be anything but good. Didi had written that a marriage had been arranged for Renu by Sri Ma. However he and his wife were appalled when they were informed of Sri Ma's *kheyāla* of Narsingha as the bridegroom. Niraj Nath was completely upset and his anger fell on Mahatma Prabhudattaji. He said a *sadhu* had no call to interfere in worldly matters and why should he concern himself regarding Renu's marriage! The *sadhu* was saddened at this unexpected turn of events. He said he would not have spoken if he had thought that Renu was a visitor. He was under the impression that she was a member of the ashram. Sri Ma herself spoke to the various people concerned on a Thursday. Niraj Nath's anger was assuaged. He was prevailed upon to apologise to the *Mahātmā* who readily gave his blessings to him and his family. He continued to favour this family. As both belonged to Allahabad it was all to the good for future associations.

Niraj Nath however could not reconcile himself to the bridegroom-elect. Sri Ma told him to look for a suitable groom because the date of the marriage was ordained. In spite of an all-out effort by him and his friends and well wishers no

suitable young man could be chosen within the time. Niraj Nath was not too worried because he was certain that if Narsingha being devoted to Sri Ma since he was a young boy did not go against her *kheyāla*, certainly his wife would put a stop to the whole idea. These families were known to each other being members of Sri Ma's extended entourage. Sri Ma spoke to Narsingha and his wife Shanti Devi for sometime explaining her *kheyāla* to them. Sri Ma said to Shanti Devi that unless she gave her consent with an open heart nothing could be done. Much to Niraj Nath's astonishment, Shanti Devi came to him and said, "Uncle. I am convinced that this marriage is for the ultimate good for the three of us. So do not hesitate to give your consent to it. Please arrange for the ceremony to be performed".

So Sri Ma's most controversial *kheyāla* was solemnised as directed by her. The participants went their separate ways immediately after the ceremony. Renu returned to Allahabad with her parents. Narsingha with his family went back to Alipur Duar where he was posted at this time. Sri Ma had said that the marriage was a spiritual bondage. Neither the groom nor the bride would have any rights or duties toward each other. They would lead their separate lives as before.

In general Sri Ma did not give reasons or explanations for her *kheyāla*. But this time she was accosted by relays of people everywhere she went. Nobody could understand the significance of this uncalled-for ceremony. Again and again and yet again Sri Ma spoke to people about her *kheyāla* for the marriage. Once she said to Renu a little ruefully, "For your sake I wear this crown of thorns on my head!" As time passed people forgot about it especially as no changes occurred in the families concerned. Renu continued as one of Sri Ma's close companions. Narsingha and his wife occasionally came to the

Ashram as visitors and met each other as family friends. An inexplicable affair in the ordinary sense but at least it brought to the fore the quality of faith which was inspired by Sri Ma. All the protagonists were tried in fire as it were and were not found wanting. Faith after all is the wherewithal for a pilgrim on his journey toward God-realisation.

Immediately after these incidents Sri Ma left Baharampur for Navadweep. Here Manoranjan Sarkar was eagerly awaiting Sri Ma. Now he arranged lots of celebrations and created a joyous atmosphere for everyone.

Sri Ananadamayi Ma at Sarnath

Sri Ma wandered back to the new Ashram at Varanasi in mid-March. During the following weeks. She took up her abode at the Birla *Dharamshala* in Sarnath. During the day she would visit the Ashram in Varanasi, returning again to Sarnath in the evenings to stay overnight at the *dharamshala*.

Sri Ma was always being requested to break her *maunam*. One Friday evening at Sarnath she became quiet as usual, but then after a little while she spoke in a soft voice to the fairly large gathering sitting in front of her. Hariram Joshi, Govinda Malaviya and a few foreigners were present. Atmananda (Blanca Schlamm) had already taken up her residence in Rajghat school. She was a frequent visitor. Sometimes Lewis Thompson came with her or on his own. The eminent scholar Mahendra N. Sarkar and his wife were spending the evenings with Sri Ma. He was delighted to realise that the long spell of her *maunam* was ended. He was always keen to engage her in conversation. At the first opportunity he started:

Question : Ma, please tell us what to do for spiritual felicity.

Sri Ma : One's own Guru is the true guide

Question : But you yourself are the Supreme Guru!

Sri Ma smiled but did not respond to this. Dr Sarkar understood her to mean that a genuine personal question should not be broached in public. He then raised a topic of general interest.

Question : Many people have seen you as Kali or Krishna or Saraswasti. Are these forms projected on to you for the time being?

Sri Ma : There is no question of any projection on to this body. This body is always as it is and not anything different. The question of casting a spell or hypnotic effects does not arise. It is however true that in God's creation everything is possible anywhere and at any time. Some people because of their own predilections are prone toward seeing visions or hearing special voices or sounds aided by yogic *sāadhanā*. This is not to say that delusions do not happen. That is also possible.

Question : How to know the difference?

Sri Ma : That which is genuine is self-authenticating. It is always awe-inspiring, beautiful and uplifting. It does not evoke ridicule or doubt or disgust. No harm can accrue. Besides a real manifestation has no ulterior purpose to serve.

Other themes were discussed on other days.

Question : It is said that nerve-centres are ordinarily in a tangled state. When one pronounces the syllable *Om* the resonance straightens out the *granthis* (spiritual nerve centres).

Sri Ma : I agree. It is true that the resonance of the *mantra* loosens the knots of the nerve-centres so that the life-force may rise up by penetrating the centres one after the other. The Yogi experiences this rising awareness. But someone may be practicing this *japa* (repeating a *mantra*) for a long time and feels or knows nothing. It has to be concluded that "*japa*" has not been done. Mere repetition is not *japa*, just as a heap of bricks is not a wall!

Question: Would you say that a true pronouncement of the *mantra* is effective in opening out the *granthi*s or because the *granthi* is open and not knotted up, the *mantra* is achieved?

Sri Ma : Simultaneously. You dig the earth. Would you say the spade entered the earth or the earth opened to receive the spade?

Such conversations became a daily feature at Sarnath. One day the topic of previous lives came up for discussion.

Question: Ma, do you believe in a previous life?

Sri Ma : Before and after. If you say the one, the other is implied. Here there is no question of belief. Whatever is, is. Belief, however also falls within it. From the point of view of a *sādhaka* - it may appear to some in numerical order; it is also possible to view the totality of existence as eternally present as Self and *Brahman* or God and this creature. The vision of the seeker encompasses the entirety.

If you are asking about this body then whatever you say is acceptable. As you know this body has not performed any *sāadhanā* - it speaks spontaneously. There is no previous birth or any birth or you may say all births are here (pointing to herself). From the meanest bacteria to all strata of animals,

birds, human-beings-all-all. Nothing is beyond or apart from this body. Every special manifestation also belongs here (pointing to herself).

Question : Ma, tell us specifically if you had a previous birth.

Sri Ma: "This is the first. What is first and what is second? Creation and annihilation is going on all the time. Consider a seed. Even here the process of birth and death is continuous. Maybe the seed is stale; it will not germinate. You throw it away. Even so the seed falling on the ground turns into earth and is transformed out of its own shape. Another good seed sprouts and grows into a plant and puts out its own characteristic leaves and flowers in a well-defined and limited way. This could be considered a first advent from one point of view. But from one seed will be produced innumerable, infinite number of seeds. In one is contained infinity. From one fire countless fires may emerge. The nature of fire remains constant. So one birth, infinite number of births, no question of any birth whatsoever. It is all here (pointing to herself).

"Whatever is being said is not a matter of realization out of yogic *sāadhanā*. Whatever is, it is.

"As you know this body did not receive any schooling nor was it tutored or taught by anyone. At one stage this body went through the *lilā* of *sāadhanā*. It was a *lilā* because it was a *kheyāla* only. At that time this body went through and attained fulfilment in all the paths of God realisation. The trials and attainments of every path of *sāadhanā* became a reality to this body. When this body was a "*bhakta*" it worshipped God in deep humility and devotion. During that time if this body heard somebody say "I am That" (*advaita*) it was as if

something intolerable was being said. There would be anguish and tears at the very thought of such an approach. Then again when the path of identification (*advaita*) was trod that also was fully realised. You see no lacuna is possible in Truth. Every approach is therefore toward fulfilment.

"Some of you may think that Ma is repeating what she has heard elsewhere, even so that is acceptable here because the dimensions of doubt, disbelief or scepticism are seen as being genuinely experienced. Truth, however, is indestructible and whatever is, it is!

"(Pointing to herself) There is nothing previous to this and nothing will follow from it. Again there is everything here, whatever is. To speak of a totality is not possible after all—always there will be something lacking. The manifestation of entirety is what it is. Truth is being stated— you may understand it as you will."

Sri Ma laughed a little to take away the solemnity of her words. Perhaps the audience at Sarnath was competent and it could evoke such profound words from her.

The time of the birthday celebrations was drawing near. It was the custom to hold these festivities beginning with the calendar date, that is 2nd May (19 Vaishakh of the Bengali Calendar) and concluding on the fourth day of the dark fortnight of the moon. These two dates were the same in the year of her birth, that is 30th April, 1896. Since then there was generally a gap between the two dates. This year the gap happened to be of 27 days. After spending 7 days of this function in Varanasi, Sri Ma left for Navadweep in response to the ardent prayers of Manoranjan Sarkar.

While Sri Ma was in Varanasi Swami Turiyananda

passed away. He was Didi's uncle and was ailing for sometime. He had been staying at his niece's house in Ramapura. Following Sri Ma's *kheyāla* and instructions, Didi brought him to the Ashram and made arrangements for his care and nursing. He passed away peacefully within a few days. Didi and her family were happy that Swamiji's last days were lived in the presence of Sri Ma.

At Navadweep Manoranjan Sarkar made elaborate arrangements for Sri Ma and her companions. The festivities acquired the liveliness and grandeur they always had when Sri Ma herself graced the occasion with her presence.

Navadweep is a town dedicated to the memory of Mahaprabhu Gauranga. It is full of beautiful temples housing the images of Gauranga and Nityananda. Sri Anandamayi Ma was well-known in Navadweep. She was made welcome at all the temples. At Hari Sabha the main caretaker Murari Baba said "I have dressed the image like Sri Ma today! (in a white *dhota* and *chaddar*). After all Gauranga and Sri Anandamayi Ma are the same!" She also visited the Ashram of Sakhi Ma, a living legend as a dedicated worshipper of Lord Krishna. Sakhi Ma made much of Sri Ma as the visible form of the Deity installed in the Ashram.

It was Sri Ma's *kheyāla* to travel. In the last week of the Janmotsava, she arrived in Dhaka and stayed for a few days at Ramna Ashram. The Ashram, standing empty for long periods of time, filled immediately with a joyous crowd. The sound of *Kirtan* permeated the surroundings. When the crowds became too large, Sri Ma came and sat out in the open.

While coming to Dhaka a military officer Jamini Kumar had approached her on the ferry steamer. He had introduced

himself as the officer-commanding at present posted in Dhaka. Shahbagh gardens were under military occupation. He invited Sri Ma to visit Shahbagh while she was in Dhaka. He would make arrangements for her visit to Shahbagh which had been the scene of many remarkable and miraculous incidents. Shahbagh had seen her first public appearance. She had become known as the "Ma of Shahbagh", then later the "Ma of Dhaka".

Jamini Kumar and his wife made her welcome and escorted her all around the little cottage where she and Bholanath had lived during the years 1918-1924. He pointed out the trees near Sri Ma's room saying they emitted the scent of sandalwood. Everyone was amazed and saw for themselves that it was so. Sri Ma said, "There was so much *kirtan* and *satsang* here. The trees have imbibed the *sāttvic* effect of the devout atmosphere". Jamini Kumar said "But the trees near the main *kirtan-room* (*Nāma-ghar*) are quite ordinary. Only these that are near your own room are transformed".

Sri Ma at that time made no reply. Later she spoke to Didi regarding this odd phenomenon. "This body is not saying whether the trees have become sandalwood or not - but it was experienced by everyone that they were truly emitting the fragrance of sandalwood. How wonderful is this creation-men, animals, birds, trees, vines all have distinct and different abilities of receptivity or rejection. One hundred people listen to the same discourse. Out of them a few will imbibe the message of the speaker, will respond and enter deeper into the subject matter. Others will remain indifferent and not learn anything from this experience. So also the strata other than the human. One should not think of them as below or lesser. One

cannot know what role they are playing in the hierarchy of things. One may not be aware of their individualities, their distinctive powers of reception or rejection. Everything, indeed all things are manifestations of the One only. They are united in being the many forms of the same unitive ground. An all inclusive wide-spectrum vision would see no contradictions but understand the overlapping of distinctions. It is not enough to say this- what is there to understand or reject-Whatever is, it is That! (*Jātā*)"

Summer 1945

After the successful completion of the *Janmotsava* in Dhaka, Sri Ma resumed her travels. She spent a few days in each of the places of her visit. Travelling across the northern districts of Uttar Pradesh she arrived at the remote hill-station of Almora in mid-June, 1945. The small Ashram at this time was almost like a nursing-home with seven patients suffering from typhoid. Mukti Maharaj had been very ill. Now he made a recovery. The other patients also regained their health gradually.

The group of eight women of this hill-station known as Sri Ma's *ashtasakhis* (eight friends) clustered round her as usual. *Chitta Chore*¹ said, "Where did you go away leaving us here to suffer the pangs of separation? Do you know you are coming here after nine months!" The devotion and attachment of these simple hillfolk was admired by all who came to know them.

Sri Ma went up higher on the mountain to the small village of Dhawalchina. Here she settled in the cramped quarters of a

1. THE WIFE OF THE HEADMASTER OF A LOCAL SCHOOL. SHE USED TO SAY "MA IS MY CHITTACHORE" SO HER FRIENDS

small school house. Didi always marvelled at the fact that Ma never regarded comforts to be necessary for sojourning in a place. In time Dhawalchina owned an Ashram where some of her ascetic devotees practised rigorous *sādhana*, notably Swami Vijayanandaji. So this pioneering visit was an auspicious beginning.

After a few days Sri Ma returned to Almora. The summer months were spent in this Ashram. At this time many Europeans were living in seclusion, in the foothills of the Himalayas considered to be a sacred region (*Uttarakhand*). Miss Blanca Schlamm was in Almora at this time. She became one of the most devoted regular visitors. She came with Lewis Thompson and a few others who were practising their own *sādhana* in retreat. Blanca in time came to be known as Atmanandaji in the Ashrams as well as abroad. She was very helpful in communicating Sri Ma's words to her foreign devotees.

Sri Ma had a bevy of young women staying with her at Almora. One day Buni who was *mauni* (observing silence) in response to something being said to her made a rude gesture toward Didi. She of course knew Didi since her childhood and treated her as a member of her own family. Didi smiled at her but Sri Ma said. "This is not right. Buni, you must do penance for this act of disrespect toward your elder. You will do 10,000 *japa* (repetition of God's name) for this".

Seeing that Buni was reduced to tears, she exclaimed, "What? tears already! I had thought that Buni had overcome her tendency to cry at the slightest word. Am I not free to check your behaviour? You may think, 'Ma scolds us' but is it not the ideal that all of you should pursue the path of spiritual endeavour?"

"You probably think that a little *japa* and meditation in the mornings as a routine is enough and then you are free to enjoy yourself in chatting with friends, eating well and pleasing yourself in other ways. But have you not come here (to me) to tread the path of renunciation? Should I not remind you of this?"

How could Buni explain to Sri Ma that she had no spiritual aspirations but her greatest happiness was to stay near her and participate in the daily *lilā* of Sri Ma's way of being in the world.

At this moment, Hiran didi, Sri Ma's friend and devotee from the early days of Shahbagh in Dhaka, broke out in a well-known *bhajan* (song, hymn) which was very apposite—

"Oh Lord do not take into account

my many shortcomings!

(In Hindi, mere avaguna chitta na dharo)

The words of repentance that Buni could not utter because she was *mauni* were sung on her behalf by Hirandi. Sri Ma then began a panegyric of good qualities in Buni. All the girls, Renu, Viveka, Munni, Billoji as well as Didi and Hirandi broke out into smiles because this was an inevitable corollary to Sri Ma's rare scoldings! Buni also had to smile!

Sri Ma in general never demanded that people around her should go in for rigorous *sādhana*. She encouraged, made practical suggestions, provided facilities and in other ways taught that *Sreyas* (the Good) is obtainable by *Vairāgya* (renunciation) only. Grace cannot descend into a cluttered up heart, just as two things may not occupy the same space in the world. *Sūnyatā* (emptiness) therefore is simultaneous with

pūrnatā (fulfilment)

One evening Sri Ma said to Didi that she had "seen" (not physically) the Rani of Rajgarh, who was a regular visitor, sitting very close to her and talking in a very informal and familiar way as with a close friend. Didi was rather surprised because the Rani was very formal in her behaviour and maintained a distance from the usual crowd milling round Sri Ma. Sri Ma quite unexpectedly added, "You can ask her what she was doing from 3 to 5 p. m. today."

Questioned by Didi the Rani said she was reading Bhaiji's book *Sadvani*. Sometimes she had questions. Then she would look at a photograph of Sri Ma in her room and strangely the solutions to her problems came into her mind as if spontaneously. She had been overwhelmed by this experience. Didi was amazed. She realized that she did not always remember that it was not at all necessary to be near Sri Ma physically to obtain her *kheyāla*. It truly could be invoked by anyone anywhere!

On another day Sri Ma said to Didi, "Although I have neither heard of or seen such things, I 'saw' (inner vision) a big light being shone over targets as it were, just as if one were to see the target before firing at it."

The people in India were not aware of the progress of the war, so such statements were not quite meaningful to them. But because Didi was in the habit of writing down whatever Sri Ma said in her hearing we have a record of them. The time was just a few weeks before the war came to a sudden stop. In retrospect it seems she may have been indicating the final acts of the war.

It was time to leave Almora. Sri Ma's *sakhis* (friends) bade

her tearful farewells. One of them said, "Why do you come here to create havoc in our lives? We will now cry every day and pine for your *darshana* but you will be far away!" Sri Ma smiled at them and said, "I shall be with you *whenever* you want me!"

Sri Ma travelled down to Rai Bareilly in late September, 1945 in response to the invitation of Sheetal Prasad who had made preparations for celebrating the annual Durga Puja in his hometown. Sri Ma's presence leant the festival an added air of magnificence as well as joyousness.

Sri Ma spent the winter months of 1945 in her usual mode of travelling from one place to another. The country became involved in a strong student movement during this time. A few officers of Subhash Bose's Indian National Army were brought in captivity to the country. The country came to know about his unsuccessful bid for independence. The British Government wished to make an example of these officers by condemning them for treason but it proved to be an error of judgment on their part. The whole country rose to the defense of the officers. The I. N.A. officers had to be released. They were hailed as heroes by their countrymen.

Sri Ma, wandering around the country, came to Bandh at the invitation of Haribabaji Maharaj in the beginning of 1946.

As written earlier, this entire region of about 800 villages was devoted to Haribabaji Maharaj and looked upon him as their saviour as indeed he was. Haribabaji received Sri Ma and her party with his usual impeccable arrangements. The *māhatmā* dressed in ochre-robos was a *vaisnava* at heart. His *Ista-Devata* (the image dear to his heart) was Sri 'Gauranga Mahaprabhu'. Now he wished to go on a pilgrimage to the holy town in Bengal where Mahaprabhu had been born, that is

Navadweep. He wanted to travel in Sri Ma's company because for him that would enhance the value of the pilgrimage. He persuaded some of his rural devotees to accompany him on his tour of Bengal.

It came to the ears of Sri Ma's companions that his invitation had caused great anguish in the villages. Bengal was for them a dark abode of black magic. It was said that all the women folk were in tears because they believed that whoever entered Bengal would get converted into sheep by the black magicians! The Bengali folk were highly amused at such fears. The villagers, however, were so devoted to Haribabaji that they were ready to follow where he led. About forty villagers came forward for the pilgrimage. Amidst a lot of confusion of tears on the one hand and amusement on the other a large motley crowd of devotees embarked on the long journey to Navadweep-via Varanasi and Baharampur.

This unique adventure proved that anything was possible in Sri Ma's vicinity. The words "impractical" or "impossible" were simply inoperative. The villagers of Vrindavan and Bandh did not speak a word of Bengali. The Bengalis who would be their hosts in Baharampur were innocent of the dialect of Hindi spoken by their guests (*brajbhāṣā*). The towns people of Baharampur who had invited Sri Ma and Haribabaji organised themselves to meet the challenge of the unknown.

In March 1946 Sri Ma arrived in Baharampur followed by her unwieldy retinue of more than 200 people. She was received by a large contingent of local people singing the names of Hari melodiously to the accompaniment of the special percussion instrument of Bengal, the *khole*. *Harināma sankirtana* was understood by everyone. The music immediately united guests and hosts.

The villagers from Vrindavan quickly acquired a taste for Bengali cuisine. They learnt the use of mosquito nets, mosquitoes being the bane of life in this part of the country. The Bengali populace on their part heard the robust rendering of the *Hanumanchālisā* and were fascinated by it. A troupe of artists comprising of small boys always travelled with Haribabaji. They enacted with songs and dances the various incidents of the life of Krishna. This was known as the *Rāslilā* Party and formed an integral part of *satsangs*. The troupe of boys lived away from the world like *brahmachāris* while they were eligible for the *lilās*. When they were older they went back to their families and resumed their normal schooling and ways of life.

The Bengali audience although not able to follow the dialogues in *brajbhāṣā* were entertained by the music and dances. The stories enacted by the artists were all too familiar. Haribabaji was totally dedicated to this art form. As written earlier whenever a *lilā* depicted Radha and Krishna seated on a throne or flower-decked swing while their friends danced round them he would stand behind the divine couple, wielding the ceremonial fan (the *chāmar*) most devotedly. It was awe-inspiring to see the old man so completely dedicated. Evidently the world of make-believe was not so for him.

Haribabaji also watched equally devotedly the *yātrās* performed by Bengali actors. For the *yātrā* there is no stage or auditorium, the audience sits all around a central open space where the actors perform well-known plays written especially for such purposes.

Premraj, the music director of the *Rāslitā* Party, became enamoured of this drama form. He enriched his own

repertoire by adding these dramatic incidents to his own collection of *lilās*. It was a magnificent confluence of musical streams. The theme of the *yātrās* retold in ballads sung in *Brajbhāsā* acquired a beauty of its own.

From the "jamboree" in Baharampur Sri Ma proceeded to Navadweep. At every temple she was received with great fanfare. In Navadweep she represented Gauranga Mahaprabhu. Haribabaji walked miles visiting all sites replete with the memories of Mahaprabhu. He was accompanied by his own *kirtan*-party. It was one gala performance of *kirtan*. Sometimes Sri Ma accompanied him by following in a car or in a horse-drawn carriage. She was careful to stay far behind because if Haribabaji saw her vehicle he would face it and walk backwards so as not to turn his back on her. The courtesy and devotion of the *Mahatma* was truly exemplary. To know Haribabaji was to know what it was to live constantly in God remembrance. His whole day was regularised into hours of meditation, *japa*, *kirtan* or the reading of scriptures and *satsangs*. He slept very little and ate the simplest of foods. His concern for the villagers amongst whom he lived was deep and all-embracing. He would invite them all to engage in the greatest adventures of life saying that they would tread the "razor's edge path" together! The villagers loved and admired him and tried to live up to his high ideals.

The time for the Birthday Celebrations was at hand (May, 1946) This year Kolkata had the privilege of observing this function most dear to the heart of all devotees. Manoranjan Sarkar had been mainly instrumental in establishing the Ashram at Ekdalia Road. Now his tireless efforts were channelled toward organising the Birthday festivities.

Haribabaji was still on a pilgrimage. He wished to visit the Ramna Ashram in Dhaka and the Shahbagh Gardens to pay his homage at the sites of Sri Ma's *lilās* when she was known only as the Ma of Dhaka. This was Sri Ma's last visit to Dhaka in East Bengal which soon was to become East Pakistan. These were very stressful times. Sri Ma spent long hours with the devotees who crowded round her day and night. Days and nights merged into each other. Important decisions had to be taken by all devotees. Times were coming when entire families would be uprooted from Dhaka and forced to take refuge elsewhere. Sri Ma listened to all who were gathered round her and gave advice. Her presence itself had a calming effect on agitations of the moment. Very soon Ramna Ashram itself was to be lost to all devotees in the holocaust of the partitioning of the land. It was to be demolished by rioting Muslims.

After this short visit to Dhaka they returned to Kolkata where Haribabaji went to pay his respects to the great Vaishnava saint and scholar Sri Rasik Mohan Vidyabhushan. Haribabaji had been greatly impressed by his writings. Now he wished to take Sri Ma also to visit the scholar who was unable to come himself due to his considerable age and infirmities. Sri Ma had not entered private residences since she had left Dhaka in 1928. But now she granted his wish to Haribabaji and accompanied him on his visit to the old man who was eagerly awaiting her *darshana*.

Rasik Mohan was overwhelmed and seemingly could not do or say enough to express his gratification. He was very conscious of Sri Ma's exceptional gesture of grace in coming to visit him at his residence. He communicated his feelings in a letter to Didi. A few lines are translated from it here :

"Hundreds and thousands of people are lucky enough to get the *darshana* of Ma Anandamayi now but none can gauge even an infinitesimal part of Ma's imponderable personality. The divine joyousness (*parama-nanda*) which is the subject matter of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, I see reflected in the smile on Ma's countenance....."

With the *Mahatmas* in Solan

Jogibhai (The Raja Saheb of Solan) had invited Sri Ma to spend the summer months (1946) in Solan. He invited all the *mahatmas* too, especially Haribabaji to grace his State by his presence. So on leaving Kolkata, Sri Ma accompanied by her large retinue went up to the beautiful hill-state of Baghat near Simla on the Shivalik range of the Himalayan mountains. Sri Ma was accommodated in the Club House adjoining the flat expanse of four tennis courts and their surroundings. The Club House was fully equipped as a small residence. The *mahatmas* were housed suitably elsewhere. The school house (being empty since it was vacation time) was made available to all the women folk in Sri Ma's retinue. The men also were given comfortable lodgings elsewhere. Gradually Solan (the capital of Baghat State) began to fill up with visitors from different towns. The devotees accompanied by their children came to spend the summer vacation near Sri Ma. The small town soon resounded with strains of *kirtan*, laughter of children and the general hubbub of a motley crowd. Jogibhai's attendants were not only dedicated but very competent. All arrangements of board and lodging were faultless.

The days followed the pattern of *satsangs* usual in Haribabaji's vicinity. He would arrive at the Club House around 10 a.m. He would read any sacred text and give a discourse on it, inviting other *mahatmas* also to make comments. Sri Ma was always his final court of appeal. This time he chose to read *Mātri darshan*, a book made out of Bhaiji's diaries published posthumously. Sri Ma had the *kheyala* to speak at length about all the incidents recorded in this book. These were very illuminating and valuable sessions.

Haribabaji returned to the Club House again in the evening for his *kirtan* and *satsang*. In the afternoon Sri Ma strolled about on the erstwhile tennis courts. At this time the sloping approach on to the Club House was covered on the townside by big canvas curtains. The Rani Sahiba observed *purdah*. This was the time for her to come to have *darshana*. The public did not intrude knowing the customs of their State. The Rani Sahiba was the daughter of the Maharaja of Tehri Garhwal. The observance of royal customs came naturally to her. She was more circumspect than Jogibhai who mingled very easily with everyone. The Rani Sahiba was very devoted to Sri Ma. Her competence, skill of management and dedication to details were seen clearly when the annual Durga Puja was celebrated in Solan this year, 1946.

Sri Ma left Solan in July only to return after a couple of months for the Durga Puja. A spacious cottage had been built for Sri Ma just below the Palace. This even plot of ground was again the private tennis courts serving the Palace. These were converted now into a big compound. Sri Ma's bungalow graced one end of this space, the other saw the magnificent temple-like structure awaiting the coming of the Goddess.

The people of our mountains are worshippers of the Goddess. They are all mostly *Sāktas*. The people of Baghat State prepared ecstatically to accord welcome to the Image of the Goddess which is customarily worshipped in Bengal for three days at the onset of winter.

Devotees arrived from far away towns of India. They enjoyed the scenic beauty of Solan, the hospitality of the princely household, the splendour of the Puja of the beautiful Icon of the Devi surrounded by her divine retinue. The princely couple were very devout and served the people lavishly honouring them as Sri Ma's guests. The puja reached a peak of the confluence of princely splendour and spiritual piety unknown before or since.

Sri Ma descended from Solan in late October. The *mahatmas* Hari Baba, Sharananandaji, Chakrapaniji also accompanied her. In Delhi Haribaba wished to visit the prayer meeting of Gandhiji who was in town at this time. Haribabaji sent word to Sri Ma that if she did not object he would like her to accompany him. Sri Ma said, "What objection can there be for a 'child' (*bacchi*) to go to see her father?"

Sri Ma's consent immediately converted the small group of visitors into an unwieldy crowd. Sri Ma's retinue was somehow always bulging at the seams. Upadhyayaji (Pandit Nehru's Private Secretary) had come to pay his respects to Sri Ma. Now he organised the crowd into a manageable group. Even so Mahatma Gandhi was annoyed to see Sri Ma's large retinue. She herself however was most welcome to him. He put his arm round her and greeted her very affectionately. He was full of reminiscences about her previous visit in Sevagram. Then it was time to mount the steps to the platform from where he would lead the prayer meeting. He held Sri Ma close

and so walked toward the rostrum. It was evident that he did not want anyone else. But Sri Ma held back introducing the *mahatmas* to him. Gandhiji was not too inclined to welcome them because ochre-robed *sadhus* did not play a big part in his life. He however gauging his "*bacchi's*" preferences signalled that the *mahatmas* should be accommodated near him on the stage.

After the prayer meeting (at one time he told the congregation that he had Ma Anandamayi, his daughter, with him) Gandhiji reluctantly bade farewell to Sri Ma. He said forcefully that she should come to Sevagram with him and stay near him and not wander around as she did. Sri Ma said in very grave tones "Pitaji, I am always with you. Believe me. This '*bacchi*' never lies. I do not go away from you. I am ever with you."

It was not that Gandhiji did not believe her but he also was as enamoured of the radiant physical presence of Sri Anandamayi Ma as any other onlooker. This was their last meeting. The tragic date of January 30, 1948 was not far away.

In between Sri Ma's two visits to Solan in 1946, she did not stay for long anywhere but was constantly on the move as always. She once paid a surprise visit to Allahabad going straight to the residence of Gopal Thakur. From the car she saw a new construction. She was told that it was being built by Deva Narain Babu and his wife Jamuna, Sri Ma said, "I shall enter my house; send word to everyone that I am here."

Waves of joyousness engulfed the precincts. Gopal Thakur said. "They are constructing a permanent place for the annual Durga Puja. They were making plans for Sri Ma's

presence at the inauguration ceremony. I said to them that maybe Ma will come before you are ready for her!"

After this lightning visit Sri Ma came off and on to this Satsang Hall many times over the years. Her last visit was on 9th January, 1982.

Sri Ma paid another surprise visit at this time of her short sojourn in Allahabad. She said to her few companions. "Prabhudatta Maharaj Pitaji invites me many times to visit him at Jhunsī. Let us go now." It was pretty late but this did not deflect her *kheyāla*. They arrived at the large Ashram on the other side of the Ganges. The surprised attendants made her welcome but informed her that the *Mahatma* was living like a recluse in his own room which he locked from inside. They dared not disturb him. Sri Ma then asked Dr. Pannalal who was with her to knock on the door. Dr. Pannalal did this identifying himself. The door was opened immediately. The *Mahatma* thought he must be bringing some message from Sri Ma. What was his excitement and gratification when he saw Ma herself standing at his door!

All arrangements for the honoured guests were made quickly and circumspectly. Next day Prabhudattaji said to Sri Ma, "You have been gracious to me. I shall ask for a boon from you." Sri Ma said "I am a small child, what boon can I grant?"

The *Mahatma* said. "I shall not ask for anything great, neither worldly riches nor spiritual fulfilment (*bhukti mukti*) but your promise that you will come and stay here for a month at least every year!"

Sri Ma made her usual reply that she would come whenever he wanted her to come. Taking leave from the *Mahatma* Sri Ma returned to Allahabad in Kanhaiya Bhai's car to Krishna Kunja. The annual Puja of Kali in November was scheduled to be performed in the bower of Krishna this year. Such anomalies became symbolic of accord in Sri Ma's presence. The second day after this Puja is celebrated as *Bhāīya dooj* that is a day dedicated to brothers. All brothers are entertained to a meal by their sisters who put a *tikā* (a sandal paste mark) on their foreheads praying for their long life and felicity in life. Sri Ma had given a new form to this festival. Didi would put the *tika* on everyone's forehead men, women and children gathered round Sri Ma. Ma called it a *brahma bindu*, that is an all embracing, universal, mark or *tikā*. This year the Hall of Krishna Kunja was full of devotees. Gopal Thakur was also present. People arranged themselves in rows to receive the *tikā* from Didi. When Didi had finished Sri Ma called out "How about me? Don't you want me to get a *tikā*?" Didi quickly rectified her omission. Abhaya who was in Sri Ma's party, asked Gopal Thakur to speak a few words on the "*brahma bindu*". Gopal Thakur smiled and said, "What is there for me to say? Sri Ma herself has indicated the meaning by asking for a *tikā* for herself. The fraternal bond uniting everyone irrespective of huge diversities is fulfilled by the inclusion of Sri Ma because a few of us only are here to experience this togetherness. By assuming the *tikā* herself Sri Ma has made it all-inclusive. It is for all those who are not here at this moment."

Previously Sri Ma herself had given an explanation of this

ritual. She had said "The space between the eyebrows is an important centre of sensation in every body. The touch of the auspicious *tika* is like a reminder of the self as Brahman, a reminder of the quest for this knowledge. This is why I call it *brahma-bindu*."

Sri Ma continued to travel. She returned to Krishna Kunja after a few days. These were very bad times for the country. The pre-independence-day riots had broken out in Bengal. Hindu communities were completely at the mercy of their erstwhile neighbours, the Muslims. Curfew had been clamped on major cities. India paid the heavy price of the Balkanization of the country in order to gain independence. The aftermath was the cruel displacement of ten million people. History will decide if this was justified.

During this time there was a pall of gloom all over the country. People listened to the harrowing tales coming out of Bengal and Punjab and felt frustrated at the helplessness or apathy of the Government.

Sri Ma listened in compassionate silence to the tales of woe which were related to her by devotees who had managed to come away from what had been East Bengal and now was going to be East Pakistan. She spent some time in Allahabad, Jhansi, Varanasi and Vindhyaachal at the end of the year 1946. Prabhudattaji would pray for her presence at Jhansi whenever she came to Allahabad. Once she started for Jhansi late at night in a car provided by Kanhaiyalal of Krishna Kunja. The sandy banks of Jhansi were too much for the car. It stalled. Sri Ma, Didi, the escort sent by Prabhudattaji and the driver got out. The men pushed the car till it was

again ready to go. This happened a number of times. So much so that it took them two hours to traverse the short distance after crossing the river. The roads were empty because of the curfew. The sandy banks were awash with moonlight. It was a strange journey quite enjoyable because Sri Ma herself entered into the spirit of the adventure by helping to push the cars sometimes.

They arrived at the Ashram at Jhansi at 12 midnight. The *Mahatma* was waiting anxiously at the gate with lights. His concern and apologies were brushed aside by Sri Ma. She assured him that there had been no discomfort or annoyance. It had all been a *kirtan* although of a new kind.

Sri Ma visited Kolkatta also at this time. Her presence immediately created an atmosphere of joyousness quite unrelated to the conflict situation obtaining in Bengal. Everyone took heart at Sri Ma's robust words of encouragement. She listened sympathetically to their feelings of dread for the future but adjured them not to give way to panic. She spoke of bravely facing whatever the times brought and always to trust in the unfailing grace of God. She had been replying in this strain to the letters of many of her devotees. Now the crowds forgot their troubles and became the usual cheerful retinue of their beloved "Ma".

A rather endearing incident occurred at this time. A new devotee known as Bholanath had requested Sri Ma on a previous occasion to visit his new house in the suburbs of the town. Sri Ma had not been free at that time. Now she said to Bholanath that she would go to his house. But Bholanath had been very disappointed and had been nursing his hurt

throughout the year. Now he said curtly that it was not convenient for him as he was going out of station. Sri Ma said. "That is all right I shall go to my house. You need not accompany me. I know the way. You should not have shown 'the enemy' the way to your abode, now you can't prevent my visit." She spoke in such teasing tones that everyone started laughing. Bholanath's sense of hurt also evaporated.

The beginning of 1947 found Sri Ma in Varanasi. A very important function was inaugurated in the Ashram on January 14, 1947. This was the *Savitri Mahayajna*, the most prestigious of the Vedic rituals. We now give details of how this *yajna* came to be inaugurated and how it was concluded after a duration of three years.

In retrospect we see that these three years were very crucial for our country; may be the *yajna* held together the forces of disintegration which at times seemed to be overpowering.



After the conclusion of Savitri Mahayajna Ma standing in front of the temporary thatched Havanshala.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Akhanda Mahāyajna

1947-1950

"Worship the One in any form that expresses Divinity to you; invoke His presence by any of His Names that is most dear to you; abide in complete reliance upon Him in all matters of life."

-Sri Ma Anandamayi

The ritual of a continuous sacrifice (*akhanda mahāyajna*) was initiated on January 14, 1947 at Varanasi Ashram. This continued for three years concluding on January 14, 1950. The scope, magnitude and splendour of this enterprise marked a high point in the history of not only the Ashram but also our country. Such was the opinion of all the scholars and *Mahatmas* who graced the occasion of the *puṇnahuti* (completion). The much respected erudite savant Triveni Puriji Maharaj and equally respected doyen of the ascetic orders, Devigiriji Maharaj of Uttarkashi said, "In our age such a *yajna* has never happened before and will not happen again. It is unique."

The history of this enterprise is replete with instances of miraculous coincidences. Didi Gurupriya has written a book describing the orchestration which created the *akhanda mahāyajna* of three years. She writes that although the *yajna* took shape ostensibly under her (Didi's) direction, she knew herself to be an instrument only. It was Sri Ma's *kheyāla* alone which brought together the right people at crucial times and

place.

Times, indeed, were crucial. The country was passing through very difficult times. The political scene was one of confrontation between the rulers and the ruled. The war-years had accentuated the opposition. Sri Ma came into very close contact with all political leaders quite naturally because of her association with Jamnalal Bajaj and Mahatma Gandhi. Bajaj a dedicated freedomfighter was an ascetic at heart. His untimely death brought Sri Ma to Sevagram where she met Gandhiji. She also met Babu Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India, Acharya Vinoba Bhave and other stalwarts, who were with Gandhiji at the time. Jawaharlal Nehru and his entire family were drawn to her because of the memory of Kamla Nehru and her surrender at Sri Ma's feet. Vallabh Bhai Patel came to visit her with Jawaharlal Nehru. Indira Gandhi no doubt remembered her from her schooldays.

Sri Ma's own entourage looked forward to these meetings very hopefully. They thought that if all the leaders were to be guided by her then the entire nation would benefit from these meetings. In time it dawned on her close companions that Sri Ma remained ever true to her own oft-repeated *vāni*:

"To talk of God alone is worthwhile

All else is pain and in vain."

All dialogues with eminent leaders of the country were about spiritual matters. She had nothing to say regarding worldly affairs. She understood perfectly the overwhelming concerns confronting the leaders and did not trivialize their struggles on behalf of their country. Her response in general

would be "Let God guide your efforts." It took many years for people to realize that she indeed belonged to humanity. The two sides of any situation of confrontation were for her like the clapping of hands of the same Person.

Sri Ma, however, was seen to give great respect to anyone wearing ochre robes. Ochre robes or *agni-vastra* (cloth of fire) marked out the aspirant for self-realization, the ascetic who has set out alone on the razor's edge path to fulfilment or *brahmānanda*. In the course of her wanderings all over India Sri Ma had met many eminent renunciates, such as Balananda Brahmachari at Deoghar and Mangal Giriji at Haradwar. She had been very well received at both Ashrams. In the decade of the forties she came in wider touch with the *sadhu samāj* (ascetic orders) of our country due to the pioneering act of introduction by Prabhudattaji Maharaj of Jhansi.

This exemplary leader among the renunciates gave his full allegiance to Sri Ma Anandamayi. Evidently he had recognised her for what she was inspite of the many veils she affected to hide her true identity. The very first hurdle for all renunciates was the fact that she was in a female form. The ascetic orders eschew female companionship so in the beginning they had kept their distance till Prabhudattaji invited her to grace their assemblies. Secondly she was not known to belong to any brotherhood (*Sampradāya*) or to have been initiated by any Guru. She was not even an ascetic in the sense of one who leaves home and hearth behind to follow the path of renunciation.

The impact of her radiant personality was self-authenticating. This was apparent in the world of *sadhus* as everywhere else. She did not need to speak. The inimitable

glance of complete awareness of all that one was, was enough to indicate that here was someone who could be one's inner self. The eyes were all-seeing but also endearingly compassionate generating a feeling of home-coming and peace.

As written earlier, Sri Ma came into close contact with the *sadhu-samāj* in Prabhudattaji's Ashram at Jhunsi in early 1944. Here she came to know Haribabaji Maharaj of Vrindavan, Chakrapaniji, the very much respected blind *sadhu* Sharananandaji and many more. This meeting was the precursor of many such in other parts of the country. All the Heads of the monastic orders got the opportunity of coming into close contact with her. All Heads of our monastic orders are prestigious savants and scholars of great repute. They truly were competent to make something of the unfathomable phenomenon going about as an ordinary individual in our midst.

Simultaneous with Sri Ma's entry into the world of the *sadhus*, we see in retrospect the beginning and the swift development of the Ashram in Varanasi. Didi Gurupriya in early 1944 was able to finalize the purchase of a spacious plot of ground on the Ganges near Assi Ghat. The annual Vasanti-puja of 1944 was performed on this ground. Some of the *mahātmās* came to attend the puja thus inaugurating the future tradition of reciprocal visits to all Ashrams all over the country.

The Ashram at Varanasi grew into a large conglomerate of temples, living quarters and *satsang* halls within a very short time. The spacious courtyard in the middle again raised speculations about a possible *Mahāyajna*. This Ashram

provided some measure of stability to the fluidity of constant movements of Sri Ma. The school for young girls, the Kanyapeeth was housed in spacious quarters constructed for their convenience. The school so far had been quartered in various rented houses. Now they had their own dormitories, classrooms, a temple and their own kitchen and other facilities.

Times were disturbed. Following Sri Ma's advice all those who were able to do so left Dhaka and found refuge in Kolkota or other towns in India. Two of the very devoted families Manmohan Ghosh's and Amulya Kumar Datta Gupta's came to Varanasi thinking they would perhaps see Sri Ma here more often than anywhere else. The Images from the Temple at Ramna Ashram were brought to Varanasi and established in the new Ashram. Manmohan Ghosh who was an engineer designed and constructed a special Temple for housing these cherished images. This architectural gem added grace and beauty to the new Ashram. The devotees of Dhaka uprooted from their homes found some solace in being able to have their usual daily *darshana* of the same Deity, Annapurna in her new Temple.

The end of the war did not bring relief to India. There were student uprisings at the time of the trial of the I.N.A. officers. There were riots at the time of the Partition of the country which spread like a scourge of cruel devastation. Independence was achieved, but at great cost.

Sri Ma, in fact, visited Varanasi very often during these years. Her presence no doubt helped in the process of rehabilitation of the long-time devotees from Dhaka.

The Varanasi Ashram became a regular centre for the gathering of *mahātmās* and devotees for the very popular *satsangs* of dialogues with Sri Ma. Among the frequent visitors of this time was one *dandi-sadhu*, Sri Jogesh Brahmachari. The *danda* or staff which is held in the right hand is a special insignia of the brotherhood (*sampradāya*) to which he belonged. He was the second person to demand a *Mahāyajna* from Sri Ma.

On the eve of Independence when Bengal was plunged into terrible communal riots Jogesh Brahmachari had gone to Noakhali to help the beleaguered people. He was maltreated severely. His *danda* was broken and thrown away. In great dejection of spirit he returned to Varanasi saying he had lost faith in his vocation. Sri Ma talked to him at length and persuaded him to re-assume his *danda*. At her *kheyāla* a small place was marked out in one corner of the courtyard for the performance of the ritual of penance and reaffirmation. Jogesh Brahmachari regained his faith and confidence. It was at this time that he prayed to Sri Ma to sponsor a *Mahāyajna*.

There were other straws in the wind all pointing toward a major undertaking. Kanhaiyalal of Allahabad was the owner of a timber forest. He said to Didi that if she were ever to organise a *yajna* he would be able to supply the fire-wood for it.

The topic was kept alive by other small incidents. Sri Ma and Didi met Sri Agnishwatta Sharma in Varanasi who was more familiarly known as Batuda or Batukda. Batukda was a Vedic Scholar, trained in Vedic ritualisms and possessing the authority to perform the same. On being consulted Batukda

said that the courtyard of the new Ashram was spacious enough for housing a *yajna-shālā* that is a building of specific proportions where a sacrifice (*yajna*) may be performed. A competent engineer in the person of Manmotan Ghosh was already in Varanasi.

In retrospect it emerges very distinctly that the *Mahāyajna* prophesied 20 years ago was envisaged for the distressful times of the post-war years. Every *yajna* is purposive that is it is a sort of a prayer which seeks fulfilment. The *samkalpa* (prayer, resolution, target, aim) of this *yajna* was *visva-kalyān* that is, "for the benefit of mankind."

The radiating goodwill of the powerful ritual sanctioned by an ageless tradition must have borne fruit. It must surely have created an atmosphere of sanity in times of dire uncertainties. The *Mahāyajna* was a sheet anchor to which everyone could relate wholeheartedly.

It was a strange concatenation of events which led to the performance of the *Mahāyajna*. The eddying waters of a flood bring together various floating objects, the miscellany is held together in a tenuous bondage for sometime and then again it disperses and the objects float away to their different destinations. Didi herself while preparing for the *Mahāyajna* felt as if she was also a flotsam moving in the current of a *kheyāla* which was supremely self-sufficient.

The Yajna

The *yajna* is a ritual of sacrifice, a giving away, a parting with something valuable, an offering of the best toward those powers which guide our destinies. The Vedic seers saw the universe as a manifestation of that primordial power (*Sakti*)

which vibrates into creation. They stayed in tune with the movements of this surging force. They named these manifestations and worshipped them as gods who held the key to the Unknown beyond. They sought to propitiate or harness the manifest powers toward their own wellbeing mundane as well as spiritual. This harmonious reciprocity between man and nature was sought to be sustained by the *yajna*. It is stated in the Gita:

*devanbhavatyatanena te deva bhavayantu vah
parasparambhavayantah sreyah paramavapsyatha.*

Chapter III, Sl. 11.

(With this do ye nourish the gods, and the gods shall nourish you; thus nourishing one another, ye shall attain the supreme good. Tr. by A.M. Sastry).

Fire was the visible and tangible link between the supra-natural divine order and the world of the mortals. The sages ignited sacrificial fires by rubbing together two pieces of special fire-wood called *arani*. These were nurtured and sustained by pure *ghee* (purified butter). Into such fires were offered oblations consisting of many auspicious items such as various kinds of grains, nuts, spices and molasses.

The Vedic seers considered that the gods were the known manifestations of the Unknown. The Vedic heritage consists in the resolution of the paradox: "knowledge of the unknown." Enquiry into the unknown is latent in every ritual. It blossoms into a full-fledged enquiry in the Upanishads or the last-section of the Vedas. The Upanishads, therefore, touch the pinnacle of human yearnings for truth. The Vedic

tradition comprised the teachings for worldly welfare as well as answers for those who would fain penetrate the mystery of creation. The relevance of the Vedic tradition is timeless because the questing spirit is also ever alive. The usual format of our religious writings is the dialogue, the worthy disciple seeking knowledge from the enlightened teacher. Since the object of enquiry is self-knowledge, the teachings are imponderables to be heard, assimilated and finally realized. Each aspirant must work out his own way to Truth. A spiritually rich religious way of life takes the aspirant to his goal, that is, a state of supreme yearning. All-consuming yearning is simultaneous with fulfilment. The heart of religion, therefore, lies in learning how to transform oneself into a true aspirant, a *mumukshu*.

The Vedic seers maintained a unity in the created world by the *yajna*. It kept humanity in close touch with nature and the powers that underlay both. The dynamism which set in rhythmic motion the forces came from the *mantra* revealed unto the poets (*kavi*) who were worthy recipients of these "keys" by which they could enter into commerce with the divine order of existence. Power without movement is in a state of equilibrium. The *mantra* provides the impetus for propagating influences for the benefit of mankind.

In modern times the *yajna* had become an obsolete ritual. Pauranic worship of gods and incarnations, ceremonial festivals were popular. The *yajna* required expert knowledge of Vedic *Karmakanda*. The persons who would engage in it would have to be dedicated and adopt an other-worldly way of life for the duration, a rigourism bordering on asceticism. Provisions also would be required in some profusion. For all

these reasons Didi had hesitated to embark on this grand affair. But, time, evidently was right because all contributory factors coalesced into a smooth pattern now. With the construction of the Ashram at Varanasi came the volunteers as performers of the *yajna*. Nepal Chandra Chakravarty, a longtime devotee, offered his service as a priest. Kamalakanta Brahmachari, as a member of the Ashram, was interested in Vedic rituals. He also offered his services. Didi also could rely on Sadananda, a young brahmachari who was in Sri Ma's retinue. Didi brought together Batukda and Manmohan Ghosh, the expert in Vedic procedure and a qualified engineer who could give shape to the structure in which the *yajna* could be performed.

Under Batukda's directions a structure for the *Mahayajna* took shape in the central courtyard of the Ashram. All measurements, width, length, height, the thickness of pillars etc, are specified in the relevant Scriptures. Manmohan Ghosh became fascinated with the new type of engineering which was so meticulously worked out combining beauty with efficacy. He dedicated himself totally to this task. He had already picked up the dialect of the local workmen. He spent hours measuring, calculating and the laying out of the bricks for the foundation. The building was a square spacious room built on a larger platform. It had four doors opening out of the four walls. The four doors would be built of four different types of wood, also specified. The door in the west wall would be the main gate of entry (*praveshdwar*) Facing this door was built the *kunda* or square hollow in which the sacred fire, when ignited, would be placed. This *kunda* also had specific measurements and was built in layers. There were four

pedestals at the four corners of the room. The roof in the beginning remained temporary. It was constructed of four large triangular asbestos sheets placed slantingly from a high apex. The small building looked very graceful. Perhaps it will not be out of place here to remember the services of the headmason, Mangru, who was the right hand man of Manmohan Ghosh and who helped create this perfect house for the *Mahāyajna*.

Many discussions took place about other requirements while the building was being constructed. All calculations are made depending on the number of *āhutis* (oblations) to be given unto the sacred fire. When first the subject was broached, Sri Ma had said, "Is it possible to arrange for one crore?" (One hundred lakhs).

Didi had accepted this number as Sri Ma's *kheyāla*; The building had been constructed accordingly. Now enough provisions were required for the daily worship of the sacred fire. The *āhutis* (oblations) consisted of specified grains, spices, and molasses. The grains needed to be cleaned, washed and then dried again in the sun. Sri Ma gave up her own spacious room for the purpose of storing the grains. The Incharge of the Kanyapeeth, Kshama, was detailed to manage this very important department of supplies.

The most difficult requirement was that of the *hotā* that is, the priest who would put the oblations into the fire. The priest was required to be an upright brahmin dedicated to his calling of study and piety.

Things progressed slowly but steadily. A date was fixed for the inauguration ceremony, January 14, 1947 that is the last

day of the month of Paush of the Indian Calender known as *Paush-samkrānti*.

For Didi it was somewhat like diving into unknown waters. Her unshakeable faith in Sri Ma's *kheyāla* for this *Mahāyajna* was her only where with all at this time. All questions regarding sufficient money, the availability of many more dedicated personnel, pure *ghee* and the right kind of firewood remained unanswered. Even Sri Ma said laughingly to Didi, "You are plunging into the ocean. It is very brave of you!"

It was Sri Ma's *kheyāla* that the *Mahāyajna* should be performed strictly according to Vedic injunctions. Batukda came daily to the Ashram to explain and instruct about the requirements. In the very beginning of their acquaintanceship, Sri Ma had related to Batukda, the history of the fire which was being preserved in the Ashram in Dhaka for nearly twenty years. She had asked him if it would be possible to ignite the fire of a new *yajna* with the help of this already existing one. Batukda had demurred. He said he knew of no such precedent; *yajna* fires were always lighted by rubbing two pieces of special firewood (*arani*) together. Sri Ma had said no more.

During the months of preparations of the *yajna* Batukda had become more familiar with Sri Ma's ways. He had realized that her awareness of Vedic injunctions was nothing short of the miraculous. He had developed an attitude of listening carefully to every word spoken by her.

Strange as it may seem, Didi had forgotten all about the fire being preserved in Dhaka Ashram, the actual reason for

the present *yajna*! Unknown to her Sri Ma had sent word to Dhaka. Brahmachari Keshava arrived in Varanasi on the eve of the opening ceremony, carefully carrying the live embers of the fire. This was installed in a portable *kunda* (square vessel) of bronze. Sri Ma spoke again to Batukda. She said, "Now that the *Yajna* fire from Dhaka is here, how would it be if it is placed near the new fire to be ignited. When both flames rise and become visible, a united flame may be used?"

By this time Batukda had accepted Sri Ma as a person possessing total authority. Her *kheyāla* was *Sāstra* (scripture) for him. He said firmly that the fire being preserved for the last twenty years would be used for the *Mahāyajna*. A new fire was not required.

Brahmachari Kamalakanta in the meantime had procured two pieces of *arani* (firewood) of the required size. He was very keen to see the ancient ceremony of igniting fire from *arani*. Finding them a little damp he positioned them near the warm vessel of the Ashram fire in order to dry them out for the morrow. The flames of the fire are allowed to die down after the ritual of daily oblations. The smouldering embers are covered with ashes as if the fire is put to rest and sleep under a blanket of ashes. Early next morning when Kamalakanta came to fetch the fire as well as the *arani* he was aghast to see that both pieces of wood had been consumed to charred remains by the still dormant fire in the *kunda*. Nothing could be done at the eleventh hour. Sri Ma's *kheyāla* was to prevail. The flames of the *Mahāyajna* would arise out of the *yajna* fire performed way back in Shahbagh in 1926. There was another oddity about this fire. The original *yajna* had been for a Kali-puja. Kali-puja is a Tantrik ritual. The *Mahāyajna* contemplated was fully vedic in character. The mantra chosen was

the most prestigious, the Gayatri. In retrospect it seems that Sri Ma with her characteristic light touch brought about an amalgam of two distinct traditions.

The day of the *Mahāyajna* dawned crisp and clear. All guests in the Ashram awoke to the melodious strains of pre-dawn *kirtan* being sung around the *yajna-shālā*. The small neat building had been decorated over night with festoons of flower garlands and green foliage. Devotees who had come from far and near assembled in the courtyard of the Ashram while the sun rose to make the waters of the Ganga sparkle like a hoard of jewels. Sri Ma dressed in her usual spotless white clothes came to attend all the preliminary rituals which were performed with meticulous care and circumspection.

Firstly the personnel of the ritual were ceremonially made welcome and initiated as participants. Every *yajna* is headed by the Acharya who would be over-all in charge of the proceedings. The Acharya would be an adept in Vedic ritualism and a noted scholar with an in-depth knowledge of the Scriptures. Batukda was formally invited to grace this post. The next in importance was the *yajamāna*, namely, the person who would be performing the *yajna*. Nepal Chandra Chakravarty had been selected for this post. He was a devotee of long standing. He was unmarried and for long years had been living like an ascetic at home. Now he left home to reside in the Ashram. To help the *yajamāna*, two extra *brahmacharis* Kamalakanta and Sadananda were selected as *hotas*, that is, those who would actually feed the sacred fire with oblations. A few more *brahmacharis* were appointed to render such help to them as may be required in the daily routine of the performance.

All personnel underwent the required procedures of initiation and purification. In fact, the ritual of purification was all-embracing. The *yajna-shālā* itself, its precincts, all paraphernalia, all instruments and utensils as well as all the colourful flags and pennants decorating the eaves of the building were included in the ceremony of purification.

Each of the four doors of the *yajna-shālā* was dedicated to one Veda. Four Vedic scholars, experts in Rik, Sāma, Yajur and Atharva Veda sat each at his own designated door and commenced the proceedings by pronouncing aloud verses of benediction. The tunes and rhythms of each were distinct. The assembly of devotees listened in bemused silence to the sonorous voices reciting these ancient *mantras* for invoking the blessings of gods for the enterprise at hand. It created an atmosphere of ancient hermitages and was thus a unique experience for modern people. This atmosphere was enhanced by the presence of eminent ochre-robed *Mahātmās* who sat on a dais and presided over all rituals.

The sacred fire was carried by the initiated personnel in a procession to the *yajna-shālā*. They entered through the door in the West. The fire was placed in the *kunda* (hollow) to the accompaniment of Vedic *mantras* inside and *kirtan* outside. Inside the *yajna-shālā* Batukda began the process of invoking the presence of the gods and praying for their support for the undertaking.

All presiding deities of the elements, the nine planets, the ten directions (east, west, north, south, the points in between, the upper and the lower) were invoked and worshipped by their appropriate *mantras*. Twenty pairs of colourful flags were dedicated to the ten *dikpālas* (lords of the ten directions)

and put up on the eaves of the *yajna-shālā*; the gods could be identified by their different emblems and their *vāhanas* (the animals sacred to them). A big multicoloured flag adorned the top of the *yajna-shālā* raised on a pole. Small bells were attached to this flag so that it constantly emitted musical chimes while it fluttered in the wind.

Inside the *yajna shālā*, the *yajamāna* was led to invoke the presence of Gayatri Devi the presiding Deity of the *yajna*. A gold statuette of the Goddess had been installed on a pedestal erected for the purpose. All *yajnas* are purposive. The purpose of this *mahāyajna* was written out by Didi. She had interpreted Sri Ma's *kheyāla* in these words. "For the gracious acceptance (*priti*) of the One, who is the Supreme Being and is the Adored One (*Ista*) of all creation and so for the benefit of all humanity and other creatures."

This resolution (*samkalpa*) was incorporated in the rituals now. The *yajna* commenced with the pronouncement of the *Gāyatri Mantra* along with the consignment of oblations into the sacred fire.

Mantra : The Vedic mantra can be pronounced by qualified persons only. The qualifications are : birth (highest caste), initiation (*dīksā*) and daily practice (*svādhyāya*). In Modern times not many brahmins would qualify as very few practise the daily routine of *japa*.

Although initiated they do not maintain the custom of continuity strictly; this discontinuity disqualifies them from uttering the *mantra*. Three *brahmacharis* only fulfilled these conditions at this time. They alone could be appointed to act as *hotas* that is, the priests who would actually offer the

oblation to the sacred fire.

The most important ingredient in the oblation was pure *ghee*. In our own times it is most difficult to procure pure unadulterated *ghee* made out of cow's milk. A devotee in Dhaka Surendra Mohan had sent a 5 kg. container of *ghee* for Sri Ma. This had not been used so far. Sri Ma solved Didi's difficulty by saying, "Begin with this *ghee*. We shall see how things arrange themselves!"

At the right auspicious moment the *Mahāyajna* was begun with the recitation of the *Gāyatri mantra* with each oblation as it was consigned to the fire. The crowd of devotees assembled in the spacious courtyard listened to the rhythmic cadence of the beautiful *mantra* uttered in unison by many voices. Gradually the aroma of incense in the atmosphere was superceded by the rich and full-bodied fragrance of oblations burning in the fire which now rose in flames of many colours. When the orange, gold, red and yellow tongues of fire became visible to the audience they broke out spontaneously in shouts of jay, jay! (*jayadhvani*).

The *Mahāyajna* had begun. Every morning for about three hours the *brahmacharis* would put in a specified number of oblations. Batukda calculated that it would take nine years to attain the number of one crore Didi, however was able to attain the services of six more *brahmacharis* over the months so the *Mahāyajna* was concluded on January 14, 1950, that is in three years. In the evening Nepal Chakravarty sat quietly in the *yajnasālā* to do *japa* of the same count of the *mantra* pronounced in the morning. Another *brahmachari* sat doing *japa* of this *mantra* for the duration of the giving of oblations lest any gap occur by mistake. Puja and *ārati* were performed

to the Goddess as the final ritual everyday.

These three years proved to be a time of constant anxiety lest something or other went wrong which it did many times. Kanhaiyalal, who had promised to supply fire-wood could not keep his promise because of reversals in his own personal affairs. He could supply one truck-load of fire-wood only. A few months earlier a big mango-tree had been struck by lightning in Vindhyachal Ashram. Sri Ma had asked the Ashram to preserve the wood of this tree. Now Didi very gratefully accepted this wood from Vindhyachal.

Money was always just enough neither in excess nor less than necessary. Didi had learnt from Sri Ma not to mix-up donations. Money given for a specific purpose could not be utilized for something else, so Didi with the help of Kamal Brahmachari maintained a separate account for the *yajna*. Sri Ma's companions were strictly forbidden to ask for donations. The supply from voluntary contributions was erratic, but miraculously just about sufficient for every purpose.

The most important item at this time was pure *ghee*. The adequate supply of *ghee* itself reads like an adventure story. The five seers of *ghee* with which the *yajna* was begun was a mere drop in an ocean. Didi came to know that good *ghee* was available near the timber forest from where came the first consignment of fire-wood. Sadhan Brahmachari was sent to procure a few tins from these villages. The farmers, realizing the dire need of the purchasers, increased the price astronomically. The purity also became suspect. So this source petered out after the first lot of tins.

Many devotees supplied this rare commodity in small

measures. Main among them were the Zamindars of Santragachhi, and Baharampur, Sukumar Bhattacharya and Ramranjan Chowdury. Didi was constantly in a worry about the supply of pure *ghee*. Once she decided to go to Kolkata to tap the sources in the villages of Bengal. But times were so disturbed that all known places had become unapproachable. Didi one day sat in Sri Ma's room in the Ashram in Ekdalia Road in Kolkata and prayed for guidance. She was so restless that she went out walking alone in the city as if she would find some solution there to her problem. When she returned to the Ashram tired and dispirited she found some devotees had come to see her and were talking about the predicament of obtaining pure *ghee*. It transpired that Shashadhar Bhattacharya knew of a merchant who was engaged in this business. Didi's prayers had borne fruit. About 8 tins of this priceless commodity were acquired on this trip. Didi could breathe easily for the time being.

Durga Puja was at hand. The devotees of East Pakistan prayed for Sri Ma's presence in their part of the country. In spite of political uncertainties, the Puja was performed with meticulous care and dedication. Sri Ma returned to Kolkata for Kalipuja. After the Puja she was invited to visit Beldanga by Jaikishen Jhajharia. Wherever she went these days, people were eager to talk about the *yajna* taking place in Varanasi. Jaikishen Jhajharia expressed great interest. He told Didi that she should increase the number of priests so that the *yajna* could be concluded in less than nine years. He offered to bear the expenses of this expansion. Didi was persuaded to increase the number by four more. At this time the school for young *brahmacharis*, the Vidyapeeth, was doing very well.

As written earlier the school was established in Almora Ashram. A few of the older boys came to Varanasi to help with the expanding requirements of the *yajna*.

Didi was sure of qualified personnel in the students of the Vidyapeeth but she was cruelly disappointed as regards the promised money. Jaikishen Jhaharia was able to finance the increased expenditure for a few months only. He himself unfortunately suffered some reverses in his business. He was obliged to tell Didi that he would not be able to help her any further. (Sometime later he did give her some part of this money when he had recovered his fortunes).

Now Didi was in a worse case than before. According to the rules of the *yajna* the number of oblations being put in the fire could be increased but certainly they could not be decreased. She was in dire straits regarding money. Forgetting that Sri Ma did not have any *kheyāla* for asking for money she suggested that may be an appeal could be made to some of the heads of monastic orders since the *yajna* was universal in concept. Sri Ma dismissed the suggestion saying, "Just because somebody has something you need, should you ask for it? You should look to God alone for help!"

In this connection Sri Ma used to relate the following incident many times to different groups of people:

"One day Didi was sitting in front of me, sunk in gloom because Kamal had told her that he had no money at all for the morrow. At this time Bindu's mother approached us and very diffidently gave two of her gold bangles to Didi for the *yajna*. Didi was at once joyful and went out to make suitable conversion of the gold into money.

"It so happened that after this personal contribution from this Lakshmi (in the form of Bindu's mother) money started coming in an unending stream. Didi never again was short of money for the *yajna*."

The problem of *ghee* remained. Sri Ma was invited to visit Mumbai during the winter of this year (1947). In Mumbai amongst other places Sri Ma stayed at Muljibhai's residence at Sion. Nandubhai also requested her presence in his house. Here Didi quite accidentally learnt that Nandubhai was in the business of marketing pure *ghee*. She immediately offered to become his chief buyer. These devoted men came to know the details of the *Mahāyajna* being performed in Varanasi. Both men became interested and promised to supply the *ghee* as their own contribution toward the enterprise. Didi could breathe a sigh of relief.

From Mumbai Sri Ma went to Ahmedabad at the earnest request of Kantibhai Munshaw and Mukundbhai. Sometimes Kantibhai used to take Sri Ma for drives to the countryside. On one such an outing they came to a Dairy Farm. Didi was amazed to see the size and proficiency of this Farm. She immediately asked Kantibhai to enquire from the owners if they would undertake to supply *ghee* for the *yajna*. For Didi it was nothing less than a miracle! She had found a Dairy-owner who agreed to supply pure *ghee* as needed.

Back in Ahmedabad, Kantibhai being the successful entrepreneur that he was wanted to know all about this momentous sacrificial event being organized by Didi. Didi was happy to share her problems with these worthy devotees. She described to Kantibhai and Mukundbhai the history of the

yajna. She told them that in the Ashram they were as always made to do with whatever came to hand yet she knew that many people would be eager to contribute toward the *yajna* if they knew of the need for it. In fact many would find fault with her for being kept in the dark. After all the *yajna* was for the benefit of mankind and not a private affair. Both Kantibhai and Mukundbhai understood her dilemma. They said, "Didi, do not go out asking for money as it is not Sri Ma's *kheyāla*. We shall help you to accomplish your object."

This assurance was the bulwark which upheld Didi's courage till the last. As a matter of fact the Dairy Farm went out of business after a few months and was closed down. Thereafter Kantibhai and Mukundbhai kept up the supply of pure *ghee* from various other sources.

The *Mahāyajna* functioned smoothly for three years. The long duration itself became an advantage. Hundreds of people got the opportunity of witnessing such a rare phenomenon. Dozens of men and women became involved in many ways towards its management. The Ashram took on a festive look. Every morning the residents went about their various duties listening to the beautiful *Gayatri Mantra* being pronounced in the *yajna-shālā* for a long time, almost three hours. The big terrace which had been built facing the *yajna-shālā* saw activities related to the *yajna*. The grains were washed and dried in the sun and then cleaned of extraneous bits. Many people took on the duty of helping in the process. Many more posted themselves as guards. Apart from birds and squirrels the main menace was the ubiquitous mischievous monkeys!

The oblations were prepared with meticulous care. Each *hotā* was given a correct measure of it for the day. The whole Ashram and the surroundings became full of the aromatic scent issuing out of the *yajna-shālā* every morning.

The long duration of the *yajna* contributed toward other events. The devotees came to know each other quite well during their stay at the Ashram in Varanasi. Talks of being organised for future events arose spontaneously. The reputation of the Ashram spread as a citadel of the Vedic tradition. The monastic orders had no hesitation in relating to the activities in all the Ashrams in Sri Ma Anandamayi's name.

In the last year of the *yajna* (1949) Didi was required to inaugurate another major undertaking as an integral part of the function. This was the feeding of brahmins, an essential adjunct to all rituals. Since the number of oblations was one crore (one hundred lakhs), the number of brahmins to be entertained to a feast was ten thousand. Didi naturally was staggered at the prospect of this massive undertaking. Sri Ma lightened this burden for her in a very ingenious manner. She said, "Do not wait for the conclusion of the *yajna*. Start now with small numbers, as for example, five or ten or twenty. Even one every day should add up to the total" So this is what Didi did. To begin with Pandit Vaidyanath Shastri who was a daily visitor was invited formally to take his midday meal in the Ashram. Other brahmins in small numbers were entertained to the midday meal in the Ashram. Devotees began to contribute for the feeding of brahmins. Didi gratefully accepted donations for even one, that is Rs. 2.50 which was at that time sufficient for this purpose. Gradually the numbers could be increased to one hundred or even more.

Sri Ma suggested that invitations could be sent out to different communities. Thus, brahmins belonging to Gujarati, Maharashtrian and TAMILIAN communities came in large numbers to the Ashram at different times. All communities have decided ways of cooking and serving food. In order to give maximum satisfaction it was suggested that the different communities engage their own cooks for the occasion. They were provided with every facility for preparing a feast in accordance with their own customs. Grains, vegetables, curds, sweets, condiments, spices, fruits and dried fruits were provided with meticulous care. The big terrace was earmarked for these functions. The Ashram people had the opportunity to witness many colourful gala occasions. Usually more than 200 brahmins came clad in silken clothes on the specific day of the feast. The residents of the Ashram welcomed them by washing their feet and offering them flower garlands and putting sandal paste on their foreheads. The brahmins then sat in rows and while food was being served to them, they pronounced *mantras* of benediction for the *yajna*. sometimes in chorus, sometimes in a single sonorous voice.

After the feast, the brahmins were given *daksina* (donation of money) which completed the ritual. Throughout the year, these occasions kept enhancing the festive air in the Ashram. People from neighbouring houses became involved. Women foregathered for the purpose of preparing vegetables, the washing of grains and a dozen other tasks which are preliminaries for a big feast.

During and after the war the country was put under a

system of rationing of food stuff. Even if money was sufficient rice and pulses were at a premium. Somehow the Ashram managed to meet the requirements. It was not Sri Ma's *kheyala* that provisions should be acquired from the black-market, so they asked for special permits from time to time. Devotees were asked to bring their own rations when they came to visit from other towns. In spite of this wartime regimentation there was always an air of plenitude in the Ashram.

Sri Ma came to Varanasi very often during these years. The *Yajna* needed her guidance. Batukda had got into the habit of asking her advice for every detail knowing her *kheyāla* to be infallible. The number of *hotās* (priests) had been increased to nine so that the day of completion drew near and that too just when the Ashram had reached its maximum spaciousness. The riverside building had been completed in two storeys, Both contained one large hall flanked by big rooms. The roof of this edifice was on a level with the courtyard of the Ashram so that now it added considerably to the space around the *yajna-shālā*.

Invitations were sent out to all who were connected with the Ashram. A formal Management Committee took shape. Preparations were made for a mammoth gathering of mahatmas and devotees. Many nearby houses were rented for the accommodation of visitors. Suitable rooms were earmarked for the mahatmas and their retinues. Many of our reigning Princes were devotees of long standing. Bookings were made for them in hotels and suitable guest houses. Jogibhai, of course, had his own suite of rooms in the new Ashram.

The teachers of the Vidyapeeth came from Almora with their students to man the various departments as they took shape. Panu Brahmachari, a young tutor, was put in charge of reception. He would organise reception parties for the *Mahatmas* who were to be received ceremonially with *kirtan* (and also band music) and fetched in a procession with flags and banners etc. Sri Ma herself greeted them at the entrance, from where they were escorted to their rooms.

Devigiriji Maharaj was persuaded to descend from his high mountain retreat in Uttarkashi to the considerably warmer climate of Varanasi although being January it was cold enough for all plains people. Haribabaji came accompanied by the great Vedantic scholar Swami Akhandanandaji, also Chakrapaniji and Krishnandanda Avadhootji. Avadhootji on behalf of the Ashram went to Khanna (the Punjab) to escort Triveni Puriji Maharaj to the function of the completion of the *yajna*.

Apart from attending to all these V.I.P. guests, Panu Brahmachari had the task of billeting all devotees who came from all over India. Sri Ma's *ashtasakhis*, the village women from Almora, came to mingle with the sophisticated ladies from metropolitan cities like Kolkata and Mumbai. It was a harmonious mingling of many cultures, languages and strata of society. All arrivals were met at the gates and then escorted to the accommodations rented for them. For families who wished to cook for themselves (generally with small children or aged parents) were provided with every required facility.

Panu Brahmachari was to be found at his duty at the gate throughout the day and late into the night.

Swami Paramanandaji of our Ashram assumed charge of the many kitchens set up to provide suitable meals to this huge gathering of people. He had an able assistant in Mrinmay, another tutor from the Vidyapeeth. Mrinmay Brahmachari (later, Chinmayananda) was to be found from morning to night in the lower storey of the riverside building which was taken over completely for the purpose of providing two major meals to more than 500 people every day. Mrinmay was totally committed to this service. He was ably assisted by the women who had been longtime devotees of Sri Ma. These devoted women cooked magnificent meals for the visitors. All of them no doubt remembered for long the loving care with which Hemididi, Matari Pishima, Sushila Mashima and others served the food untiringly till everyone had eaten. They would wait uncomplainingly for late comers. The crowd was one big family.

Programmes : In retrospect it can be seen that Sri Ma was an adept at crowd management. She helped Didi to organise the daily routines of the Ashram that the in-flowing crowds were automatically channelised into different activities. All women could help in the kitchens preparing for the large meals. The men-folk were mobilized for *kirtan* parties or for helping in the arrangements of the daily *satsang*, which because of the presence of the *Mahatmas* became an important feature.

The *Mahatmas* were requested to give discourses to the public. The spacious hall in the first storey of the riverside

building became the venue for the most enthralling *pravacans* (discourses). Those who have had the privilege of listening to Swami Akhandanandaji's most scholarly yet delightful recounting of any episode from the Scriptures will be able to imagine the scene. Swamiji's voice was deep, his memory phenomenal. His style of delivery was erudite but lightened by flashes of humour. Noting the popularity of these discourses, microphones and loudspeakers were introduced in the *satsangs*. One or two loudspeakers were attached to the outer railing of the balcony projecting over the river below. It was seen that the usual crowds on the ghats of the river sat quietly listening to the discourses.

Apart from the discourses, the *satsangs* were organised in a variety of ways. There were regular readings from the scriptures and devotional songs rendered by eminent vocalists such as Ratneshwar Banerjee from Kolkata.

Crowds had no time for idle chatter or for loitering round creating confusion. Groups were entrusted with various different rituals, here a *Rama-archā*, there a *Bhāgavat-path* or a *Kumari-puja*. The Ashram always wore a look of organised activity. In later years it was realized that had Sri Ma not set an example of crowd control so beautifully, many a gigantic function would have come to grief in unforeseen ways.

Amidst all the public functions there were a few private and quiet ceremonies, also a sacred-thread ceremony for some young boy whose parents took this opportunity to discharge their duty in Sri Ma's presence. Some devotees would ask to

be initiated by Didima. Sri Ma would somehow find a few minutes to attend these quiet but profoundly important rituals.

The much awaited day of *puṇnāhuti* (completion) arrived. A miracle achieved as Didi thought when she had any time to think at all. Many prestigious functions were celebrated in the Ashram at this time. A happy crowd comprising of men, women and children of almost every province of India witnessed a virtual recreation of the times of ancient hermitages.

The morning of 14th January, 1950 dawned to the sound of melodious *usā-kirtan* (pre-dawn *kirtan*) and an atmosphere permeated by the pure fragrance of burning sandalwood. All devotees in freshly washed clothes gathered in the courtyard and joined in the *kirtan*. The *yajna-shālā* looked festive with its fluttering colourful flags and festoons of flower garlands. The young people of the Ashram had spent the whole night in decorating not only the *yajna-shālā* but the entire surroundings.

Batukda was ready with the ritual of offering of the last oblations. He took Sri Ma's permission to begin the rituals for concluding this magnificent event. Unknown to most people Sri Ma had arranged for a few pails of water and milk to be put inside the *yajnashālā*.

Sri Ma entered the *yajnashālā* accompanied by Didi, Udasji and Maroni. The fact that these three women had acquired the privileges of a brahmin by adopting the sacred thread was recalled to the memory of all devotees. If Sri Ma herself had not asked them to come with her they would not have asked for the privilege. It was another example of her

unobtrusive pioneering ways.

Batukda welcomed Sri Ma. He and the other *brahmacharis* stood up to pronounce the *mantras* to mark the solemn occasion. The last oblation prepared with special care and circumspection was consigned to the sacred fire. The flames rose high, the whole *Yajna-shālā* was lighted up as if by a thousand lamps.

Batukda looking up saw a dreadful sight. The wooden rafters were smouldering! Before panic could set in, Sri Ma pointed to the pails and the hand-sprayers. Quickly the rafters were soused in water and the disaster averted. Batukda later recollected that such provisions were given in relevant scriptures but he had forgotten to arrange for them. He as well as others realized that all such lapses and loopholes were constantly being made whole by the ever vigilant *kheyāla* of Ma.

The beautiful *mantra* which had resounded in the Ashram for three hours every morning for three years was bade farewell to in solemn and sad words. The hearts of all devotees were filled with the profound silence which reigned supreme for a few minutes. The *Mahāyajna* was concluded.

People became busy with the festivities which follow the conclusion of such enterprises. A procession was led through the streets of Varanasi. It was a pageant of flags and banners and other insignia sacred to the *yajna*. The strains of *kirtan* were sometimes eclipsed by band music which led the parade. Haribabaji was fond of band music so this was introduced, in the programmes of our Ashram also.

The day concluded with a feast for all devotees. The *brahmacharis* of the Vidyapeeth were especially treated to a

sumptuous meal. They had lived like ascetics for almost three years. Now they would return to the freedom of their own school life in Almora. The students as well as the teachers of the Vidyapeeth were congratulated by everyone for carrying out a difficult task so successfully. Didi's dream of carrying out Sri Ma's *kheyāla* for a *Mahāyajna* was fulfilled.

CHAPTER SIX

The In Between Years

1947-1950

"Worship is not a ritual : it is an attitude; it is an experience."

-Sri Ma

After the inauguration of the *Mahāyajna* (January 1947)

Sri Ma continued to travel in her own erratic style. She went to Cooch Behar where she was surrounded by crowds. Kusum Banerji, one of the newcomers to the Ashram, was astounded to see the quality of attraction which made people surround Sri Ma at all hours. He was travelling in her entourage for the first time. Sri Ma herself gave an explanation, "Why are you so surprised? This body is the nearest of the near of everyone. People are always pleased to see their most dear one!"

Sri Ma spent a few more weeks in Bengal. The festival of Shivaratri was celebrated in Kolkata in her presence. From Kolkata she travelled to Varanasi, Delhi, Bareilly in quick succession. They had to wait in Moradabad Railway Station for a few hours for the connecting train to Bareilly. Didi took the opportunity to read out as many letters as she could to Sri Ma. One of Didi's onerous tasks was the swift disposal of Sri Ma's correspondence. She always kept a copy of the answers as precious *Vani*. One such letter to a *brahmachari* residing in one Ashram was as follows:

"Karma (Action) is itself an aspect of the Supreme Being. Whatever action you are engaged in should be performed in a spirit of enthusiasm and pleasure and as service to Him. Negligence and non-seriousness should never find place in your course of action. While performing the work in hand, your mind should retain thoughts of the Lord. While your hands are busy in practical work, if your mind and lips are busy with *japa* then the work itself will be more efficacious. You must systematically arrange all your work so that all actions are performed as if you are an instrument in the hands of God and so perform them confidently and happily.

"When you have adopted the other-worldly way of life you should not await praise or expectations of help from others. Fortitude and discipline should be your strength. Just as a drop of acid may curdle a large quantity of milk, so even a trace of anger is very harmful. Why should you take recourse in weakness at all? Tell yourself I shall be pure, good, only auspiciousness will proceed from me!"

In Bareilly, Sri Ma paid a surprise visit to Sharmaji, the engineer, who was a longtime devotee. The whole family went almost berserk with the sudden joy of her unexpected *darshana*. In time they settled down and made adequate arrangements for Sri Ma and her retinue.

from Bareilly Sri Ma proceeded to Bandh where Haribabaji was awaiting her. The *Mahatma* himself with his *kirtan* party was waiting for her at the approach to the village. The villagers had brought an elephant for Sri Ma to ride on. Sri Ma wanted to walk with Haribabaji, but he persuaded her to mount on to the elephant. He said all the villagers would be able to have her *darshana*! The procession proceeded along the village paths. Haribabaji as usual walked backward with

his *kirtan*-party, so that he would be facing Sri Ma on the elephant.

The villagers were celebrating a festival. The day started with *kirtan* at 8 a. m. Thereafter Haribabaji conducted the *satsang* for one hour. He read from books about Sri Ma. Manohar, one of the villagers with a superb voice, sang the hymn to Sri Ma written by Bhaiji. The *satsang* concluded with *Rasilās* or Gauranga *lilās*. After a short interval of two and a half hours for the midday meal and a little rest, Haribaba again came to start the *satsang* at 2.30 p. m. This continued till 5.30 p. m. People dispersed for a time to attend to their own affairs. They again gathered in the *satsang* hall for the evening session at 7 p. m. After the evening *kirtan* the villagers enacted short skits for Haribabaji's entertainment. The skits or *lilās*, as they were called, were didactic in nature conveying spiritual messages like *guru-bhakti* (devotion to one's guru), faith in God, the worthwhileness of *sadhana* etc. The villagers showed great talent and were very versatile in their depictions. While Sri Ma was in Bandh, the concluding portion of the *satsang* was always a dialogue with her. Sri Ma answered questions from the audience in her own inimitable style of a spontaneous response. She was never at a loss or hesitant as to the answer. All questions were resolved to the satisfaction of the interlocutor.

After almost a month in Bandh Sri Ma came back to Varanasi. She visited Vindhyachal a number of times. It was pleasant weather and very peaceful in the hill-top Ashram at Vindhyachal. Soon many devotees from Kolkata came to spend some time with Sri Ma. Jatish Guha (Bunidi's father) Saroj Datta and the two brothers Subodh and Nirad Dasgupta. They were desirous of visiting the various holy sites on this

mountain plateau. An expedition was organised for them one day. When all of them had returned to the Ashram, Sri Ma said to the group sitting in front of her. "It so happened today that I found myself standing alone on the steps when all of you went inside the temple. I could have walked away and nobody would know where Ma was. An opportunity was missed!" Swami Paramananda said, "I shall always remain with you henceforth so that you should not have this chance again!" Some of the group began to tease Swamiji saying he was just taking advantage of this incident to remain in constant attendance. Sri Ma said, "If it is my *kheyāla* then I would send all companions away on some errand or other."

Swamiji said, "Others may obey you, but I shall remember to disregard your suggestions and not leave you alone."

Sri Ma smiled and said, "If it is my *kheyāla* then you will not remember your determination not to leave me alone. Moreover all this is unnecessary. If it should be my *kheyāla* then I can disappear from your midst, can't I?" The group of people acknowledged the truth of this statement. They could only pray for her *kheyāla* to remain approachable by them.

Just outside the gates of the Ashram, there was a huge tree growing almost at the edge of the sloping mountainside. A rough platform of stones and rocks surrounded the base of the tree. Sometimes Sri Ma sat on this platform with the back to the trunk of the tree. In this position she could look out over the vast countryside. It was a beautiful panorama of fields and groves of trees. The shining waters of the Ganges could be seen in the far distance meandering through its sandy shores. The small group of devotees staying in the Ashram sat with Sri Ma on the platform or stood around it enjoying the utter peace of the still surroundings. Some of them suggested that

as the platform seemed to be a specially auspicious spot how would it be if they sat in meditation on it for sometime. Sri Ma at once endorsed this view. She said the hour of midnight is specially suited to meditation. They could assemble around 11 at night and sit for meditation for one hour, that is from 11.30 p. m. to 12.30 a. m."

Thus the ritual of meditation at midnight was begun in Vindhyachal which continued in Sri Ma's vicinity for many years. The original group consisted of Swami Paramananda, Dr. Pannalal, Jatish Guha, the Dasgupta brothers, Bindu, Bhupen and Bithu, students from Allahabad, Rani Majumdar, and Shashadhar Bhattacharya. They all hoped for some special experience during the special hour. On the first night a falling meteorite lighted up the whole scene in an ethereal brilliance for a few seconds. It seemed to disappear on the roof of Sri Ma's room in the Ashram.

The group of devotees continued to observe this hour of meditation, each experiencing a kind of fulfilment in his or her own way. Didi would come with a light around 12.30 a. m. and the session would come to an end. One day Sri Ma said, "I 'saw' (not physically) a young yogi last night sitting amongst you. He told me about his *sādhana* and that he was deriving great benefit from our presence at this hour. So you see it is not just coincidence, that we sit under the tree every night." Sri Ma talked in great detail about the young yogi. Then she said to Swamiji, "Paramananda, did I not describe to you a yogi and his disciple 'seen' by me in Sawai Madhopur? Later the local people confirmed that such a couple had resided in the place for some time?" Swamiji endorsed Sri Ma's words by saying, "Yes that was so". Perhaps Sri Ma was addressing, herself to some doubts in one of the auditor's mind regarding

her vision of the yogi. But most of them knew that the line of demarcation between the physical and the ethereal was ever tenuous for Sri Ma.

After the peaceful days at Vindhyachal, it was time again for a major festival at Varanasi. Sri Ma came back to Varanasi in the last week of April, 1947. The Janmotsava of this year was celebrated in the Ashram. The residents saw the usual gathering of devotees and also the *Mahatmas*. The *Mahāyajna* added to the solemnity of the occasion.

The summer of this year was spent in Kishenpur Ashram in Dehradun. Haribabaji came with his retinue to stay in the Ashram. The usual programme of *satsangs* became the way of life for all devotee residents, as well as visitors from the town and from out of town.

Amulya Kumar wrote in his journal, "The hour of the *satsang* is an exercise in patience. Haribabaji's voice is so low as to be nearly inaudible, moreover we understand neither the text nor his exegesis because we do not understand the language (Hindi). However, patience is amply rewarded because we have *darshan* of Ma for an hour."

The bulk of Sri Ma's Bengali entourage got used to the new ways of assembling for *darshana*. They could not crowd round her whenever they wished to do so. Sri Ma, however, made herself available to her devotees whenever possible. But the *Mahatmas* took precedence over everyone else. Didi said once, "May God bless all the *Mahatmas*. They alone are capable of anchoring Ma's *kheyāla* to this earth. We are all unworthy and do not know how to hold on to this Presence."

Ramlal: The miracle of a new life for the child Ramlal took place in Kishenpur at this time. Ramlal, a child of three

or four years had come on a visit with his parents Nirmal and Leela Ghosh for a few days. He was running a slight temperature when he came. Within a day it became a raging fever. One of the rooms of the Ashram was converted into a sick-room for the ailing child. The little boy was extraordinary in many ways. He was a difficult patient and recalcitrant about taking his medicines. He had a special relationship with Sri Ma. He would choose to follow her suggestions in an off-hand way. He liked her to remain in his room for as long as possible. Sri Ma visited him many times. The best doctors of Dehradun were consulted. The fever had a stranglehold on little Ramlal. The disease was diagnosed as typhoid. Very soon the doctors began to look troubled and the day of crisis arrived.

Sri Ma was sitting in her usual place in the evening *satsang*. Leela (Ramlal's mother) came to her and prayed heart-breakingly for her son's life. The entire congregation was affected by her tears. Haribabaji was visibly moved. Sri Ma alone sat like a statue, looking her usual calm and serene self. After the *satsang* Haribabaji initiated certain rituals for Ramlal's recovery. He organised a *akhanda-japa* near Ramlal's room. He also requested everyone to recite *sloka* 29/II of *Durgasaptasati* a specific number of times. He was a great believer in the power of such rituals.

Everyone took part in them willingly. At night Sri Ma asked Didi to sit in the sick-room for an hour from 1.30 a. m. to 2.30 a. m. Didi was told to do her own *japa*. At this hour in the night many people awoke with a feeling of dread. This was discussed in the morning. Sri Ma said that she had seen a messenger of death near the sick-room and had waved him

away and out of the Ashram.

After the night of crisis, the sick-child seemed to be a little stable. Very, very slowly he began to respond to treatment and finally recovered. His parents, his doctors as well as all the residents of the Ashram believed that Ramlal had got a new lease of life due to Sri Ma's grace.

During the summer a *Panchavati* (a grove of five sacred trees) was planted under Haribabaji's direction on the piece of land which had been donated by Sachi Babu to the Ashram. This land gradually was developed into the small Ashram named 'Kalyanvan'. This was very close to Kishenpur Ashram.

Sometime in May the Prime Minister designate Jawaharlal Nehru came to visit Sri Ma with his daughter Indira Gandhi and colleague Vallabh Bhai Patel.

Didi had been suffering from stomach ache from time to time. It was Sri Ma's *kheyāla* that she should go to Kolkata for a proper diagnosis and treatment. While Didi was away in Kolkata and Varanasi Sri Ma continued to travel in the mountain regions. These were very troublesome times. Refugees had started moving out of the regions earmarked for the new state of Pakistan. As written earlier many devotees of Dhaka came to settle down in Varanasi.

After travelling around in the north for some time Sri Ma returned to Varanasi to attend the functions of *Jhoolan* and *Janmastami*. At this time Ganga Didi was serving the

Kanyapeeth as its caretaker-in-chief. She was a scholarly lady, belonging to the *Nimbārka Sampradāya* of Vaishnavism. She organised these festivals with great enthusiasm. Sri Ma entered into the spirit of the celebrations and mingled with the girls of the Kanyapeeth to re-enact many of the exploits of Krishna in Vrindavan. Didi returned to Varanasi. She seemed to have recovered a little from her illness. While Sri Ma was in Varanasi the country attained independence on August 15, 1947. The resident devotees of the Ashram sat in meditation around Sri Ma on August 14 at midnight to pray for the country's future prosperity and peace.

The political scene continued in disarray. Amidst all the disturbances an oldtime devotee Naru Babu invited Sri Ma to visit his village Bodagram in East Pakistan. Sri Ma travelled down to Jalpaiguri where she was received by Narubabu and his family and friends. The local *KaliBari* (The temple of Kali) was chosen for Sri Ma's residence in the city. It so happened that Sarada Sen with his mother and family was living in Jalpaiguri at this time. Way back in 1914 Sri Ma and Bholanath were lodgers in Sarada Sen's house in Ashtagram. It was his mother who had given Sri Ma the nickname of "Khushir Ma" (The Happy One). She had looked after the bride with great affection. Sri Ma used to call her *Mashima* (aunt). Now Sri Ma with her entourage went to call on this lady. In a mood of mischief she stood surrounded by her women companions and prompted by her someone asked the old lady to pick out her "Khushir Ma". The old lady hesitated glancing at each face in turn. Sri Ma then called out, "Mashima!", whereupon the old lady recognised her and took her in her arms, saying, "You used to be as beautiful as the Goddess! But you are the same girl I knew!" There was much rejoicing at this reunion.

Many new people came to pay their respects to Sri Ma. One of these was Govinda Babu. He and his wife were living like ascetics in a small house and were much respected by the townspeople. Sri Ma visited him at his request. While they were sitting outside his house, he introduced one of his friends to her. To the friend he said, "You have asked me many times to take you to some person of great spiritual attainment (*mahāpurusha*). Here is someone who is worshipped by such men!" Didi was amazed to see the instant recognition of Sri Ma by obviously a worthy devotee. She realized it was not necessary to trail around with Sri Ma for years in order to know her for what she was. Maybe it was a deterrent!

From Jalpaiguri they arrived in Bodagram where Sri Ma was received with all festive welcoming rituals. The family were celebrating the annual Durga Puja. For them the coming of Sri Ma was the advent of the Goddess herself. Three days flashed past on a tide of joy. The region had already been divided into India and East Pakistan but as yet the village people continued to live as friendly neighbours-one of the peaceful spots which raised questions regarding the genuine nature of the riots elsewhere. Many Muslims came to participate in the joyousness although they could not subscribe to an "Idol worship". A few of them sat with Sri Ma and raised objections. One man said, "Why do you allow Idol worship?" Sri Ma spoke to them gently, "You see, there are infinite ways of worshipping the Infinite. Everyone is desirous of finding the One only but it is possible to seek Him in everything and everywhere. The ultimate aim is the same but ways may be different. Whether you say, "not this", "not this" (*neti neti*) or "all is He", "all is He" (*iti iti*) you will arrive at the same goal because Truth is one only."

A prestigious Kazi Sahab came to meet Sri Ma. He said to her, "I have not come here to listen but to say something to you! Battle is now joined (spiritual). Please grant that I may not run out of ammunition!" Evidently he saw in her a person to whom prayers may be addressed. Sri Ma smiled but did not say anything. Later when she was leaving Bodagram, she sent him a message through Narubabu. "Tell Kazibaba-since he had said he did not come to listen, I did not speak. Tell him when battle is joined (for God-realization) then all wherewithal is provided by God himself. There is no need for any worry at all!"

On her way back Sri Ma was asked to stay in Jalpaiguri for a few days. Sri K.B. Mohanlal was posted here as Forest Officer of Assam at this time. He and his wife Kamala were old-time devotees. They escorted Sri Ma to various towns of the province. They made lavish arrangements for Sri Ma's retinue as well. In Shillong Sri Ma had occasion to hear devotional songs sung by a Muslim music teacher Motimian. He was tutor to Chitra, the daughter of Kamala and Mohanlal. He sang hymns to Kali and also some Vaishnava songs. He told Sri Ma that his grandfather had been a sage of some spiritual eminence. Their entire family were Kali-worshippers. This amalgam of culture and religion is perhaps peculiar to Bengal.

A rather touching incident took place in Jalpaiguri at this time. Sudhir Bhattacharya, retired Civil Surgeon, was living here with his family for some time. His wife and widowed sister-in-law were devout women, and had already been initiated by their family Guru. His wife confessed to her younger sister-in-law that she would have preferred a female form to worship and to be intimate with; it was not possible to be very close to their Gurudeva. One night she dreamt that her Guru was asking her to wield the fan while he rested on his

bed. After some time she saw the form of her Gurudeva turn into a female form of radiant beauty. In the morning she told her dream to her sister-in-law. It so happened that after a few days they were visiting a friend's house where they saw a photograph of Sri Ma Anandamayi. Sudhir Babu's wife recognised the lady of her dream! She was very thrilled to know that this was Sri Ma Anandamayi who was expected in her town very soon. She waited impatiently for her first *darshan*.

Sri Ma was kept busy with organised *satsangs* and many visits in and around the town. One day the two ladies came with offerings of flowers and fruits and were disappointed to find Sri Ma away from the house. Didi noticed these ladies especially when one of them called out in great excitement, "Sri Ma is here. Sri Ma is here!" as soon as she saw the car stop at the gate. Sri Ma met the ladies and exchanged a few words with them. Sudhir Babu's wife seemed transported. Even Didi noticed that this lady looked bemused and full of joy.

When they returned home they exchanged opinions about their experience. The younger sister-in-law said, "I did not quite like Anandamayi Ma. She is aloof and distant. Our own Gurudeva is so kind and compassionate just like a loving father to us!" Sudhir Babu's wife said, "Was it like that for you? For me it was an experience of such bliss that I am filled to the neck with it!"

The next day she again prepared to go to the *satsang*. She asked her husband to fetch some flowers and fruits as offerings. When Sudhir Babu returned from the market he found his wife lying in a faint. Plunging the whole household in sorrow this lady died a few minutes later. It did seem that she was just awaiting the *darshan* of Sri Ma before achieving

release from her mortal coils.

Sri Ma visited this grief-stricken family and spoke to the husband assuaging his sense of loss in her own inimitable style of rendering solace to the bereaved.

In November, 1947 Kalipuja was celebrated in Kolkata. From Kolkata Sri Ma travelled right across the country breaking her journey at various towns to Mumbai. From Mumbai she came to Ahmedabad. She was very well-known in Gujarat. She visited all the familiar places invited by local devotees. She came back to Kolkata again to attend the function of the annual Gita Jayanti celebrated by Gopal Thakur of Allahabad. Kolkata had offered to host this function this year.

Sri Ma returned to Uttar Pradesh in the beginning of January, 1948. This year Allahabad was celebrating the *Ardha-Kumbha Mela*. Dr. Pannalal had made arrangements for tents and huts for Sri Ma and her retinue on his camp site. Sri Ma came to the *sangam* after attending the ceremony of the first anniversary of the *Mahāyajna* on January 14, 1948 at Varanasi.

On 30th January Sri Ma was seen to be a little unwell. Didi persuaded her to retire to her own *kutia* instead of attending the *satsang*. She had been alone in her *kutia* for some time when the shocking news of Gandhiji's assassination was brought to her. She exclaimed, "Like Sri Krishna and Christ! Both had embraced the violence done to them and so risen above it. He (Gandhi) has shown how to rise above violence and so conquer it!"

After the day of ritual bathing in Allahabad, Sri Ma resumed her travels. She spent some time in Delhi attending a

Bhagavat Saptaha and sundry other functions. Haribabaji was awaiting her arrival in Bandh. He had organised a programme of *satsangs*, *rāslilā* and *kirtans* for a prolonged period of time. Udiyababaji was also expected to grace this festival. Sri Ma had said, "If Udiyababa goes to Bandh then this small child (*bacchi*) will also go there." Now when she arrived in Bandh, she was told that due to ill health Udiyababaji had changed his mind. This great ascetic always walked to his destinations. He did not use trains or cars for his journeys. In his weakened condition it was not possible for him to walk from Vrindavan to Bandh. His followers had prevailed upon him to break his promise in this matter. Haribabaji was very disappointed to get this message. He almost lost heart for the function. Although he was happy about Sri Ma's presence, his dependence on Udiya Babaji's cooperation received a severe set-back. After a lot of consultations it was decided that Haribabaji, accompanied by Sri Ma would go to Vrindavan to persuade the Mahatma to change his mind.

Sri Ma on arrival in Udiya Babaji's Ashram at once went up to him saying, "Your little daughter (*bachhi*) has come!" The *sadhu* embraced her and seemed pleased to see her and his friend Haribabaji. They persuaded him to agree to the use of a conveyance for the journey.

Some time later it transpired that his disciples were not pleased with this decision. In another meeting, one *dandi-sadhu* raised his voice in opposition. He said, "Why is Mataji being so insistent? The *Mahatma* has never travelled in a car so far. To go against his life-long custom cannot be good for him. Such a departure from the norm is sure to have adverse effects on his health." Everyone was surprised at his outburst. Udiyababaji himself dismissed his disciple saying decisions had been taken and no more need be said.

Udiya Babaji's disciples, however were not convinced. They continued to appeal to Haribabaji to give up his idea of taking their Guru to Bandh. They were convinced that the *Mahatma* would not survive this ordeal. Haribabaji was naturally upset at all this opposition. Late at night Didi arrived at his place of residence and left a message for him with his devoted attendant Ghanashyam. The message was from Sri Ma that Haribabaji should not worry about the matter anymore but go to sleep. Udiya Babaji would go with them as promised next morning. On getting this message Haribabaji was relieved of anxiety and following Sri Ma's suggestion retired to his room for the night.

Sri Ma in her own room seemed to be in a playful mood. She brought out a pair of cymbals and began to sound them rhythmically. She initiated a game of guessing about the probable outcome of Udiya Babaji's final decision. Mostly the guesses piled up on the side of a negative outcome. Sri Ma then continued to play with the cymbals. She said, "They say I am being insistent in this affair. I will demonstrate what is true insistence if Pitaji is still reluctant." She continued as if speaking cajolingly. "I shall go to Pitaji and speak like this to him. I shall say 'Pitaji, why do you worry about your health? The body after all is not forever. How should a Sadhu be concerned about what is inevitable. But a word, a promise, is forever. The word will remain after the body is no more. Come, let us sit in the car.'"

Sri Ma's words eddied away with the musical resonance of the cymbals. Evidently the words were heard by Udiyababaji who was still being besieged by his followers against the programme. Manohar (one of the disciples of Haribabaji) who was in the meeting reported later that quite at

the same time Udiyababaji spoke impatiently to his people using the same words being uttered by Sri Ma in her own Ashram. He said he would not worry about his physical well being. Since Sri Ma and Haribabaji had come to fetch him he would honour their request and keep his word."

As a matter of fact he was the first to leave in one of the waiting cars early at 3.30 A. M. Haribabaji and Sri Ma followed in the other after a couple of hours. Thus Bandh celebrated a coming together of many prestigious Mahatmas, because some others also came to grace the occasion.

Manohar came to know about Sri Ma's playful words when he came to tell her about the meeting in Vrindavan. The strange coincidence of Sri Ma's words and Udiya Babaji's sudden decision to accede to their request was appreciated by Haribabaji. Manohar was so overwhelmed that he prayed humbly to Sri Ma to ever thus influence from within all their thoughts and decisions.

Sri Ma usually attended all the programmes very meticulously. One day she took the two *Mahatmas'* permission and left the *satsang* before its conclusion. The next day she again asked permission to leave before it was over. Haribabaji said, "Is it quite necessary?" Sri Ma settled down again. Haribabaji knew that unless Sri Ma graced the rostrum the *satsang* lost its cohesion and took on a desultory look. All congregations big or small always sat immovable while Sri Ma was visible to them for any length of time. Everyone knew this. Whether people listened to the religious discourses or not was not known but everyone sat still as long as they could gaze on the radiant form of Sri Ma on the stage.

Sri Ma was seen to sit up straight on this occasion and

close her eyes. Her cheeks were wet with tears. When she came away from the *satsang* she seemed to be in an aloof mood. Dr. Panna Lal asked her about the tears. Sri Ma said. "You see, the whole atmosphere is replete with prayers and supplications and devotional music. It was a reaction to that mood."

At night when Sri Ma retired to her room, she seemed in an exalted state. She sat up on her bed and began to pronounce *mantras* (in Sanskrit) perfect in their rhythm and cadence. The few girls in her room, Khuki (Bholanathji's disciple from Dhaka), Udas, Chhabi and Moni listened to her in bemused silence not daring to move or go out to inform others about this rare phenomenon for which they were taken to task, next morning, by all those who had missed the opportunity. It was well known in Sri Ma's circle that any check to her *kheyala* always resulted in adverse events. But Sri Ma's compassion was boundless, perhaps by invoking supra-normal powers she herself averted any untoward effects which may have been impending on the festive atmosphere. Haribabaji himself realised that this priority for the *satsang* had misled him into disregarding Sri Ma's *kheyala*. Being the great saint he was, he made his apologies which Sri Ma in her own special modest way dismissed and waived away.

After the successful conclusion of the function Sri Ma accompanied by all the *Mahatmas* came to Lucknow to attend the Sant Sammelan organised by the much respected Garg Datta Mishra. Mishraji's longtime wish to see Sri Ma grace the rostrum with her presence was fulfilled this year.

In the month of April, 1948 Vasanti-Puja was celebrated in Varanasi Ashram. The *Mahāyajna* was going on also. For a few days the Ashram was filled to capacity with a happy

throng of devotees. Leaving Varanasi Sri Ma travelled to Dehra Dun. From Dehra Dun she went up to Solan. The Rani Saheba of Solan had passed away a month or so ago. This was very sad news for all devotees because most of them at some time or other had occasion to enjoy the hospitality of this princely household.

Sri Ma's fine sense of the fitness of things was demonstrated fully on this visit of condolence that she paid to Jogibhai. Firstly she reduced her retinue to a few only. Then she sat with Didi to see to the packing of the baggage. Didi liked to be self-sufficient in her service to Sri Ma. She always carried a set of utensils, a bag of food grains, a box of simple home-remedies (known to all as Didi's black-box) and sundry other things. Sri Ma's movements were mostly unpredictable. Didi was ever ready to camp out and provide a simple meal without being obliged to ask for anything from visitors. This aspect of Sri Ma's unremitting travels was itself a miraculous achievement. Now Sri Ma made Didi reduce her baggage to bare essentials. Her few companions also were directed to carry the minimum of effects.

Since Jogibhai had not been informed of her visit, there were no cars or people to meet her at Kalkaji Station. Sri Ma travelled quietly by the mini train to Solan. On arrival she and her companions started to walk along the road going up the mountainside to the Palace on top. Half-way along this road one of Jogibhai's attendants Rupram saw Sri Ma and paused in amazement. He quickly made his *pranam* and rang up the Palace from a road-side shop. In a few minutes Jogibhai's car came down the road. Sri Ma and her few companions were picked up and driven back to the Palace gates where Jogibhai was awaiting its arrival. Sri Ma got down and advanced towards him while her companions kept to the background.

Jogibhai was for the first time seen dressed informally by Sri Ma. He was wearing a silk *kurta* and *dhoti*. His head was uncovered. He greeted Sri Ma and asked Didi why she had not sent word to him.

Sri Ma's cottage just below the Palace precincts was in readiness to receive her. All arrangements for her and her companions were made swiftly and competently as usual by Jogibhai's staff. Sri Ma spent a few quiet days here. Every day for many hours Jogibhai was in her room, talking to her while the others kept their distance. The whole State was in mourning so there were no festive crowds round Sri Ma. For a few days Jogibhai was able to talk to Sri Ma for long hours. Evidently he described to her the last days of the Rani Sahiba. Sri Ma was the ideal confidante. Her compassion for the bereaved was itself a matter of the lightening of an overburdened heart. The Rani had died peacefully after a short illness. In the last moments she had been lying on her side facing away from the bed-side table on which had been placed her favourite photograph of Sri Ma. One of the attendants suggested that the table should be placed on the other side of the bed so that the Rani Sahiba could see the photograph. The princess indicated that it was not necessary and that she could see Sri Ma! Evidently an ardent devotee did not require any physical evidence of Sri Ma's presence!

Sri Ma with her depleted retinue went to Nainital from Solan. She was never troubled by the alternate descents into the plains and then mounting to a different mountain town. Her companions were just happy to be travelling with her. In Nainital her host was Dr. Panna Lal and his eldest daughter Leelaji and her husband Rameshwar Sahai. A comfortable tent had been pitched on the lawn for Sri Ma.

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, the first Indian Governor of U.P. of Independent India was in residence in Nainital at this time. A very warm invitation was received by Dr. Panna Lal from her requesting the visit of Sri Ma to the Government House. The summer residence of the Governor was a long white building situated amidst undulating lawns edged with colourful flower beds. A spacious rostrum had been put up under a big spreading tree. On the carpets covering the rostrum was spread a magnificent tiger skin. Mrs. Naidu was awaiting Sri Ma here. She received Sri Ma with great pleasure and asked her to sit on the tiger-skin. Sri Ma in her white robes sat on the gorgeous tiger skin looking radiantly beautiful. She said to Mrs. Naidu in Bengali,

"Ma,

'Hari kathai katha

aar sab vritha vyatha!"

ki balo Ma? tomār Bānglā bhāshā mone ācche?"

(To talk of God alone is worthwhile, all else is in vain and pain, isn't it so? Do you remember Bengali?)

Mrs. Naidu said that she could understand well enough but she had got out of the habit of speaking in Bengali.

Dr. Panna Lal initiated some dialogue, but the Governor seemed content to sit quietly in front of Sri Ma. She appeared to have attained whatever she had been looking forward to. After a little while Sri Ma took her leave and returned to the Priory, Dr. Panna Lal's residence.

After a few days Sri Ma descended to the Ashram at Almora. The Vidyapeeth was located in this spacious Ashram. The teachers and students of the Vidyapeeth were happy to have Sri Ma with them for a few days. Sri Ma spoke a few words of praise for the high standard of upkeep

maintained by the boys and their tutors. Some of these young boys were soon to leave for Varanasi to help in the management of the *Mahāyajna* in progress there.

Janmotsava in Delhi

The *Janmotsava* of 1948 was celebrated in Delhi. Sri Ma took up her residence in the suite of rooms built by Dr. J.K. Sen as an annexe to his house. A marquee was put up on the spacious lawn in front of the house for the daily *satsangs*. The elderly couple were devoted to Sri Ma. They watched with equanimity the influx of visitors disrupting their ordered way of life. The heat of May could not damp the enthusiasm of *kirtan* parties or other participants. The devotees of Delhi performed their special *akhanda-nāma-yajna* one day. On the eve of this function Sri Ma spoke to one or two men about ice. They brought a few blocks of ice the next day, just because she had expressed a *kheyāla* about it. In the meantime Sri Ma had asked two of her young attendants Bithu and Bindu to buy a big handspray and keep it in her room.

In spite of the sweltering heat the *akhanda-nāma-yajna* did not have any dearth of participants. The singers kept moving round the altar of flowers and pictures in the centre of the marquee, filling the environment with the sound of melodious *kirtan*. Around 3 p.m. when the heat was at maximum, Sri Ma came out to the *kirtan* and using the handspray; she sprinkled rose-water scented iccold water on the crowd; the relief was immediate. The exhaustion from heat was dissipated. Others took up the agreeable task of spraying the refreshing water over the crowd from time to time. Shortly after a sudden cloudburst lessened the temperature to comfortable degrees. The *kirtan* was concluded with its usual beautiful and heart-warming hymns of gratitude and farewells to the two princes

of *kirtan*, Gauranga Mahaprabhu and Nityananda Mahaprabhu.

The *tithi puja* was observed with circumspection and meticulous attention to every detail. Bishuda had come from Varanasi to perform the *puja*. It was attended by a galaxy of *Mahātmās* who sat quietly on a rostrum prepared specially for them. Sri Ma as usual lay on her chowki covered from head to toe with a white sheet. It had never been possible for the devotees to offer *puja* to her person. It had become a tradition that Sri Ma lay inert and totally hidden on the night of the *puja*. Her still form was covered with flowers, garlands, silken clothes. Those who sat near sometimes felt that Sri Ma's form alone was there and that she had gone away altogether. However this may be, the devotees knew no other way of celebrating the function which was so dear to their hearts.

After the functions in Delhi Sri Ma returned to Nainital and visited other nearby hill stations during the remaining summer months. She came down to Varanasi in mid-July on the occasion of Guru Purnima.

Sri Anandamayi Ma's Kheyāla for those getting ready for the last journey.

Sri Ma was close to the extended family of Bholanath since the early days of her marriage and housekeeping. One of these devotees was Anu, the nephew of Pramoda Devi, her eldest sister-in-law. Anu for some time had been suffering from cancer of the tongue. His parents had brought him to Kolkata for treatment. They wrote to Sri Ma praying for her *kheyāla* for their son. Anu himself wrote to her but he did not ask to be redressed but seemed to have accepted his fate with fortitude. His letter expressed only his total dedication at Sri Ma's feet. All who heard the letter read out were overcome by

pity as well as admiration for his courage.

Sri Ma had a sudden *kheyāla* to go to Kolkata maybe to see Anu. From the railway station she went straight to visit Mohanananda Brahmachari, who was unwell. Mohananandaji was very pleased to see her. He said, "I was thinking of you so intently! I shall soon leave for the station because I am going to Monghyr. May I have your *darshana* again before I leave Kolkata?"

After this visit Sri Ma went to see Anu. His bed had been placed near the window. Sri Ma stood outside and saw that he indeed was very ill. Sri Ma's companions were impressed by his quiet demeanour and attitude of total surrender to Sri Ma's *kheyāla*. He made no complaints although his sufferings were heart-breaking for others. Once like a child he said to Sri Ma "I shall go with you". Sri Ma said with great emphasis. "I am always with you!" which seemed to satisfy him. After a while she asked his leave to go, which he gave readily. As it turned out this was their last meeting because he attained peace soon after. Sri Ma visited yet another terminally ailing person. This was Kanu (Buni's uncle) whose frequent letters to Sri Ma were known to all her companions. She always listened to all his letters sometimes four or five at a time, and answered them. It seemed that this correspondence itself was a *sādhana* for him.

Sri Ma came to the Ashram after all these visits. After a brief period of rest and a quick meal, it was again time to go to the station to grant the request of Mohananandaji for a second *darshana*.

From Kolkata Sri Ma went to Deoghar in response to the prayers of Pran Gopal Babu who was ailing and wished for

her *darshana*. Another person awaiting her was Prof Nalini Brahma. The two scholarly men welcomed the rare opportunity of a meaningful dialogue with Sri Ma.

Sri Ma returned to Varanasi to attend the functions of Jhoolan and Janmashtami with the girls of the Kanyapeeth. These were celebrated with great enthusiasm as usual.

Henri Petit-Henri Petit was the Ambassador of France to Ethiopia. He had come to India in search of a spiritual master. In the course of his travels he had come to Varanasi and met Sri Ma. He told Atmanandaji, who used to interpret for him, that his quest was over. Although he went back to his post he was unable to stay away for long. He returned again to India and came to Jhunsi at this time along with Sri Ma's usual retinue. Everyone was impressed by the quality of his devotion to her. He seemed totally transformed and fully dedicated to *sādhana*. Sri Ma gave him an Indian name, Satyananda. He became well-known by this name to the whole family of Sri Ma's adherents.

Sri Ma returned to Varanasi. Her youngest sister Hemi Mashima was very ill at this time. She had been advised to live on the river itself. She and her attendants lived in a big houseboat on the Ganga. When in Varanasi Sri Ma went out sometimes to visit her by boat. Gangadi, the Incharge of Kanyapeeth, sometimes accompanied Sri Ma. Gangadi's mother and aunt were living in a rented house near the Ashram. Both women were old and ailing and were unable to come to the Ashram for Sri Ma's *darshana*. It was always in Gangadi's mind that if the opportunity arose she would request Sri Ma to visit these women.

One evening Sri Ma had the *kheyala* to go out for a walk.

Accompanied by Didi and Gangadi she came out of the lane to the main road. She asked if Gangadi's mother's house was nearby. Gangadi guided her to this house where Sri Ma met the two old ladies who blessed themselves again and again for this unexpected *darshana*. Gangadi later told Ma that her aunt, who was almost blind, had wanted to touch Sri Ma but had not dared to do so. The visit was so short and they had been taken by surprise.

Next day Sri Ma said to Didi, "Swami Shankarananda has asked me to visit Hemi Mashima so let us go to the river. Didi wished to arrange for a conveyance but Sri Ma walked out to the road before this could be done. Gangadi, Mukti Maharaj and a few others walked along with her. Seeing that Sri Ma was walking toward her mother's house Gangadi hurried ahead to warn the women. The aunt this time was found awaiting Sri Ma outside the house. This time she was able to touch Sri Ma and was happy. To the surprise of her few companions Sri Ma continued to stand in front of an open window of the house as if expecting to see someone else. Taking advantage of Sri Ma's continued presence Gangadi's mother said, "My younger sister is also in this house. She is on her deathbed. Her sons brought her to Kashi (Varanasi) to fulfil her desire for passing away in this holy city, but she is lingering on and her suffering is great. She is lying in an inner verandah otherwise she could also have had this much coveted *darshana*".

Sri Ma asked about the location of the verandah. Didi felt that it was Sri Ma's *kheyāla* to give *darshana* to this lady. She and Mukti Maharaj entered the house. At Mukti Maharaj's suggestion the cot itself was lifted and brought near the window at which Sri Ma was standing seemingly just

awaiting this manoeuvre. She stretched out her hand and touched with her fingers the middle of the woman's head saying, "An attainment of the privilege of dying in Kashi. It is good to attend such an event."

Sri Ma immediately came away as if her errand had been fulfilled. Didi marvelled at the incident because although Sri Ma had not been told of this woman previously, she had apparently visited the house mainly for this purpose. The woman died a few hours later under peaceful conditions. She did not seem to be suffering at all after Sri Ma's visit.

The relentless schedule of travels continued.

Sri Ma went up to Dehradun. One of the pioneering devotees of Dehradun Mahalakshmi was ill. She underwent an operation at this time. Sri Ma visited her in the hospital. Next Sri Ma again descended to the plains to go up to Solan where Jogibhai was about to celebrate a Bhagavat Saptaha. (August, 1948).

From the high mountains Sri Ma returned to Varanasi. Within a few days it was time to leave for Kolkata for this year's Durga Puja. She broke her journey on way to Kolkata to pay a short visit to Bishnupur, the seat of Zamindar Ramakanta Bhattacharya. Bishnupur was at one time an important town. It was no longer a flourishing town although the scenic beauty was quite captivating. The soil of this area is red. The red lanes meandering through villages disappeared inside dark forests of towering *shal* trees. The clear water of numerous big lakes reflected the blue colour of the rocky hills surrounding them. These lakes were full of white and pink lotuses since it was the season for them. This paradise had one drawback. The visitor could not imagine how the local people

dealt with the onslaught of mosquitoes as soon as the sun went down.

Sri Ma paid a quick visit to Jamshedpur before she came to Kolkata for the Puja which was celebrated with its usual fanfare.

Sri Ma returned to Varanasi. Haribabaji was awaiting her in Jhunsi. In response to Prabhudattaji's prayers Sri Ma spent almost a month in Jhunsi. The people of Allahabad crossed the river everyday to attend *satsangs*. At the conclusion of this visit Sri Ma came to the house of Niraj Nath Mukerji in Allahabad with her full retinue as well as the *Mahatmas*. *Satsang* was observed as usual in the evening. Sri Ma herself had directed that the portico of the house should be enclosed by heavy curtains. A stage was put up for Haribabaji facing the house. The devotees sat on the steps and the verandah. It rained quite heavily during the *satsang*. Haribabaji continued with his reading and discourse unperturbed while the rain water flowed under his chowki and over the carpets. Sri Ma was drenched a little although many people held umbrellas to protect her from the slanting rain. The large contingent of devotees were treated to a sumptuous meal. The joyousness of these haphazard get-togethers was a regular feature in many such houses all over India.

Sri Ma and Haribabaji went on to Krishna Kunj and then left for Vrindavan. She visited other houses in the town also. After travelling around ceaselessly for a few days Sri Ma returned to Varanasi in December (1948) to attend the annual function of Gita Jayanti celebrated by Gopal Thakur, his family and devotees.

The *Maunam* of fifteen minutes:

Once late at night while resting quietly on the red-verandah of the Kanyapeeth, Sri Ma said, "How nice it would be if at a point in time everybody would become *mauni* for say 15 minutes and sit in meditation. A sudden cessation of action and a recall toward quietude." Only Didi and Bithu were sitting nereby. Bithu said, "Ma, shall I try?" Sri Ma said, "Can it be done, the Ashram is full of people, all busy with different things. But see if you can."

Bithu went around the sprawling Ashram to the numerous kitchens (the kanyapeeth, the general kitchen as well as a kitchen for the personnel of the *Mahayajna*) to the Kanyapeeth, to the Annapurna Mandir, explaining Sri Ma's *kheyala*. Some people were sceptical of the idea, some said it would be difficult, but Sri Ma's *kheyāla* prevailed. Bithu requested Atulda to sound the conch-shell from the *nātmandir* of the Annapurna Temple one minute before quarter to nine exactly. For the first two or three days Bithu went round the various buildings reminding people to heed the conch-shell and to be silent. It was easy enough because Sri Ma was in residence and everyone wanted to abide by her *kheyāla* and so in time it became a routine for all the Ashrams as well as Satsangs.

The middle of December saw her again in Dehradun. She kept moving from Kishenpur to Raipur. She stayed in one of her devotee's (Naresh) house also for one day. She visited Doonga also escorted by Chowdhury Sher Singh's wife.

One day Prof Satya Babu an oldtime devotee spoke to Didi, "Didi I have read the published seven volumes of your Diary. I was hoping to see some mention of myself. Do you remember that on the occasion of the opening ceremony of Kishenpur Ashram I received special *kripā* from Baba

Bholanath. I have engaged in enough discussions with Ma also!"

Didi said, "Bhai (brother), who can count the breakers of the ocean! My books are infinitesimal drops of the vast expanse."

Sri Ma returned to Varanasi to grace with her presence the second anniversary of the Mahayajna (1949).

Haribabaji and Udiya Babaji had invited Sri Ma to accompany them on a tour of the Punjab. The pilgrimage started from Kurukshetra. Sri Ma came to the Gita Bhavan near the Lake Dwaipayana in mid-February, 1949. Krishnananda Avadhootji was the organiser of this programme. Sri Ma was accompanied by a large retinue. Haribabaji's *Rashila* party was with him along with other attendants. The entire party consisted of about one hundred people. Avadhootji was evidently a great organiser. All travel arrangements, board and lodging facilities were faultless. All along the roads they found people waiting to welcome Sri Ma to their towns. The sounds of *kirtan* as well as band music stayed with them for long hours. Sri Ma was given princely receptions at Ambala and Khanna. In Khanna Sri Ma met Triveni Puri Maharaj, the *Mahātmā* of great reputation in the Punjab. This meeting was the beginning of a close association with the old ascetic. He was also known more familiarly as Khanna Baba. Khanna Baba was seen to accord to Sri Ma a respect and allegiance of the highest order. Maybe being a great *Mahātmā* himself he recognised Sri Ma as the most gracious presence in the world.

Didi marvelled at the impact of Sri Ma on the new crowds. People seemed to accept her as a person most dear to their hearts. Whatever their religious affiliations, their reverence and adoration was as if to their own *Istadevatā*. Udiya Babaji

also seemed to have shed his reserve. He said frankly, "I did not recognize her for what she was earlier. She is a true *Sthitaprajna* as described in the Gita!" He travelled in the same car with her talking familiarly and most affectionately. Sri Ma said later to Didi, "Baba is being so outgoing as to be quite remarkable. I hope this will not turn out to be our last meeting!" There was some reason for Sri Ma's apprehension. It had been noticed a few times that whenever a notable person had come very close to her, the meeting had somehow or other taken on the character of a final farewell.

Sri Ma spent part of the summer in Dehradun. Devigiriji Maharaj very kindly came down from Uttarkashi to stay a while in the Ashram in Kishenpur.

Sri Ma was also visited by Pandit Onkarnath Thakur at this time. The assembled devotees had the pleasure of listening to his vocal recitals and his famous *bhajan, jogi mat ja!*

Dehradun also had the privilege of observing the *Janmotsava* of this year. In the presence of the well-known *Mahatmas* Sri Ma's Birthday Puja was performed by Kusum Brahmachari. Sri Ma lay quietly on her *chowki* totally inert and passive while the ochre-robed *sadhus* enhanced the splendour of the occasion by their presence. Khanna Baba from the Punjab, Devigiriji from Uttarkashi, Swami Akhandanandaji and Haribabaji from Vrindavan, Krishnanandaji Avadhoot, Swami Krishnanandaji from Mumbai and others came together to render their allegiance to Sri Ma.

Jamnalal Bajaj had bought a piece of land near Raipur Ashram. This had been donated to the Ashram. Parashuramji

had constructed a building on this land. It was named "Tapalaya" that is, a place where *tapasya* may be performed. Sri Ma accompanied by all the Mahatmas came to this new building and so a fit opening ceremony was celebrated for it.

Kishenpur Ashram had the privilege of observing the annual Durga Puja of this year (1949) also.

The devotees from all towns were now looking forward to attending the closing ceremony of the *Mahayajna* at Varanasi.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Pioneering Ascetics of Our Ashram

Uttisthata jāgrata prāpya varān nibodhata

ksurasya dhārā nisitā duratyayā

durgam pathastat kavayo vadanti.

-Kathopanishad/II/14

The conclusion of the *Mahayajna* gave Sri Ma greater freedom (if that is possible) to resume her travels. For a few months she had been suffering from a stomach ache. Since she did not take any medicines the many doctors in her retinue were helpless. They as well as others could only pray for her own *kheyāla* for a recovery. Sri Ma had said that it had been her *kheyāla* that no one connected with the *Mahāyajna* should fall ill till its completion. It was apparent that Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to undergo some suffering to ensure the success of the function.

Sri Ma came to Vrindavan with Haribabaji in March, 1950. Now Sri Ma and her retinue could stay in the new Ashram built in her name. She continued to be ill although she as always attended all her engagements without fail. Her illness did not make any difference to her appearance or her attending *satsangs* for long hours. Haribaba was very distressed to know of her illness. He took a vow to eschew regular food till Sri Ma was well again. In fact he had determined to go on a total fast for Sri Ma's health but had been dissuaded from this greater rigourism.

After one or two days Sri Ma, on returning from the *satsang* to the new Ashram, went straight to the general kitchen which was always set up for all the devotees who thronged round her. She asked the cook to feed her from the items he had prepared for the crowd. The cook was taken aback but with great circumspection he gave her a little of the rice and dahl as well as the rotis and vegetables. Didi was aghast to learn of Sri Ma's partaking of this heavy lunch in the general kitchen. For months Didi had been preparing very delicate food with special care for Sri Ma! What would be the result of this unsuitable diet! But Sri Ma seemed to have recovered from her indisposition. She sent a message to Haribabaji. "Tell pitaji that I have had rice and dahl and vegetables so he should also partake of his usual food." Everyone was happy that due to Haribabaji Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to right herself so speedily.

Haribabaji was pleased with Sri Ma's recovery. He suggested that she should go to Vindhyachal and stay there for some time for rest and quiet. Sri Ma said "For this body, all places are the same This body has no special retreats which may prove to be conducive to health!" In another context she had said, "Whether this body sits in the *satsang* or walks about, or talks to women about their problems, or discusses profound topics with scholars, it is the same!"

Didi and other auditors were reminded that it was best to leave Sri Ma to her own *kheyāla*. However, Sri Ma started for Vindhyachal after a few days. The train arrived at Etawah station around midnight. As expected Jai Narainji (Dada of Etawah), attended the train with lavish arrangements of food for Sri Ma's retinue. His people went to the compartments

where the devotees were and gave them baskets of food. Dadaji was well known for this singular service toward all those who travelled in Sri Ma's company.

The middle of April, 1950 found Sri Ma in Varanasi Ashram to grace with her presence the Vasanti Puja which had become its special annual feature since 1944. One day Sri Ma said to Didi. "I have a *kheyāla* to say something to you. You are always so concerned about Didima, Dadamashai and Makhan (Sri Ma's parents and brother) For sometime now I have been addressing you as 'Didi' that it occurs to me...." Didi spoke quite spontaneously completing Sri Ma's sentence, "That I am the first child born to your parents and who died before you came to them?" Sri Ma smiled and said, "But it is you who is saying it!"

After travelling around for a few weeks Sri Ma returned to Varanasi to attend a special function. At the time of the digging of the foundation of the Ashram two Sivalingams had been found buried deep in the ground. These had been lifted out and cleaned. At this time the two Sivalingams were kept in one of the rooms of the Ashram.

A very special ritual took place at this time in Varanasi Ashram. As written already Nepal Chandra Chakravarty was a long time devotee. He had met Sri Ma when she had visited Varanasi for the first time in 1928. He was a bachelor and lived very simply almost like a hermit. He had been chosen to lead the *Mahāyajna* which had just concluded. For three years he had practised a rigourism which was exemplary in modern times. He now asked for Sri Ma's permission to renounce the world and become a *sannyāsi*. The Hindu tradition is renunciation-oriented. The highest aim of life is to engage in

the quest for enlightenment. After discharging one's duties in the world the seeker is advised to turn toward achieving the ultimate felicity of human life or *moksa*. In modern times people have forgotten this ideal. The quest for worldly successes dominates life.

Sri Ma in compassionate understanding of the modern attitude always spoke toward a solution of this predicament. She gave a new meaning to the concept of renunciation. She always asked everyone to fill his or her mind with thoughts of God. In her words, "Let your mind abide ever at the feet of God. Just as two things cannot occupy the same space, so more your mind becomes preoccupied with thoughts of God, it will be emptied of worldly concerns! You do not need to go away to the forest or to a retreat. If you hold fast to the Supreme Lord what is irrelevant will fall away naturally." She said with emphasis, "I know that God's name (*japa*) is capable of achieving everything!" (*āmi jāni nāmei sab hai*)

It was however very pleasing to Sri Ma that Nepal Chakravarty chose to tread the path of the traditional renunciate. A small temple type room had been constructed at one end of the long terrace of the new Ashram. The sacred fire had been installed here. Another newly built room at the other end of the same terrace was chosen by Sri Ma to be the venue of the *yajna* to be performed by Nepal Chakravarty as the last rite of his life. She said "In one temple the sacred fire is being preserved, the other temple will see the renunciation of all fire-rituals!"

And so it was. In Sri Ma's presence all contradictions met in harmony. Nepal Chakravarty became Swami Narayananda Tirtha. Ordinary people are truly not aware of

such rituals, because they play no part in their lives. Now a group of people had the rare privilege of witnessing the call to "tread the razor's edge path" being responded to by a resolute pilgrim.

A few of the brahmacharis of the Ashram were now inspired to follow the path of any guru. Someone indicated the presence of Didima who was available to them as not only a member of a prestigious monastery (*akhārā*) but in herself as perfect a human being as is possible in this world. She was Swami Muktananda Giriji Maharaj, the mother of Sri Ma, more familiarly and affectionately known to the family of devotees as "Didima" (mother's mother). Didima had been initiated into the Girl *Sampradāya* by the eminent *Mahātmā* Mangal Giriji Maharaj of Haradwar. This transformation for Didima was in name only. She from the very beginning had led an exemplary life. Her equanimity was ideal. Under adverse circumstances she was gentle, hardworking and without rancour. Her unfailing sense of humour made light of all hardships. Later in life she gained much prestige and there was no dearth of money or comforts. But Didima remained the same unassuming gentle person with an unfailing smile and a blessing for all those who approached her. The ochre robes she wore added nothing to her stature, indeed Didima's innate state of perfect renunciation lent a glow to the garb of a Sannyasi. The youngmen accepted her as their Sannyāsi Guru most confidently.

Brahmacharis Swarup, Prakash, Mrinmay and Keshav were initiated into *Sannyāsa* by Didima. Swarup and Prakash the two longtime friends became Swami Swarupananda and Swami Prakashananda. Mrinmay, a tutor in the Vidyapeeth,

was renamed Swami Chinmayananda. Keshav, a Parsi youth, became Swami Keshavananda. The Ashram was enriched by the presence of these young and able renunciates clad in ochre-robos which were so pleasing to Sri Ma!

The *Janmotsava* of this year (1950) was celebrated in Kolkata. Sri Ma stayed in the small Ashram in Ekdalia Road. She also visited the new house of Mr. Justice Subodh R. Dasgupta (familiarily known as "Kohinoorda") These new devotees had made provisions for a suite of rooms for Sri Ma in their new house. Sri Ma stayed here many times over the years as well as this time. A *Bhāgavat Saptāh* also was observed at this time. Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to dedicate it to the memory of Kulada Ranjan Bhattacharya, an ascetic who had been living in Ramna Ashram in Dhaka for a long time. All devotees in India were shocked and saddened to hear that he had met his death at the hands of rioting Muslims. The beautiful Ashram itself had been razed to the ground. The landmarks sanctified by Sri Ma's residence in earlier years were forever lost to all pilgrims who would have so devoutly visited them.

In India the country was beginning to be governed by the leaders. Dr. Kailash Nath Katju was Governor of West Bengal. He had known Sri Ma from her many visits to Allahabad. He now came to see her and sat near her talking of old times. He said that to be with Sri Ma was to be given some respite from the turmoils of life in the world.

After her sojourn in Kolkata Sri Ma went to Puri where she stayed for almost a month.

The sojourn in Puri was broken by many short or longer

trips to other towns. This year Puri was celebrating the festival of Renewal of Lord Jagannatha (*Navakalevara*). The ritual of renewing the Sacred Images is very elaborate and is observed with meticulous care in every detail. It is done at an interval of twelve years. The devotees wished to attend this special festival, so Sri Ma returned to Puri in time for it.

Sri Ma's Change of Condition

Didi was a little concerned about Sri Ma at this time because she was again living on a diet which was less than sufficient. She did not eat anything during the day but only a little from the *prasād* which the Temple Authorities sent to the Ashram every night. On the night of 10th or 11th July, 1950 the *prasād* came so late that all the devotees had retired to bed. Didi got up to serve a little of this food to Sri Ma. After eating a few mouthfuls Sri Ma got up and went out into the courtyard. Here she suddenly collapsed to the ground and lay in an awkward position. Paramananda and Sadhan Brahmahari hurried out. They helped Didi to carry Sri Ma back to her room and laid her down on her bed. She lay quiet. In the morning Dr. Girin Mitra was asked to see her. Girin Mitra was a devotee of long standing. He was at this time living like an ascetic in the Ashram at Puri. Girin Mitra was concerned to see her pulse very low, almost thread like. A pall of gloom descended on the Ashram. Devotees prayed for Sri Ma's recovery which seemed to hang in the balance for a while.

After a day or two much to the relief of her companions Sri Ma resumed her usual ways of being with her retinue of devotees. After a week of her sudden collapse she was able to

attend the ceremony of the pulling of the Chariot. Then it was time to leave Puri and return to Varanasi via Kolkata.

Dr. Gopal Dasgupta, an eminent doctor of Varanasi, was greatly devoted to Sri Ma. He was not a believer in religions as such but was a humanitarian of some repute. He, however, was totally dedicated to Sri Ma. His entire family was attached to her as well. Whenever Sri Ma came to Varanasi Gopal Dasgupta would be in regular attendance. He sometimes examined her medically and would suggest such diet as was likely to be of benefit to her. Didi now took the opportunity of the doctor's presence to talk about Sri Ma's sudden illness in Puri. Sri Ma said. "Paramananda thought that this body had reacted to an incident which had taken place that day. Sadhan was annoyed with this body for a reason which was not true. But while under this misapprehension he spoke to this body in some anger. Later he decided to leave the Ashram and go away alone as an independant sadhu. I knew of his resolve and had a *kheyāla* about him throughout the day. Paramananda remembered some words spoken by me in some other context namely that "This body may go away altogether if you (the people of the Ashram) behave in this manner." Sadhan, however, realized his mistake. He returned and expressed his repentance to this body. I am not saying that Paramananda was right. There were other things. I had the *kheyāla* of Santosh's death on a similar occasion in Puri more than two decades ago, There was the atmosphere of a renewal of the divine Images in Puri. What happened was this; on this night this body saw the extinction of bodily functions one by one. The sight of the eye, the sound of the ear and other sensations dwindled off. The breath seemed to be going out

totally to mingle with the cosmic atmosphere. The condition was what would be ordinarily called death by all of you Then like the switching on of an electric light everything was restored. There are innumerable other dimensions of this episode but I have now no *kheyāla* to talk about them."

The audience sat in grave silence contemplating Sri Ma's words. The devotees realized that due to an incalculable divine compassion they were still in the presence of their beloved Ma!

Guru Purnima in Varanasi Ashram

A concourse of devotees celebrated Guru Purnima. The Ashram had acquired two new Temples built by the loving care of Man Mohan Ghosh who had dedicated himself to this service. The site of the *Virajā-homa* (the last rite for *Sannyāsa* performed by Nepal Chakravarty) was now transformed into a small picturesque temple which perched at the end of the terrace as if a jewel of shining beauty. Another temple was in the process of being built on the second storey of the building on the north side of the central courtyard. The Images brought from Dhaka were to be finally installed in this temple as well as the two Sivalingams found on the site of the Ashram.

Sri Ma took part in all the festivities but Didi saw that her manner was unusually listless. After a few days Sri Ma, however, responded to the care and concern of her retinue by righting herself by her own *kheyāla*. One night she seemed to enter into a *bhāva-samādhi*. Didi who had witnessed many such states in Dhaka recognised it for what it was. She and a few others kept vigil near the bedside. Dr. Gopal Dasgupta had never seen Sri Ma in *samādhi* before. He tried to recall her

to the present by talking and trying to make her respond to his questions. Sri Ma's expression was withdrawn but she spoke one or two words in a lisping way and again sank back into a dimension of total peace. Her face and aspect were beautiful. After a long time she said gently, "Go home. I am all right, there is nothing to worry about". So then everyone left Sri Ma to her rest.

Sri Ma stirred around break of dawn and seemed to be once more her normal radiant self. She walked out on to the terrace and took a few turns on it. She then retired to her room in her usual normal way. Didi was surprised to see Patalda standing alone in the courtyard looking up at the terrace. Evidently he still was keeping vigil. She signalled to him that all was well. Now he also finally left the Ashram to go home.

Sri Ma generally spent the time of Jhoolan and Janmashtami in Varanasi. Gangadi, the In-charge of the Kanyapeeth, always prayed for her presence on these occasions. There were a few weeks to go before the time of these festivals in August. Sri Ma travelled to Delhi in response to the invitation of Dr. J. K. Sen. She also graced the house-warming ceremony at Panchu Babu's new residence. Sri Ma went up to Dehradun where the new sannyasis Swarupananda and others were happy to get her *darshana* so unexpectedly.

Sri Ma returned to Varanasi to join in the festivities in the Kanyapeeth. The students celebrated the functions maintaining their usual high standard which was expected of them.

In the month of September Sri Ma spent almost a week in Etawah. Jai Narain (Dada) had made elaborate arrangements for her reception. His whole family as well as neighbours

were devoted to Sri Ma. The whole region resounded with the strains of kirtan. A festive crowd was always milling around Sri Ma. After almost a week they bade a sad farewell to her.

The annual Durga Puja in October was celebrated by the devotees of Baharampur. Sri Ma was well known in this town. There was a faction in Baharampur which was opposed to religious festivals. This group of youngsters tried to disrupt the festivities but Anil Chandra Chatterjee confronted them and his dignified and firm attitude exercised a beneficial effect on the mob. They abandoned their anti-attitude and dispersed peacefully.

One day Sri Ma was invited to visit, the residence of Maharaja Srish Nandi and Maharani Nilima Devi of Cossimbazar, one of the major states of Bengal. The princely couple made everybody welcome and greeted Sri Ma with devotion.

After the Puja Sri Ma visited Beldanga at the request of Jaikishen Jhaharia. She came to Kolkata only to leave it again for the Ramakrishna Ashram at Barada. This entailed a complicated journey. From Kolkata, Sri Ma and a few companions went by car to Diamond Harbour. Here they embarked on a boat. After almost three hours they disembarked to sit in palanquins for the last lap of the trip to the village of Barada in Dist. Midnapore. The Swamijis of Ramkrishna Ashram were ready to welcome Sri Ma and her few companions with great eagerness. They received her at the riverside *ghat* and made a procession of the palanquins. They accompanied Sri Ma's palanquin, singing *kirtan* all along the four-mile route to the Ashram.

After a couple of days Sri Ma returned to Kolkata, where the devotees were waiting to celebrate Lakshmi Puja in her presence. Sri Ma was expected in Varanasi for the inauguration of the new temple for Annapurana on the occasion of Annakut-Puja. She continued to travel during the intervening fortnight. After visiting Tatanagar and Puri she arrived in Varanasi in time for the festival of *Annakuta*. The new Temple was now ready for the ceremonies of installation and inauguration.

This Temple was spacious and very beautiful. There was a gallery inside the temple which opened out to rooms which could be used by Sri Ma. There was a square antechamber in front of the temple enclosed on three sides with railings. The temple being situated on the first storey, anyone standing in the square space in front of it commanded a panoramic view of the holy river flowing past. This antechamber (*nātmāṇḍir*) became the venue of innumerable *satsangs*. Sri Ma would sit in front of the door to the temple facing the men who sat in front and the river. The women sat in the verandah which led up to the temple. All devotees carry nostalgic memories of these sessions where they had listened to dialogues on critical subjects, music by eminent exponents, or simply the rewarding experience of profound silence.

Annakuta became a regular feature of Varanasi Ashram because of the presence of Annapurna. Another tradition which was well established for this time of the year was the Gita Jayanti celebrated by Gopal Thakur of Allahabad. He came to stay with her wherever she happened to be at this time, so that he could celebrate the *jayanti* in her presence. This year (1950) Varanasi Ashram became the venue much to



Ma with the presiding deity of the Varanasi Ashram, Mata Sri Annapurna, after re-installation in Varanasi Ashram.
- October, 1950

the delight of all residents.

In the last week of November, the Vice-chancellor of Banaras Hindu University. Govinda Malaviya escorted Sri Ma to the site of the religious rituals which inaugurated the Annual Convocation. He also requested Sri Ma to bless with her presence the site of the New Temple to Siva which was under construction in the middle of the campus.

Sri Ma at Narendra Nagar

The Maharaja of Tehri Garhwal had died in a car accident a few months ago. The bereaved family was awaiting Sri Ma's presence in their midst since that time. Due to the tradition of these princely realms the family could not leave the state for the one year period of mourning.

Sri Ma arrived at Narendra Nagar at the end of November. Rajmata Anandapriya, the then Maharaja Manavendra Shah and the princesses gathered round Sri Ma. A large house-like tent had been erected near the Palace for her. Her companions were accommodated in the Palace itself. Sri Ma spoke such words of sympathy and compassionate understanding that much of the overwhelming grief was assuaged. The Rajmata was especially concerned because it had been foretold that the present Maharaja and his infant son were also likely to die shortly. Jogibhai had also come to Narendra Nagar. He was the uncle-in-law of Maharaja Manavendra Shah.

The family was sitting around Sri Ma while she was told of their posible fearful future. Sri Ma asked the Maharani to give the infant prince to Jogibhai. Jogibhai took the baby in his arms and looked toward Sri Ma for her next instructions. Sri Ma said, "Now the child belongs to you. Give him back to his

parents saying that they should look after him and rear him on your behalf. Give a name to the child." Jogibhai looked long at the child in his arms and said "Sudarshan" (handsome). He then gave the infant back to his mother.

The Maharaja and Maharani were obliged to leave for Delhi. When they came to take permission from Sri Ma, she took off the shawl from around her shoulders and wrapped it round the Maharaja. Everyone present immediately felt that Sri Ma had put a shield round him to guard him against all dangers. And so it evidently was because the Maharaja and Maharani of Tehri Garhwal continued to serve Sri Ma devotedly to the very end. Maharaja Manavendra Shah continued to take an active interest in the Sangha to the day of his passing away.

Sri Ma descended from Narendra Nagar after about ten days or so. She visited Delhi to stay at the residence of Dr. J. K. Sen. The devotees of Gujarat were requesting Sri Ma to visit them. Kantibhai Munshaw came to Delhi to add his prayers also. Sri Ma undertook a prolonged tour of the various townships and towns of Gujarat.

The tour ended in Ahmedabad. Kantibhai's big house and gardens became full of visitors from many parts of the country. For Sri Ma a house-like tent had been erected on the front lawn. The devotees of Gujarat went all out to be hospitable to all "North Indian" visitors to their town. There were Kashmiris, Punjabis, Bengalis and Hindi-speaking people in Sri Ma's entourage, but for the Gujaratis they were just North Indians! All provincialisms were united under Sri Ma's magical presence.

A special confluence of cultures was achieved by the *Nāmayajna* performed by the devotees from Delhi. As written earlier the *Nāmayajna* was a time-honoured festival for these men. At this time a second generation of the original *kirtan* party was carrying on the tradition very ably. Biren Banerji, Lal and Nani Banerji and others were worthy sons of their fathers. Sri Ma explained the meaning and tradition of the *Nāmayajna* to the Gujarati devotees. They enthusiastically helped to erect the altar of pictures in the centre of a marquee put up especially for the *kirtan*. The altar was decorated with flowers, garlands, green leaves and lights. The ritual of the *Nāmayajna* under Sri Ma's aegis followed a slightly different pattern from the original tradition. In general on the eve of the all-day *kirtan* the performers sit in front of the altar and sing the special hymns of invocation to Mahāprabhu Gaurāṅga and Nityānanda and their four prestigious companions. After the invocation known as *adhivāsa* the singers stand up to go around the altar carrying their instruments strapped to their shoulders and begin the *kirtan* which would be sung from dawn to dusk the next day. This music is placed under the safekeeping of the altar for the night as it were by the singers when they become silent. Sri Ma had initiated a novel feature. Instead of ceasing to sing the male performers transferred the *kirtan* to a group of women standing by who took over the singing and continued the whole night till the men came at dawn to take it back from them. Sri Ma had inaugurated night-long *kirtans* for women way back in Dhaka. There were very fine voices among the women; they became proficient in carrying musical instruments while standing or walking around the altar. In the beginning Sri Ma herself saw to the safety arrangements for the women and young girls during the

night but by now it had become a standard procedure. The marquee or *pandal* was given over exclusively to the women. All menfolk retired to their quarters. Special guards were on duty to see that nothing untoward happened during the night.

These night-long *kirtans* had become very popular because women got the opportunity to show their skill and power of endurance. It became especially delightful when Sri Ma came to join and stay with the *kirtan* many times during the night. The *kirtan* remained unbroken for more than twenty four hours.

One of the new devotees Mrs. Talyarkhan, a Parsi lady very well-known in this part of the country, became quite enamoured of the *Nāma-yajna*. A new dimension of the ways of devotion was opened out for a large section of the populace.

In the last week of December Sri Ma went to the State of Morvi, in response to the prayers of the old and ailing Maharaja Sir Lukhdirji. He had abdicated his throne in favour of the Prince, who at this time was abroad. The princesses of the state came to the railway station to receive Sri Ma although usually they did not appear in public places. Morvi like a few other States such as Tehri-Garhwal, Mandi, Suket and Baghat became totally devoted to Sri Ma. The old Maharaja was living in retirement. Sri Ma visited him in his retreat. Sri Ma's companions were impressed by the sincerity of dedication displayed by the Maharaja as well as his entire family. They seemed inconsolable when time came for Sri Ma's departure. They requested her again and again to visit them in future also.

The New Year 1951 saw Sri Ma in Mumbai. She stayed

for a couple of days at the Siva Temple near Muljibhai's residence in Sion. Sri Ma returned to Delhi. After a fortnight or so she came away to Vindhyachal. She visited Varanasi Ashram for a day. She returned to Vindhyachal accompanied by six foreigners. The foreigners had been travelling with her. This was a much needed respite for them from the constant disarray and confusion which seemed to be an integral part of Sri Ma's way of constant movements. In Vindhyachal they could sit in meditation in Sri Ma's room for long hours. Sri Ma made herself available to them for dialogues. The surroundings were peaceful. The vast panoramic views from the Ashram gave it a quality of quietude appreciated by all who were interested in *sādhana*.

Two of these foreigners were residents of the Ashram at Varanasi. Colin Turnbull from Oxford was enrolled in Benaras Hindu University as a research scholar. He lived like one of the brahmacharis in the Ashram practising his *sādhana* under Sri Ma's guidance. Sri Ma called him Premananda and as such he was known to the other devotees. The other young man had come from America in search of spiritual guidance. While he was still at sea, he had a vision of a beautiful lady in white with flowing dark hair. When he came to the Ashram and saw Sri Ma he realized that she had already appeared to him in a vision. Sri Ma gave him the name Jayananda. Jayananda (Jack Unger) lived like a brahmachari in the Ashram for many years till he was recalled to his country on urgent family business.

Jayananda and Premananda shared a room in the Ashram. Sri Ma often came to this room and sat with them advising them and helping them to rearrange their belongings quite as

naturally as she did with the other residents of the Ashram. In time they were joined by Vijayananda (Dr. Weintrob from Alsace-Lorraine).

Gopal Thakur of Allahabad invited Sri Ma to visit Patna on the occasion of Saraswati Puja. After this ceremony Sri Ma attended another festival organised by the devotees of Allahabad. This was the ever popular *Nāma-Yajna* performed by the special group of singers of Delhi known amongst the devotees as the "Delhi-Party".

Sri Ma came to Varanasi to participate in the festival of *Siva Rātri* which was observed in its usual magnificent style in the Ashram. Around midnight Sri Ma went to Visvanath Temple in the city as the Chief Priest had come to fetch her for this visit. There was an unmanageable crowd inside the Temple. The priests became helpless under the press of humanity. For a moment it appeared that Sri Ma would be crushed in the melee but the next second Didi was relieved to see her standing out of the crush of people. It was one of the rare occasions of Sri Ma's employment of her yogic powers.

Haribabaji had prayed for Sri Ma's presence in Bhiraute on the occasion of the festival of holi. The ascetics were also desirous of celebrating Sri Ma's *Janmotsava* of this year in the Punjab. There were still a few weeks before the date of birth. Sri Ma left Bhiraute to travel around in her usual manner visiting Vrindavan, Delhi and Agra. She also went to stay with the Rajmata of Tehri-Garhwal at Anandakashi. The Rajmata had built a cottage for herself on the bank of the Ganges, Rishikesh. She wished to live in retirement practising her own *sādhana*. This beautiful mountainside retreat was given the name Ananda Kashi by Jogibhal. Sri Ma abided

with the grief-stricken family for a while. The Maharaja of Tehri Garhwal was considered to be the devotee-in-chief of the Image of Vishnu in the prestigious Temple at Badrinath. The princesses of the family themselves prepared the holy oil for the Temple every year. This was sent to the Temple with some ceremony. Sri Ma and her few companions watched the processes of this handicraft. The Rajmata presented a little of this precious oil to Didi for Sri Ma's use. For her Sri Ma was the moving image, the same as the static one in the Temple.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Janmotsava in the Punjab

"We do not distinguish between Ma and Akala
Purusha!"
- Sant Lakshmanji

In the last week of April, 1951 Sri Ma came to Jullundhar. She was received at the station by a large concourse of people, chief among them being the four sons of Sardar Sadhu Singh. Sri Ma had named them Ram, Bharat, Lakshman and Shatrughna. After a little rest in the Temple of Savitri Devi, Sri Ma and her companions were escorted to Hoshiarpur where Haribabaji received her with great ceremony and fanfare.

The Punjabis are used to the concept of *satsang*. Haribabaji was well-known in this part of the country. In Hoshiarpur he had practised *sāadhanā* under the aegis of his own Guru. Now a Temple housed the *samadhi* of this saint. *Satsang* took place under a marquee (pandal) erected nearby.

This year the *Janmotsava* was spread over almost three weeks.¹ The *Mahātmās* had arranged to celebrate it in three towns, beginning with Hoshiarpur, then in Doraha for a few days. It would conclude in Ambala. All arrangements for board and lodging of the expected large crowd of devotees from all corners of the country were quite faultless. Krishnananda Avadhootji was revealed as a great organiser and also as an artist who revelled in flower decorations. He impressed everyone with his untiring spirit of service to Sri Ma and all

aspects of her *kheyāla* as understood by him.

They spent a few days at Hoshiarpur. Sri Ma was taken to visit the town's cremation grounds. All visitors were amazed to see the beauty of this place. In general the cremation grounds present a stark and bleak aspect but this place abounded in flowering shrubs and ornamental trees. The sites for the necessary rituals were well kept and conveniently placed.

Hoshiarpur observed the beginning of the *Janmotsava*. After a week of celebrations the *Mahatmas* moved on to *Jullundhar* where they were again made welcome by Sadhu Singh and his sons. These Sikhs gave as much allegiance to Sri Ma as to their own Guru Granth Sahab. This Ashram was visited by Sri Ma many times over the years.

From *Jullundhar*, the congregation went on to Doraha, a distance of 50 miles. This place was comparatively speaking quieter. After a rest of three days Avadhootji conducted his guests to Ambala about a couple of hours drive from Doraha. Here again Sri Ma was constantly amidst crowds of *satsangis*. Many heads of *ākhārās* (monasteries) were in attendance also. The old sage Triveni Puri Maharaj was gracing the occasion by his presence.

Avadhootji had arranged for distribution of sweets in many local institutions to mark the occasion. One such was an exclusive school for students suffering from leprosy. Sri Ma visited this school. One of the boys came forward and recited a hymn of welcome in Sanskrit. Sri Ma walked up to him and touched him in a gesture of blessing. Avadhootji was quite overcome to see Sri Ma's gracious acknowledgement of the

affliction which ruined so many lives.

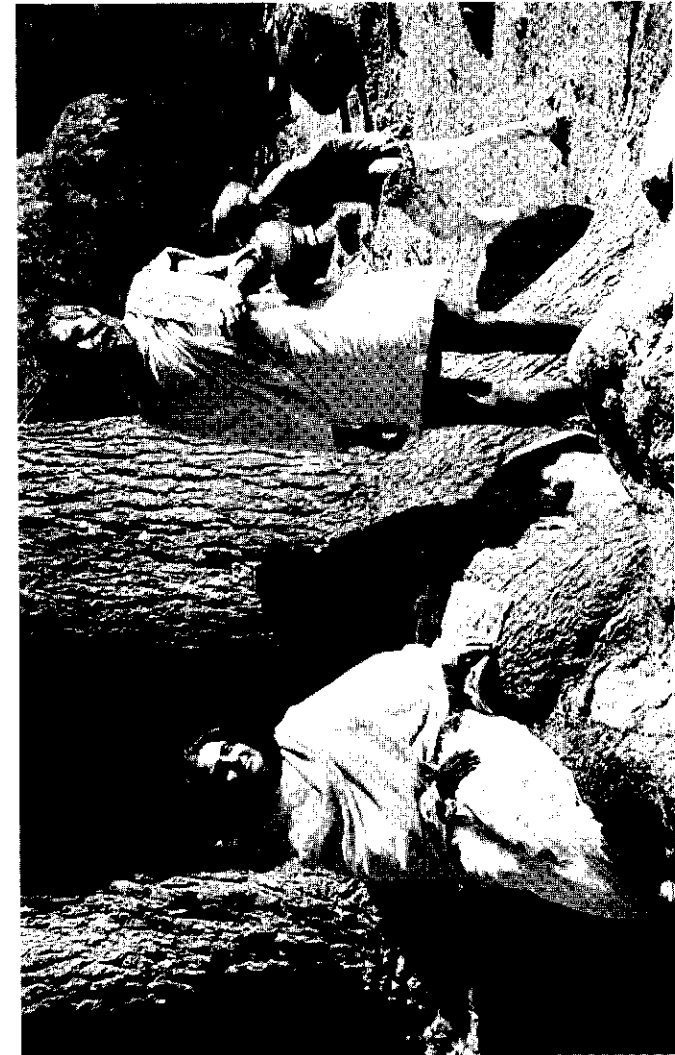
A huge congregation assembled to celebrate the *tithi puja* performed by Kusum Brahmachari. The magnificence and faultless perfection of all arrangements of every aspect of the function was truly admirable.

After the celebrations Sri Ma resumed her travels. She went to Amritsar and then on to Gurdaspur. The people of Gurdaspur were praying for her presence for quite some time. Sri Ma had passed through these regions in her earlier wanderings.

The Raja Sahab of Mandi now wished to welcome Sri Ma to his state. From Gurdaspur Sri Ma proceeded toward Mandi in a long motorcade arranged by the Raja Sahab. He drove Sri Ma's car himself leading the motorcade. They came to Baijnath, where Swami Tarananda had entertained Sri Ma at the time of the establishment of the Temple to Taradevi. The Temple was now surrounded by other buildings. They saw a school and an inn for pilgrims. Baijnath was more populous now.

The tour of the state of Mandi was ceremonious. The Raja of Mandi had been out of the country for some time. He had been appointed Ambassador of our country to Brazil. Now he and the Ranisahiba made up for their long separation from Sri Ma by constant attendance and perfect management for her visit to their state. The entire state was geared to this endeavour.

Before coming to Mandi, Sri Ma was taken through the valleys of Kulu and Manali. She had visited them before. Avadhootji who also was in attendance desired greatly that



On way to Mandi State Ma sitting quietly at the entrance to the famous hollow tree with Swami Krishnananda Avdootji standing near her.

Sri Ma would revisit these beautiful places. He stopped the cars near a huge tree which was especially spectacular because the wide trunk was like a wooden cabin with doors and windows. Avadhootji requested if Sri Ma would enter this "cabin". Sri Ma very readily entered the hollow in the tree and sat on a block inside it as if looking out of a window. Her radiant countenance framed by jagged ends of wood was captured in a photograph which has become a favourite with all devotees. The Raja Sahab had a sudden wish to etch Sri Ma's name on the bark of the tree in commemoration of her visit but, alas, nobody could produce a blade or any sharp knife for the purpose. But his disappointment was turned to joy when some body pointed to a knife lying near his own feet. In great surprise he picked it up. It seemed a miraculous find because nobody knew anything about it. The Raja Sahab was pleased like a child to have his wish granted so strangely.

Sri Ma came to Jogendra Nagar, the capital city of Mandi. The Raja Sahab ordered that while Sri Ma was in residence near the Palace no purdah need be observed by the women folk, so all women were happy to gather round Sri Ma all the time. Sri Ma was taken to visit the site of the Hydraulic Power Station which was the pride of modern Mandi. All the engineers and officers of this enterprise were presented to Sri Ma by the Raja Sahab.

The Delhi-party of *akhanda-nāma-samkirtana* came to Mandi at the invitation of the princely household. All the hill people had the pleasure of experiencing this special event of religious music.

The inevitable day of departure arrived. The whole state turned out in a procession to escort Sri Ma part of the way. They bade a sad farewell to Sri Ma asking her to come back again and again. Sri Ma made her usual answers to these prayers. She would say, "I shall come whenever you bring me" or "I am not going anywhere" or "I am ever with you". All these answers were truth personified but alas for human frailty which could not hold on to it for long.

Sri Ma returned to Varanasi in time to attend the Bhagavat Saptah to be performed in the memory of the son of Ramkrishna Mehra of Delhi. The well-known Vedantic scholar of Vrindavan Swami Akhandanandaji had been especially invited to give the discourses on this occasion.

On the full-moon day in July, the devotees of Varanasi observed the festival of Guru Purnima. They had the rare opportunity of touching Sri Ma's feet on this special occasion.

A plethora of religious festivals had become the order of the day. The devotees had come to realize that they could pray for Sri Ma's presence on such occasions. So all towns sought to arrange for a *kirtan* or a *puja* or a *saptah* mainly to enable them to welcome Sri Ma in their midst for a few days. Sri Ma's presence added magnificence to all celebrations creating a joyous atmosphere affecting all participants. Personal thoughts or national problems were forgotten for the time being. Sri Ma's oft repeated words :

"To talk of God alone is worthwhile,

All else is pain and in vain." became a vibrant reality to be

actualised in life to the best of one's ability.

Sri Ma travelled to Bhagalpur and then to Hazaribagh where Manoj Madhavji had prepared for her reception and welcome. These were short visits. Sri Ma returned to Varanasi and then suddenly had the *kheyāla* to visit Prangopal Mukherji at Deoghar. This old man was not keeping good health. He was very pleased to see Sri Ma so unexpectedly. In his old age and inspite of his illness he lived his usual life of rigorous *sādhana*. He said that just as Sri Krishna came to visit the fallen warrior Bhishma lying on the battlefield, so had Sri Ma come to visit and bless him to prepare him for the last journey. He was truly one of the old guards who had witnessed Sri Ma's miraculous display of majesty and splendour way back in the early twenties in Shabhaugh, Dhaka.

Sri Ma continued to move around not staying for more than a few days anywhere. She visited Etawah, Allahabad and Vindhyachal. This year was very lucky for the Ashram in Varanasi. Sri Ma stayed here for the annual Durga Puja, Kalipuja as well as the Geeta Jayanti which was celebrated by Gopal Thakur and his family, who came from Allahabad for the purpose.

Dr. Gopal Dasgupta had already established a centre for distributing milk to the poor children of the city. Now he acquired a small farm for goats near the temple of Sankatmochan. Milk was distributed freely to the children from here Acharitable institution was already in operation as Anandamayi Karuna. Rajmata Anandapriya had sponsored the project most generously. It can be said that this small

institution grew in scope and importance till a fully equipped modern Hospital located near the main Ashram took shape. Sri Ma visited this farm in between the various pujas.

It was noticed by Sri Ma's close companions that she was suffering from some kind of stomach ache. Didi asked Dr. Gopal Dasgupta to examine Sri Ma. He was fully aware that he would not be able to treat her as a doctor but he examined her as a concerned devotee. He related to Sri Ma an anecdote on this subject. He said one of his colleagues had asked him about Sri Ma's indisposition. He had answered, "Well, the first day I thought it was a liver condition, the second day I felt the gall-bladder, the third day I thought it could be a gastric problem. Today I might find something quite different so it is difficult to diagnose her condition!" Everyone laughed to hear this medical predicament; but to the relief of all devotees Sri Ma after a few days righted herself by her own *kheyala*.

Rajgir

In the month of December, 1951 Sri Ma came to Rajgir and had the *kheyāla* to abide here for a few days. She found simple quarters near the water-reservoir of the hot springs. Rajgir attracted many people to the hot water *kunda* (reservoir) for reasons of health. One of the local visitors, the proprietress of a big dharamshala, was so charmed by Sri Ma that she took up her abode near her. After a few days she requested Sri Ma to come to the dharamshala where she could be more comfortable. Sri Ma herself was never uncomfortable but her attendants would certainly be housed more properly. So she came to Rameshwari Devi's

dharamshala. This lady and her husband were living like Vanaprasthees that is, in retreat engaged in their own *sāadhanā* and away from their family and home. Rameshwari Devi became very attached to Sri Ma. She put her whole *dharamshala* at the disposal of her daily expanding family.

Rameshwari Devi was well-settled in her ways of *sāadhanā*. She had attained some equanimity of temperament. But when Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to leave Rajgir she became as agitated and inconsolable as devotees of longer standing. Didi was sympathetic. She said to her hostess, "Bahanji, such is Sri Ma's ways. She steals all hearts! It is not advisable at all to come close to her! Now you will be obliged to shed tears in her remembrance all your days!"

Sri Ma arrived in Puri in the last week of December, 1951. Mukti Maharaj and a few others had preceded her. On her arrival she was informed of an unfortunate incident which had taken place earlier. Mukti Maharaj, Jayananda (Jack Unger) and a few others had gone to the Temple for *darshana*. The priests had spoken roughly to Jayananda preventing his entry. Mukti Maharaj had immediately gone to his help. In the scuffle the old man had been thrown and had broken his thigh bone. The other devotees had immediately taken him to the local hospital. Sri Ma instantly went to see Mukti Maharaj. She expressed her *kheyāla* for his removal to Kolkata to a better equipped hospital. She herself went to Kolkata to see him installed there. Vijayananda (Dr. Weintrob) was travelling with Sri Ma so he was put in charge of the patient.

At Howrah Station Sri Ma was met by Dr. Sudhin Majumdar and the Director of Health Dr. Dasgupta, who took

Mukti Maharaj to the Presidency Hospital and made all arrangements for his treatment and comfort.

Sri Ma returned to Kolkata in the middle of January, 1952. She went to visit Mukti Maharaj. He was happy to see her. Not only Mukti Maharaj but other patients also were gratified to get this unlooked for *darshana*. Within a few days it seemed as if all patients were awaiting eagerly for the visiting hour. As soon as Sri Ma arrived, those who could walk came to her. Even the nurses would ask her to visit those who could not leave their beds. Sri Ma in her usual graceful way walked to the bedside of all those who wished to have her *darshana*.

One day Sri Ma was walking along a corridor near the operation theatre. She came to know that Dr. S. Radhakrishnan had just undergone an operation and was in the recovery room. She had a *kheyāla* to visit him. At that time the scholar was not known to her personally. Dr. Dasgupta asked the nurses in charge of the recovery-room to allow Sri Ma to enter it. Dr. Radhakrishnan was still under sedation. The nurses were non-plussed. Looking upon Sri Ma's radiant personality they fell back a little but made the stipulation, "Just for a minute only!" Sri Ma promptly rejoined, "For half a minute!" While her entourage remained outside she entered the room and very lightly touched the bed of the patient.

On his recovery. Dr. Radhakrishnan was informed of this surprising visit to his bed-side. He promptly sent messages expressing his profound sense of gratitude and obligation for her graciousness.

In late January, 1952 Sri Ma travelled to various towns in the Uttar Pradesh at the request of Prabhudattaji Maharaj. He

escorted her to a sadhu-sammelan in Kashipur. Here he became concerned on her behalf because he saw that the arrangements for board and lodgings were not adequate. He would not ask her to stay. After a rest and some refreshments for them he bade Sri Ma farewell. A car and driver was provided for the journey back to Kanpur over rather a rough road. Sri Ma, however, was her usual self not finding any fault with anything. But she acquiesced in all arrangements for her by the Mahatma. She returned to the house of Jagadish Mukherjee in Kanpur. The whole family was delighted to see her return to them so quickly.

The next day Sri Ma and Didi started for Lucknow via Unnao. After they had passed Unnao, Sri Ma said, "What a beautiful village! See Didi, how beautiful the trees are!" Didi saw a few mud-huts nestling under trees at a distance. She asked if Sri Ma would like to visit the village. Sri Ma hesitated because the car had already travelled ahead and the village was lost to view. Didi, however, asked the driver to stop and requested him to go back to the village which had attracted Sri Ma's attention. There were cultivated fields between the road and the village. Sri Ma said she would walk to the village if possible. The driver discovered a dusty lane leading to the village and drove carefully right up to the grove of trees. He assured Sri Ma that the car had been sent for her and that it would not take any sort of hurt anyway. Sri Ma descended from the car and walked rapidly toward a particular hut in the village. She asked Didi to fetch the basket of flowers and fruits from the car. Sri Ma walked so fast that it was difficult for Didi and Bhupen, who was with them, to keep up with her. Sri Ma arrived at the hut. By this time some of the villagers

had gathered around to see such strange visitors. There was a pond near this hut. Two trees one *neem* (margosa) and one *bat* (banyan) were standing on the shore close to each other. Sri Ma walked straight to these trees and behaved as if she had been long awaited by them. She greeted them, touching them caressingly. She put the flower garlands on them, talking to them as if to long-known friends. Didi saw that the trees were not very healthy looking and were quite small. But Sri Ma's attention was focussed on them for quite a while. Then she started to distribute the fruits amongst the villagers surrounding them. They said the name of the village was Bhavanipur. Asked if they knew who had planted the trees, they said "Dwarka" Dwarka's wife was pointed out to Sri Ma. Dwarka himself was away. Sri Ma greeted this woman addressing her as mother and saying that she herself was her new daughter and asked to be remembered as such. The village woman was bewildered but it is to be hoped that the memory of the radiant image remained with her for evermore. Sri Ma left the remaining fruits for this house. She told the family to take care of the trees, to clear the ground around the bases and make it suitable for squatting. If they so desired they could sit under the trees for meditation or some devotional music. It would be of benefit for them all. The bemused villagers agreed to carry out her advice. They accompanied her to the car and stood looking at it while she drove away.

Sri Ma said, "The twin trees are beautiful. They are as if Hari and Hara. Although they could not be seen from the road I was aware of a strong attraction pulling me toward them!" Didi marvelled at Sri Ma's ways of responding to prayers for her *darshana* from other beings than human.

Baghat House in Hardwar

Sri Ma came to Hardwar in the last week of January, 1952. Jogibhai had prayed for her presence on the occasion of the installation of Siva in a new temple in the State *dharamshala*. The *dharamshala* was very spacious. Jogibhai himself stayed here when he visited Hardwar. A new hall had been added for the purpose of *satsangs*. It had enough accommodation for the influx of Mahatmas and devotees expected whenever Sri Ma would be in residence. The boys from the Vidyapeeth (in Almora) also came to give support to Jogibhai who would be performing all the ceremonies himself.

The installation ceremony was celebrated with great circumspection. Sri Ma's presence and princely arrangements gave it magnificence as well as a rare spiritual aura. The date chosen for this intallation was the annual *Mahāsivarātri*. Thus the celebration continued throughout the night. As taught by Sri Ma all the devotees also participated by sitting for the puja throughout the night. At dawn Sri Ma walked round the temple as well as among all the people sitting in puja. She picked up some *bilva* leaves and flowers and placed them on the heads of the sitting worshippers. saying, "All are Siva-*Svarupa*!"

After a couple of days the gathering of devotees got a rare opportunity of bathing in the Ganges on the occasion of a solar eclipse. Sri Ma accompanied the congregation to the river-side. She awaited the end of the eclipse and then descending into the river immersed herself in it for a moment. When she had changed her clothes and was standing on the steps, she was seen from afar by Triveni Puriji Maharaj who had come to

the river for the same purpose. He immediately took off his shoes and came over to where Sri Ma was standing and prostrated himself on the ground in front of her. Sri Ma bent low to raise him bowing her own head to his, saying, "This is Baba's *lilā*!" (paying homage to Sri Ma). The *Mahatma* however, made no reply but went away in his usual calm and collected way. The old man was greatly respected by Sri Ma's retinue especially Didi who found him an ideal ascetic, ever abiding in an exalted state of spiritual serenity. One day Kamal Brahmachari asked him about his opinion regarding Sri Ma. He said:

"Just as all rivers flow into the ocean, so each and every orientation toward God-realization finds its fulfillment in Sri Ma. The ocean neither increases nor decreases by the influx. It remains unaffected so is Sri Anandamayi Ma. Just as the ocean is boundless so she is. Sri Ma cannot be confined by any parameters."

The Mahatma smiled and added, "Although I am sitting here, my mind remains with her!" Kamal Brahmachari could only marvel at his state of realization. Truly, the Mahatmas alone could understand Sri Ma's ways of being in the world.

Sri Ma was expected in Vrindavan for the festival of Holi which also happened to be the birthday of Haribabaji Maharaj. Sri Ma left Hardwar for Dehradun, in the beginning of March. One of the pioneers among devotees in Dehradun Kashi Narain Tankha, had passed away. Mahalakshmi, his wife, met her on arrival at Kishenpur Ashram. She was calm and composed as befitted a devotee of such long standing. The *darshan* of Sri Ma, however, assuaged the sorrow of

bereavement as nothing else could.

After a couple of days Sri Ma started on her journey to Vrindavan via Delhi by car. Some of the devotees travelled by train. A few followed Sri Ma in the station wagon presented to her by the Rajmata. Sri Ma arrived in Delhi and proceeded to Dr. J. K. Sen's house where she was expected. Sri Ma's car had outdistanced the station-wagon. Till quite late at night there was no sign of this vehicle. Sri Ma said to Didi, "It is becoming late. Perhaps it has met with an accident?" Didi remembering her cue answered vehemently, "No, Ma, nothing has happened to the travellers. They are all safe!" She repeated her assurance twice more remembering this ritual since the days of Dhaka.

Both Sri Ma and Didi were right. At some distance from the town the station wagon had met some obstacle and had capsized over on to its side. Strangely all the occupants were able to get out with very minor injuries. The travellers were Aptap Mitra, the wife (Vasanti) and daughter (Sumati) of Amulya Kumar, Kamalakanta. Buni, Khuki, Belu and a servant Prahlad. Kamalakanta stayed with the driver and the vehicle while the rest of the travellers found a car which drove them on to Delhi and to Dr. J. K. Sen's house.

Sri Ma and others listened to their story of the accident and everyone marvelled at their miraculous escape. Sri Ma said, "You had all started out for Vrindavan, so Govindaji Himself has protected you!" She also commented on Didi's emphatic assurance that nothing untoward would happen. Didi was amused and said, "So you can all see how much I have helped in the miracle too!" Sri Ma made everyone

imbibe a drink of hot milk laced with turmeric which is a time-honoured antidote for trauma and shock. She made the women lie down in her own room for the rest of the night. She touched everyone's head and said, "All of you have escaped a great mishap." Kamalakanta arrived the next morning with the luggage-laden station-wagon.

The festival of Holi was celebrated in its usual grand manner. All devotees, however, were saddened by the news of Triveni Puri Maharaj's passing away in Jullundhar. It was an irreparable loss for all those who knew him.

Sri Ma continued in Vrindavan for sometime. The foundation stone of the new Ashram was laid at this time. Jogen babu was the enthusiast for this enterprise. He made all suitable arrangements for the ritual.

Sri Ma in Ananda Kashi

The Rajmata of Tehri Garhwal had made elaborate arrangements in Ananda Kashi for Sri Ma as well as for those who might accompany her. She wanted Sri Ma to stay in Anandakashi for as long as possible. The location was beautiful. It was a comfortable residence nestling under the shadow of high mountains and on the shores of the holy river. Sri Ma had visited Anandakashi previously but this time she made a prolonged stay much to the delight of Rajmata Anandapriya.

After almost a fortnight Sri Ma proceeded on her travels once more. She travelled down to Varanasi then to Kolkata to visit Mukti Maharaj. She stayed at the residence of Ganga Charan Dasgupta for three days. A new room had been built

for Sri Ma in the garden. These old time devotees were happy to have Sri Ma stay near them for a while. Sri Ma went on to Puri and then passing through Kolkata again she proceeded to distant Khanna in the Punjab. The Mahatmas, especially Krishnananda Avadhootji, had prayed for the *Janmotsava* to be held again in this part of the country. So for the second year in succession Sri Ma's *Janmotsava* was celebrated in the Punjab.

Janmotsava in Khanna

Khanna is a small town near Ludhiana. Triveni Puri Maharaj had lived in Khanna for more than forty years. Avadhootji had built a temple in his memory. A statue of the saint was installed in this temple. Sri Ma, with her considerable entourage arrived in Khanna on May 2, 1952 on the eve of her birthday. A school house (established by Triveni Puri) had been furnished suitably for Sri Ma's use. Khanna became full of devotees arriving from various towns. All arrangements were supervised by Avadhootji. Once more, everyone had the opportunity to admire his organisational powers.

The *utsava* (function) was of about ten days' duration this year. On the night of the *tithi-puja*, Avadhootji himself escorted Sri Ma to the decorated seat arranged for the purpose. Sri Ma sat very stiffly like a statue of marble. After a while she took Avadhootji's permission and lay down on the *chowkie* in her usual immovable still fashion covered by a white wrapper.

Avadhootji himself sat in front and engaged in doing *puja* with the help of a few priests who were there for this purpose. It was indeed a remarkable event. The highly admired ascetic

offering ritualistic *puja* to Sri Ma in the midst of a large congregation singing devotional music the while.

The assembly watched in bemused attention this heartwarming dedication of an ascetic toward Sri Ma. He seemed to take pride in acknowledging that he had found his *Ista-devatā*.

Avadhootji's *puja* was concluded around 3.30 a.m. Bishuda had come from Varanasi to perform the *tithi puja* on behalf of the devotees. So the night went by as if in a swift dream of *puja-mantra*, *kirtan* and meditation. At dawn the congregation bowed at Sri Ma's feet, a privilege they looked forward to throughout the year.

After the *Janmotsava* Sri Ma was escorted to Jullandhar by Sadhu Singh and his sons. Here also she was well-known and much adored as the personification of the Highest. From Jullundhar Sri Ma went on to Hoshiarpur where Haribabaji was waiting for her.

After her sojourn in Punjab, Sri Ma proceeded to Solan and then on to Simla. Jogibhai had built a house for himself in Simla. Sri Ma's arrival in the cottage marked its opening ceremony. Sri Ma's retinue and other accompanying devotees were accommodated in the old palace building situated on a slightly lower level. Simla was very pleasant in the month of May. It was a welcome and a quiet retreat after the hectic programmes of the *Janmotsava*.

One day in late May, Didi and a few other companions heard Sri Ma singing in a low tone while she was still lying in bed. The words were in an unusual dialect of Hindi and the tune was hauntingly ethereal.

"aao mere salone chhalia re, banowari re

aao mere salone chhalia re...."

After a while Sri Ma stopped and said that she had heard somebody singing these lines (not physically) which she had reproduced in the same tune. By this time some of the other residents had gathered in Sri Ma's room. Bibhu Brahmachari who was not only a good musician but could follow Sri Ma's singing more competently than others, now made an attempt to recapture the tune. Sri Ma resumed her singing to help him out but strangely Bibhu was unable to master the exact nuances. Sri Ma herself did not always reproduce it exactly but awaited its spontaneous manifestation. She said, "It is Sri Radha's song. She is calling to her beloved. It is not of this world and so is difficult to articulate it exactly."

In the evening *satsang* Avadhootji asked about the song. He had heard about it from some devotees. Sri Ma said, "I heard somebody singing these lines so I joined in and spoke them aloud. Didi couldn't understand the words. She was afraid that people would think that I was mispronouncing them!" Everyone laughed at Didi's expense. She also joined in the laughter. Avadhootji explained that the words (*chhalia*, *salona*) were from *Brajbhasha*. They were loving epithets for the Krishna of Vrindavan describing his beauty and naughtiness. He was amazed at Sri Ma's rendering of this musical passage containing words unknown to her in the ordinary way.

Late at night Avadhootji came to Sri Ma's room. Gopal Thakur was also there. Bibhu had practised the song throughout the day. Now he came to sing it near Sri Ma to

know whether he had been successful. His rendering was good but not exact. Sri Ma joined in to eradicate the mistakes. The room filled with this heavenly tune, ethereal and heartbreakingly arresting. The small group of people sat in total silence. Nobody spoke when Sri Ma stopped. They made their obeisance and went quietly away.

From Simla, Sri Ma came to Solan where she remained for about a month. Since it was the time of the annual summer vacation Solan soon became full of visitors. The princely household as usual was dedicated to the service of all devotees, so a most pleasant time was enjoyed by all.

Chunilal Kapoor, the retired Inspector General of Police of Punjab, had built a house for himself in Solan. He and his daughters made elaborate arrangements for Sri Ma's reception in the new house. A room had been prepared for her. As soon as Sri Ma entered this room it became over-crowded with visitors. The smoke from incense sticks added to the sense of suffocation. Someone tried to open the skylight but it was stuck. Sri Ma asked everyone to go out and await her outside. As soon as the room was emptied of people Sri Ma lay down on the bed. Two things happened simultaneously. Sri Ma turned on her side very quickly and the smashed glass of the ventilator fell over her head and body. One young girl had been trying to open the ventilator from outside. It fell in the room in a shower of broken glass. Had the room been full of people they would have been hurt. Now Didi and others picked off the shreds from Sri Ma's person. She herself took out two pieces from her head. There was a trickle of blood. Sri Ma staunched the blood with a damp cloth. The daughters came to Sri Ma in great anguish and broke out in sobs of

remorse. They did not know how to contain their grief for causing hurt to Sri Ma. Sri Ma broke into their lamentations by saying briskly, "If you do not stop crying for this minor mishap, I shall have no alternative but to go away!" This stopped the sobs effectively. Thereafter all was peace and joyousness.

After the pleasant sojourn in Solan, Sri Ma descended to the plains and resumed her travels. The Rajmata of Tehri Garhwal had presented a chauffeur-driven new car for Sri Ma's personal use. It was her great wish that Sri Ma should travel in this car. In order to grant this wish Sri Ma drove to Delhi from Solan. From Delhi Sri Ma proceeded to Aligarh. At Aligarh she was received by Harigopal Mukherji. From Aligarh Sri Ma proceeded to Kanpur via Etawah. Jainarain Dada (Bajpayee) had as usual made elaborate arrangements for her comfort and rest. At Kanpur Sri Ma put up at Jagadish Babu's residence. From Kanpur she drove to Allahabad to be received by Niraj Nath Mukerji and family. There were many new devotees in Allahabad. Sri Ma rested at the house of Mrs. Sinha in Tagore Town. The midday meal was partaken of at the residence of Major Rai and his family.⁷

Sri Ma left for Varanasi the same evening. She had travelled by car from Solan to Varanasi in four days.

After five days Varanasi Ashram celebrated Guru Purnima. Before the Ashramites could congratulate themselves on their good fortune they had to bid farewell to Sri Ma, who left for Vindhyachal the same evening.

After only a couple of days Sri Ma left for Kolkata to visit Mukti Maharaj who was still confined in hospital. Nobody had been informed, so Didi could not look forward to any

arrangements for Sri Ma's reception at Howrah. But strangely she met Sopory Sahab's driver on the platform. He had come to meet his master who was expected by this train. He had not come, so the driver who always drove Sri Ma whenever she was in Kolkata, now put himself at her service. So the immediate problem of conveyance was solved. Sri Ma went to Kanak Babu's house much to their unexpected delight. The news of Sri Ma's arrival in town spread inevitably so that many people assembled in front of the hospital. Sri Ma in answer to prayers, stayed at or visited various households during her short visit. She visited Konnagar, the riverside mansion of Dr. Sarvadhikary. She stayed at Benoy Bhushan's and also at the Ashram at Ekdalia Road. She went to see Buni also, who was not too well and was at home at this time. After five days in Kolkata. Sri Ma returned to Varanasi for the festival of Jhoolan as well as the first Samyam Saptah.

CHAPTER NINE

The First Samyam Saptah

[6th August-12th August, 1952]

"Eko hamsah bhuvanasyāsyā madhye

Sa evāgnih salile sannivistah!

tameva viditvātimrtyumeti

nānyah panthāh vidyate ayanāya!!

[There is one Supreme Self in the midst of this universe. He Himself is the fire that is fully established in the water (body). By knowing Him alone one goes beyond death; there is no other path to go by.]

Formation of the Sangha

On the occasion of the completion of the *Mahāyajna* a need for a formal organisation was felt by all responsible elders in Sri Ma's retinue. Many Ashrams were now functioning as residential places for the personnel of their presiding temples. Many people were coming forward as desirous of staying in the Ashrams as ascetics. By general consensus "Shree Shree Anandmayee Sangha" was registered as a formal institution in January 1950. Raja Durga Singhji or Jogibhai was unanimously preferred as the first President. He was known to be a *Kṛpa-pātra* of Bhairji. His dedication and his upright nature were exemplary. Jogibhai himself hesitated to accept the post in the beginning while there were senior

people in Sri Ma's entourage. So Rajmata Kamalendumati Shah (Anandapriya) of Tehri Garhwal was elected First President of the Sangha. She however very soon resigned her position in favour of Jogibhai who graced the post of the President till the sad event of his death in 1972.

Some organisational measures were inaugurated. Secretaries were appointed for different Ashrams. All assets were recorded and people were put in charge of the stocks. Some amusing incidents happened during the time of new adjustments. Once Didi herself was approached by the newly appointed Secretary in Varanasi. He wanted her to sign a book in which he had listed all the utensils she was taking away to Vindhyachal for a function which was to take place there. Didi was busy. She said, "Nonsense, I always take the things which are required. They will be stocked in Vindhyachal." The young man was respectful but firm. He said he was accountable for the stocks in Varanasi and must have a written authorisation. Didi suddenly smiled and rose to the occasion by saying, "That is very good, Bring your register, I shall sign it." She was pleased that at last things were being indeed organised competently and other people were assuming responsibilities. So far it was almost a single-handed effort on her part. Indeed whatever is said about Didi's single-handed management of Sri Ma's erratic affairs would remain inadequate.

The *Mahāyajna* had brought about other changes also. *Satsangs* and discourses by Mahatmas had become a regular feature of Ashram life. Many functions were organised in different Ashrams throughout the year. In one of the meetings of the Sangha Jogibhai put forward a suggestion for a new



The first Sanyam Saptaha being held in the Varanasi Ashram hall.

H.E. Governor of U.P. also attending the function.

- August, 1952

type of function which could be held near Sri Ma. He said, "We know that Ma is asking us always to lead lives of *samyam*. We try to follow her instructions as best as we can. How would it be if we devote some days to this undertaking in Ma's presence in one of the Ashrams? She will guide us and we will understand her *Vāni* better."

This suggestion met with instant approval. After some discussion about the duration a week was deemed enough to begin with. Varanasi Ashram was chosen as the venue. The time, the week between Jhoolan and Janmashtami in August 1952. Invitations saying a week would be devoted to a life of *samyama* and all who wanted to participate were welcome to come to Varanasi, were sent out to all devotees. The response was enthusiastic.

A programme for the week was chalked out. Jogibhai and a few others sat in Sri Ma's room to write out the details of the daily programme. The week would be devoted for organising a life of total dedication to spiritual endeavour.

It would be an attempt to live in God-remembrance the whole week. A tight schedule of *japa* (repetition of God's name) *dhyāna* (meditation) *pātha* (reading of scriptures) and *kirtan* (singing of devotional music) was drawn up with intervals of time given for personal *sāadhanā*, the intake of simple food and a little rest. This routine was explained to all those who wished to participate in it.

It would be an attempt at carrying out Sri Ma's *vāni*—"Talk of God alone is worth while. All else is pain and in vain."

The day would start with pre-dawn *usā-kirtan*, a feature of all Ashrams. Generally visitors are roused every morning by

the solemn tunes of the morning hymns sung by the girls of the Ashram. This *kirtan* would mark the beginning of the day-long curriculum. All participants of the Samyam Saptah would foregather for it at break of dawn.

After this *kirtan* the participants would have about an hour in which to take their morning baths and perform their own personal *sādhana*. Then they would assemble in the Hall for an hour's *dhyāna* (7.30-8.30 A.M.). Sri Ma herself arranged the Hall for this session. Squares of mat were placed in parallel lines facing the seat where she would sit accompanied by *Mahātmās*. The number of mats were exactly the same as the number of participants. There would be no visitors at this time. Doors would be closed and there would be guards to see nobody disturbed the assembly. A conch-shell note would be sounded at 7.25 A. M. so that all participants may arrive and occupy their own seats before the doors were closed to others. After the *dhyāna*, there would be a session of group-reading of scriptures, namely the *Gita*, the *Saptasati* and one of the Upanisads.

After the readings, the assembly would conduct itself as a *satsang* to listen to the discourses of the Mahatmas. Some time was reserved for the participants to put questions to Sri Ma. The morning session would conclude at 11.30 A. M.

The participants would disperse for a short while before assembling again for a simple midday meal.

After the meal a short time was kept free for personal jobs like the gathering of washed clothes etc, and also a little rest. At 2.55 P.M. a conch would be sounded again to recall them to the afternoon session of *dhyāna* of one hour from 3 to

4 P. M. After the *dhyāna*, there would be discourse on the *Gita* by one of the *Mahātmās*. This session would conclude with *kirtan* at 5.30 p. m.

About an hour and quarter was allotted for personal routines or evening *puja*. The assembly would gather again in the Hall for the evening session at 6.45 p. m. After a discourse on one of the Purānas or the Mahābhārata, the evening session would be devoted to the specific routine of evening *kirtan* sung in all Ashrams. The *kirtan* was always concluded at 8.45 p.m., for the 15 minutes of daily *maunam* which is observed wherever Sri Ma was as well as in all the Ashrams. After this would come the most coveted hour of the day, the session of *mātri-satsang*, that is conversation with Sri Ma.

Around 10 p. m. the participants would take their light evening meal and so would the day end. The midnight *dhyāna* session was left open for volunteers only and was not made compulsory. The assembled people agreed to this programme.

Much thought was given to the question of food during the *Saptāh*. Following Sri Ma's suggestion the rigourism regarding food was graded into three groups. A. B. and C. Participants would be asked to choose his or her own group. Group A would be required to keep a complete fast on the first and seventh day of the week. Sips of Ganga-water could be taken if required. On the second and sixth day, the midday meal would consist of a little portion of *Charu* (rice boiled in unsweetened milk over the *Yajna* fire in the Ashram every day) and "*paifal*." This name was given to a special concoction of pieces of fruit in sweetened milk. For the rest of

the day one could take only sips of water if required. On the 3rd day the single midday meal would consist of a dish of vegetables and a glass of milk. On the fourth day the meal was of plain rice cooked with big chunks of vegetables in it (*Brahma Khichri*). On the fifth day a meal of mixed cereals was allowed known as *khichri*.

For group B simple midday meals were allowed with a glass of milk in the evenings.

For Group C simple meals were allowed both times, that is midday and at night.

Strange as it may seem nearly all the participants opted for Group A.¹

Mahamahopadhyaya Gopinath Kaviraj wrote out a few lines of simple instructions regarding *dhyāna* and *japa* for all participants. These were read out to the assembly before the beginning of the *Saptāha*. Some of the points were : "*Dhyāna* is concentrating mentally on the Image of the Deity who is closest to your heart or He or She you worship. You think of the Deity as seated in the lotus of your heart. You may repeat the name (*japa*) silently while you meditate on the Form. This is the simplest way. In case someone has been initiated by a Guru then he or she may do *japa* of the *mantra* and meditate on the *mantra* (or Image) as well. If one feels confident then one may concentrate on the point between the eyebrows to focus on the *Shunya* (Nothingness). The *Shunya* is the culmination of all names and forms. But this is advisable for those who are initiated and have received guidance from their Guru. If anyone is not comfortable with Images or Names then he or she could meditate on *jyoti* (a glow) and take help from the

japa of the *Pranava* (OM).

"It is good to keep a count of *japa*. One should fix upon a number for one day. The minimum is 5000. One may use a *mālā* (rosary) for keeping count or simply use the finger method. In case the method of counting with fingers is not known then one may use time as a guide, that is, maybe one thousand in ten minutes.

"For *dhyana* and *japa* one should assume a comfortable sitting posture with a straight upright spine. One may adopt any yogic *āsana* one is used to, otherwise the ordinary easy way of sitting (*sukhāsana*) is alright.

"At the commencement of all *sādhana* one is to think of oneself as pure and free of all negative thoughts. One should be ready to participate in the general aura of spiritual upliftment."

Participants came from all strata of society. There were ruling princes, professors, judges, lawyers, barristers, doctors, businessmen, clerks, etc, and their wives. There were some students and other youngsters also. Many people were used to their morning cups of tea or coffee and substantial breakfasts. Smokers agreed to eschew the habit for the *Saptāha*. For most of them it was going to be a new experience in not only abstinence but in rising early and in learning to read the scriptures. But they were all full of confidence because of the presence of Sri Ma.

Sri Ma seemed to have the *kheyāla* for this enterprise. She participated in almost all the sessions from beginning to end. She herself stood in the Hall to see to the seating arrangements

for the *dhyāna* of one hour. As written above, squares of coir mats were placed in neat rows to accommodate all participants. Five minutes were given for everyone to come and occupy his or her allotted seat. Some brought their own *āsanas* to place over the coir mat. When everybody was seated, Bibhuda sang a few lines of a *mantra* in his deep and melodious voice which created a solemn atmosphere. Volunteers ensured that there would be no random visitors during the hour. Sri Ma herself sat still as a statue, an inspiration for all.

A few days before the commencement she had asked Renu to make four sketches of a *sādhaka*, that is a man desirous of spiritual felicity. The first was of a man dressed simply, performing *japa*, his features showing deep concentration. The second sketch depicted *dhyāna*. The *sādhaka* seemed totally absorbed in a world of his own, oblivious of his surroundings. For the third, Renu was asked to depict *vairāgya* (dispassion). The *sādhaka* was walking away and seemed to be putting himself beyond the reach of the world. The fourth sketch was of *sahaja-bhāva*, according to Renu, the most difficult to bring to life on paper. Sri Ma stated that this was not a state but an awareness of fulfilment, a self-sufficiency which was manifest as saying "Yes" to the world as being the perfect depiction of the perfect Being. Sri Ma herself had posed for all the sketches. Renu was overwhelmed to see the perfect rendering, of each of the four "moods" but alas ! could make inadequate drawings only of them, although Sri Ma was most patient and helpful.

Sri Ma, however, was pleased with the paintings. She had them framed and hung on the four inner pillars of the Satsang

Hall.²

Sri Ma visited the kitchen every day to see to the preparation of the food for the participants. She herself helped to create the item known as "*paifal*." Large containers were assembled for boiled and sweetened milk. Into these went small pieces of all types of fruit available at that time. Sri Ma added many kinds of nuts and raisins and some spices. She decorated the whole dish by sprinkling red-rose petals over it. It looked beautiful and tasted so good that participants declared the previous day's fast to be quite worthwhile.

The Samyam Saptah started with the elaborate functions of Jhoolan Purnima celebrated with *puja* and *kirtan* in the Ashram. The girls of the Kanyapeeth made a special night of it. With the pre-dawn kirtan, the routine of the Samyam Saptah was begun. Nearly two hundred participants took part in all sessions in a very disciplined manner. The Ashram took on the look of a quiet hermitage. There was no time for desultory chats or for loitering about or waiting in groups for Sri Ma's *darshana*. Sri Ma was visible to all for a great many hours. This in itself was a matter of fulfilment for many of the devotees who had launched themselves into a way of life which was totally unfamiliar. All those who were used to tea and breakfast were initiated into a rigourism unthinkable had they been at home. Impossible things become possible in Sri Ma's gracious presence.

On the second day after the morning session of *dhyāna*. Sri Ma broke the silence by humming very softly a bewitching tune. After a few minutes a few words could be made out by all the listeners :

hey pitah, hey hita hey brahmatattvam

hey pitah, hey hita hey brahmabhutam

hey pitah, hey hita hey brahmasvarupam

Sri Ma looked at Bibhu Brahmachari who was sitting in front of her. He understood her *kheyāla* and made an effort to sing along with her.

Later Sri Ma said that she had "seen" a young boy with curly dark hair and dressed in white clothes sitting near her. He had sung these words which she had repeated aloud after the session of the *dhyāna*. The tune somehow was difficult and nobody but Bibhu Brahmachari could repeat it after her exactly. Sri Ma incorporated this item to follow all sessions of *dhyāna* for the Saptaha. Each hour of meditation in the morning and afternoon would be concluded by the melodious voice of Bibhu murmuring tunefully the ethereal sounds of this prayer. Much later Sri Ma named a few others who could sing it in Bibhu's absence and only during the Samyam Saptaha. These were Pushpa and Chhabi Banerji.

Sri Shankar Bharatiji -

Sri Shankar Bharatiji was a very well-known scholar-ascetic of Varanasi. His vast knowledge of the *Shāstras* had earned him great renown amongst the cognoscenti. He was looked upon as the reincarnation of Adi Sankaracharya. He lived very simply in the Temple precincts of Lalita Devi on Lalita Ghat. He was a recluse. His disciples knew him to be so much in tune with the Goddess Lalita (his adored Deity) that he never undertook any activity unless he was under divine directions to do so.

One day during the Samyam Saptaha this young ascetic came to the Ashram while *satsang* was going on in the Hall. He stood on the steps leading down to the Hall for a few minutes looking at Sri Ma and then quietly went away. Nobody but Sri Ma took note of this visit, neither had anybody recognized him. This was the beginning of a very close and charming relationship. Shankar Bharatiji had been directed by his *Ista* to visit Sri Ma as Her own living personification. Whenever Sri Ma came to Varanasi Shankar Bharatiji visited her once or twice. As these visits were always late at night only a few close companions were aware of this new devotee. Sri Ma came to know that Shankar Bharatiji lived like a mendicant. His meals consisted of whatever was given in charity and such vegetables as could be gathered after a vegetable market had closed down, that is, perhaps some discarded potatoes or tomatoes or cabbage leaves etc. Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to provide a simple but nourishing meal to the recluse every day. Shankar Bharatiji accepted this *prasāda* as if it were being provided by the Goddess Herself. His disciples also breathed a sigh of relief because he often suffered badly from stomach ache due no doubt to the wrong type of food intake. The supply of this meal was maintained even if Sri Ma was not in Varanasi.

The week terminated with *puja* and *kirtan* throughout the last night which coincided with Janmastami. The day after Janmashtami is known as the day of Nandotsava that is a day of feasting and dancing to celebrate the birth of Krishna. The first Samyam Saptaha, therefore, saw a triumphant conclusion to the week of austerity.

All participants seemed to have gained in health and an

immense air of achievement prevailed.

The success of this venture inspired the devotees to arrange for a second session at Vindhyachal from December 29, 1952 to January 8, 1953. The hill-top Ashram became a hermitage of ancient times. The grandeur of its wide open spaces was naturally conducive to quietude. The mind easily became still. Nature itself imparted its peace to those who were striving to attain it.

The second Samyam Saptah remained special because in later years it became an yearly programme to be observed in November. Kolkata had the privilege of holding the Saptah in November, 1953 and Mumbai in 1954. In later years one or two special sessions were organised by Mahatmas who were interested in it. It became the most well-attended and the most eagerly awaited programme of the year. This week saw the carrying out of Sri Ma's vani :

"To talk of God alone is worthwhile

All else is pain and in vain."

For one week the devotees lived like ascetics engaged in *sāadhanā* or in constant God-remembrance. Sri Ma said, "The aim of *sāadhanā* is to know oneself, to realize oneself." The ritual of a day of *samyam* or a week of *samyam* should not become an end in itself. The idea should be that it would somehow or other become a way of life. To spend the maximum time of everyday in God-remembrance by *japa*, *dhyāna*, the reading of scriptures or attending a *satsang*. There is no need to renounce or relinquish anything. Whatever is required will happen by itself. One does not need to pull at

leaves or flowers to make them sprout or bloom. If you water the roots consistently and faithfully the leaves and blossoms will reveal themselves spontaneously. Faith and effort are required of you. The rest will follow."

Sri Ma's Second Visit to South India

Haribabaji was keen to see the temples of South India. He wished to go on this pilgrimage in the company of Sri Ma. Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to abide by his wishes. Sri Ma's own mode of travel was unstructured and more of the nature of an aimless wandering rather than a motivated journey. This time, because Haribabaji and Avadhoptji would be travelling with her, she acquiesced in the elaborate programmes which were chalked out by her capable devotees. Kantibhai Munshaw and Thakurbhai of Ahmedabad undertook the management of the first and concluding parts of the pilgrimage.

Ms Talyarkhan, a very prestigious lady of the South and a disciple of Sri Ramana Maharshi had become a close devotee of Sri Ma. She had said that if ever Sri Ma came to the South she would be happy to make all arrangements for her. When she was informed of the projected visit, she was delighted and made very competent arrangements for the reception of Sri Ma's party at all major Temples and places of pilgrimages. This journey, therefore, was of a different kind than the usual mode of procedure adopted by Sri Ma.

An account of this pilgrimage is taken from Didi's journals. In the next Chapter, we shall translate from Didi's journals. Didi's accounts are always very lucid and realistic. We hope the readers would get a flavour of Sri Ma's way of being in such unusual surroundings. It must be remembered,

however, that she was always perfectly at home, wherever she was.

Sri Ma was accompanied by Haribabaji, a few of his disciples and Avadhootji. From the Ashram came Didi, Swami Paramanandaji, Kusum Brahmachari, Bibhu Brahmachari and Buni. A cook Shasthi Maharaj accompanied them as the party was so large. Didi was then free to cook small and simple meals for Sri Ma.

CHAPTER TEN

On Pilgrimage to South India

[From the Diary of Didi Gurupriya]

"Sri Ma Anandamayi has come to the South to visit Herself in all the Temples!"

-Mrs. Feroza Talyarkhan

Puri : October 20, 1952

Today we started on our pilgrimage to the holy sites of South India. Sri Ma has undertaken this journey because the Mahatmas wished for it. Haribabaji wanted to visit the Temples of South India and requested Sri Ma to accompany him. Many years ago Sri Ma and Bholanathji had travelled to South India accompanied by my father, one or two others, and myself. At that time we had followed in Sri Ma's erratic footsteps taking things as they came. This time it is a different affair. A careful itinerary has been drawn up. Many people have expressed their desire to be of service to Sri Ma on her journey. Chief among these is Mrs. Talyarkhan, a disciple of Maharshi Raman. She has become very attached to Sri Ma. She had told us that if Sri Ma ever came to the South Mrs Talyarkhan should be given the privilege of receiving her and making travel arrangements for her. So Mrs Talyarkhan has been informed about Sri Ma's programme. Kantibhai Munshaw of Ahmedabad has also taken charge of many responsibilities regarding stay and transport. So this pilgrimage is going to be of a different order from the previous

one.

We are a big party. Mahatma Haribabaji is with us with a few of his own disciples. Krishnananda Avadhootji has decided to accompany us. From our Ashram there is Paramananda, Bibhu, Kusum, Kamalakanta, Buni and myself. Shashthi Thakur is also with us in order to help with the cooking for such a large party.

Haribabaji is a dedicated Vaishnava. He is ready to adore at all temples of God so his enthusiasm for this journey is understandable. But Avadhootji is a strict Vedantist, scrupulously following the tenets of a life of renunciation. He however is very attached to Sri Ma, so perhaps he is coming along just to be with her, like any of us!

Waltair, 21st October :

Arriving at Waltair we found a reception committee awaiting us at the station. We were driven to a spacious *dharamshala* in the city. Kantibhai Munshaw has made all arrangements for Sri Ma's reception and accommodation. Since she is travelling with the Mahatmas she abides by all these arrangements otherwise it is not her way to be bound down by such perfect management. We caught a glimpse of her *kheyāla* for the unusual at Waltair. While the rest of us were taking stock of our surroundings and settling in, Sri Ma quietly went out of the *dharamshala*, beckoning to Shashadhar Bhattacharya from Kolkata, the only non-ashramite of our group. She said to him. "Let us go into the city". They took a rickshaw and wandered around for some time while the chauffeur-driven car remained parked at the *dharamshala*.

Sri Ma and her companion came to a place called Shanti Ashram. The residents gathered round her and made her welcome. After some conversation the local people were overjoyed to realise that they were confronting Sri Ma Anandamayi. In great excitement they told the visitors that Shanti Ashram had been chosen for her reception in Waltair at first; it had been given up in favour of the more spacious *dharamshala*. They had been so disappointed that they had lost the opportunity of getting Sri Ma's *darshana*. Now Sri Ma herself had graciously fulfilled their yearnings!.

From Shanti Ashram Sri Ma proceeded to another part of the city. They arrived at a settlement of fishermen. The fishermen were astounded to see such a radiant vision in their humble surroundings. Language was a barrier. Sri Ma overcame this difficulty by singing a *kirtan* in her soft and melodious voice. The Names of the Lord sung musically is understood by all people. The fishermen and their families joined in. Sri Ma invited them to visit her at the *dharamshala* when they expressed disappointment at her short visit. They promised to come after the day's work was over.

Shashadhar told us of this adventure. We now understood why Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* for amassing a lot of sweets and fruits. We were not too surprised to see a crowd of fishermen accompanied by their families at the close of the day. Amidst a scene of great joyousness Sri Ma distributed fruits and sweets to her visitors. Truly Sri Ma belongs to all people, everywhere. Only we in our short sightedness think we know her best.

Vejwada, 23rd October :

At Vejewada we saw many old friends from Ahmedabad.

Kundanaben, Leelaben and others of their family received us at the station and escorted us to the house where faultless arrangements had been made for Sri Ma and the Mahatmas.

Vejwada, 24th October :

Early in the morning the Mahatmas went for a bath in the holy river Krishna. Haribabaji follows a strict routine regarding daily *satsang*. In the morning he reads from some holy book for a while; then there is a question and answer session. In the evenings he and his companions sing a very vigorous *kirtan*. It is astonishing to see the quiet old man so transformed as to beat on a special gong rhythmically for the entire duration. It is concluded at 8:45 PM for the 15 minutes, *maunam* (silence), which is observed by the whole congregation. After this comes the most waited for time for all visitors, that is, a dialogue with Sri Ma. Sri Ma answers questions from the audience, in her own inimitable style which is quick to the point and wholly satisfying. She lightens the mood of a congregation by her humour. The religious way of life seems pleasant and not formidable. We have seen large crowds wait for long hours just to hear her speak to them even for a few minutes.

The morning *satsang* arranged in a Temple was surprisingly well attended. We are unknown in this part of the country or so we had thought. In the evening we drove to Guntur, a distance of 20 miles. We are to spend a couple of days at a beautiful ashram called Ramakshetra. It is situated near a lake and consists of several huts for the ascetics who lead quiet lives of *sādhana*. The residents were very hospitable. They seemed overwhelmed by the presence of Mahatmas and Sri Ma. We saw three throne-like chairs near

the gate; the reception committee was ready with garlands and other items of ceremonial welcome for the honoured guests. Sri Ma and Haribabaji sat on the chairs but Avadhootji wandered away. He is rather impatient with all such ceremonies and withdraws to the background whenever possible.

Although the local people do not understand Hindi, they seemed pleased just to see their guests. We were impressed with the quality of service. We were given to understand that Guntur had been suffering from the effects of a severe drought. Just before Sri Ma's visit ample rains had come and given relief to the people. They believed that this was due to Sri Ma's *kripā*.

25th October :

Today we visited Amaravati about 20 miles from Ramakshetra. It is a holy site where we saw many Temples dedicated to various Images of the Lord. The river Krishna flows near the Ashram. The atmosphere is very peaceful. The priests are very courteous and ready to help the visitors. I was a little saddened to think that in our part of the country the priests are very demanding and many pilgrims are put off by their noisy importunities.

On our way back our motorcade stopped at the site of one of Emperor Ashoka's monuments with its inscription declaring tolerance for all religions.

26th October :

Today we visited the Temple of Narasimhadeva atop the hill, Mangalagiri, climbing nearly 400 steps. A sedan chair

had been made ready for Sri Ma, but she elected to climb to the top alongside all of us. We were given to understand that Gauranga Mahaprabhu had visited this remote site on his pilgrimage to the South. We were shown a relic of those days said to be the footprint of Mahaprabhu. Haribaba was very pleased with this visit. He worships Lord Gauranga as his *Ista-devatā* and is very happy to come across any signs or legends preserved in local lore about the travels of the great Vaishnava teacher of the 15th Century.

The Ashram people had arranged for a *satsang* but the language was an unsurmountable barrier. The crowd however seemed content to sit quietly and gaze upon Sri Ma's radiant countenance. In such situations it is borne out clearly that Sri Ma's *darshana* is itself a fulfilling experience.

27th October :

We arrived in Madras and were amazed to see the arrangements for Sri Ma's reception. Mrs. Talyarkhan was at the forefront of a group of people who greeted Sri Ma and made her welcome. She was covered in garlands of red fragrant roses. From the station we came to the city where a spacious house had been reserved for us. A small hut-like structure was erected in the large courtyard separately for Sri Ma. As soon as she arrived at the tastefully decorated courtyard a team of ten Brahmins uttered verses of benediction and greetings from the Vedas in a chorus. Sanskrit verses pronounced in sonorous tones and in unison is always awe-inspiring. The Brahmins then presented a silver vessel full to the brim with water (*purna ghata*) to Sri Ma who touched it lightly.

After this ceremonial reception Mrs. Talyarkhan introduced other members of the group. One of them was Prof. T. M. P. Mahadevan, a scholar of international reputation. We were told that he had written an article on Sri Ma in the previous issue of Sunday Times, a prestigious paper of Madras. This explained the large crowd of people who had assembled to have *darshan* of Sri Ma. Mrs. Talyarkhan said we would stay here for a few days in order to visit all the nearby places of pilgrimage. Kantibhai Munshaw has sent a large *Kaisercar* for Sri Ma, so that she can travel in comfort.

This morning we were first taken to the famous temple of Kapāleshwar in the middle of the town. A visit to this beautiful Temple marks the beginning of the pilgrimage. Next we visited the temple of Venkateshwara. Here the image is of Lord Vishnu. The images are beautifully decorated. The Temples are massive and treasure houses of architectural gems.

In the evening Sri Ma and the Mahatmas were escorted to the house of Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer. All of us had of course heard of this well-known scholar and statesman and now were pleased to see him in person. He had specially made requests that Sri Ma should visit his house. We saw that very elaborate arrangements for Sri Ma's reception had been made. Sir Aiyer and his family seemed to be very devout. While travelling with Sri Ma we get the opportunity to come close to many eminent personalities of our country. I also realise that scholars, savants and other highly placed persons seem to recognise Sri Ma for what she is and pay homage to her unreservedly.

From Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer's house we came to the

Ramakrishna Math. The President Sri Shuddhasattwanandaji received Sri Ma and her guests with great kindness. When some refreshments were brought forward he himself wanted to feed Sri Ma a few pieces of fruits, which he did with great care and circumspection.

29th October :

Early in the morning we started for Conjeevaram a distance of 60 miles. Mrs Talyarkhan has arranged for cars. Sri Ma has her own spacious car now.

The Temple is magnificent. The gateway itself is gigantic and decorated and carved with figures and symbols, all very beautiful and altogether overwhelming. The interior, however, is dark as they do not allow electricity within the Temple. It is lighted by lamps only. The inner sanctum is so dimly lighted that it is difficult to see the *Siva lingam*. The priests, however, kindly enkindled braziers of camphor so that we were able to have *darshana* of the presiding Deity of the Temple.

It is obvious that the visit has been publicised because there is a crowd waiting for Sri Ma wherever she goes. The language barrier is total but somehow this does not seem to bother the people eagerly awaiting Sri Ma's arrival. They are happy to see her and obviously are able to communicate at some level or other. The sight of Sri Ma's beautiful and effulgent personality is enough as an experience of fulfilment.

We went around on a circumambulation around the main Temple. We saw many smaller temples. One special Siva lingam was indicated as of special significance. It is believed that Sri Rama founded this Image. Sri Ma lightly embraced the image a little caressingly. We all made our *pranams*.

Next we saw the temple of Kamakshi Devi. The Goddess is the presiding deity of the region. This Image is truly beautiful and we were impressed by the architectural splendour of the temple. We saw a magnificent garland of 108 gems glowing on the Image.

Mrs Talyarkhan then took us to see the famous Temple of Visnu at Visnukanchi. According to legend, Brahma the creator had performed a great *yajna* at this place. God had appeared out of the sacrificial fire in answer to Brahma's prayers. He had graciously agreed to abide on earth as this Image. The Image was so covered with jewels that it seemed to radiate effulgence. We were told that the great saint and philosopher Yamunacharya (the teacher of Sri Ramanujacharya) used to visit the Temple everyday to have *darshana*. It was his practice to wield a fan near the Deity to serve Him. It is believed that the savant and the Deity talked to each other. The priests showed us the fan, which is preserved in the Temple with loving care.

We were initiated into the significance of the outer and inner Image of this Temple. The large Image is the outer Form of the real Image of Varadaraja (Visnu), which is installed beyond it at a higher level. There are 25 steps to the inner sanctum, each symbolising one syllable of the sacred *Gayatri Mantra*. We witnessed a magnificent *puja* and *arati* in this place. It is truly an overwhelming experience to participate so closely in the living tradition of worship in these splendid Temples. We also had *darshana* of the very beautiful Image of Lakshmi in a nearby Temple.

We then proceeded to visit the house as well as the birthplace of Sri Ramanujacharya, the great Vaishnava

teacher of the South. He is the propagator of the *Visistādvaita* philosophy that rivals the monistic philosophy of Sri Sankaracharya. We found a very beautiful temple here also.

Evidently Mrs. Talyarkhan has contacted Government officials as well as all the Temple Management committees about Sri Ma's visit. She is received everywhere with great respect and honour. Every sanctum is opened to her. The Deities are decked especially for Sri Ma's *darshana*. The priests receive her with full ceremonial fanfare. I know it is all the same to Sri Ma, whether she is treated in this fashion or if she had passed through as once before unrecognised but free to travel in accordance with her *kheyāla*. But I must acknowledge that all of her attendants are finding this well organised mode of travel very pleasing and relaxing.

In the evening we went to visit the local Theosophical Society at Adyar. It has a famous library containing rare books and manuscripts of great value. Within the building we saw statues of Colonel Olcott, Madame Blavatsky and Mrs Annie Besant. The precincts are spacious and very well maintained.

We were also taken to visit the site of the cremation of Mrs Annie Besant's body on the banks of the river Adyar. We all felt the atmosphere to be serene and elevating. We went on to the seashore. There Sri Ma strolled around quietly for a while. Mrs. Talyarkhan had thoughtfully not informed anyone about Sri Ma's visit, so this evening she could walk about freely in comparative seclusion.

30th October :

Today we visited the Gaudiya Math. The Vaishnava

devotees of Sri Gauranga Mahaprabhu occupy this monastery. Haribaba is a devout follower, so he was especially pleased to visit this Ashram and its Temple. The quiet and beautiful surroundings were very pleasing to all of us.

Mrs. Talyarkhan told us that the eminent judge Sri Rama Rao had especially invited Sri Ma to his residence. He is a devotee of Maharshi Ramana so is well known to Mrs Talyarkhan. In this house Sri Ma was made welcome in the traditional style. Brahmins recited Vedic *mantras* of benediction and greetings in a chorus. We seem to be nearer to the heart of our tradition in the South. This profound display of orthodox customs is truly worthy of Sri Ma. I am sure Sri Ma is receiving as much adoration in the South as she does in the North by differently oriented clamorous crowds.

31st October :

Today we visited Mahabalipuram (55 miles) and Pakshitirtha (45 miles). First we came to Mahabalipuram. It is an awe-inspiring sight. The monumental carvings seen on solid rocks are breathtaking in their majesty and fine execution. It is said that previously there were seven temples here, now we saw only one. We stood in awe-struck wonder in front of the massive sculpture depicting the slaying of the demon-king Mahisha by the Goddess Durga. I had a vague impression that this image was peculiar to Bengal but I now saw that Mahishasuramardini belongs to the South as well. We saw the five chariots of the five Pandavas. They are carved out of single rocks and embellished with symbols and figurines. The concept and the execution held us all in thrall for sometime. All this was done nearly fifteen hundred years ago.

From Mahabalipuram we went to Pakshitirtham. It is believed that two ancient rishis (seers) abide here in the guise of two large birds. At noon every day they become visible to the priest who is ready with the *bhoga* (food) for them. They accept the food then fly away. The mountainous region has a very peaceful atmosphere attracting pilgrims from far and near. We returned to Madras at the end of the day.

1st November :

There is change in our programme today. The Mahatmas followed the itinerary by going on to Kalahasti, Venkateshwara and Balaji. It is a tour of more than 100 miles and will easily take a whole day. Mrs. Talyarkhan told us that the citizens of Madras were rather disappointed because they saw practically nothing of Sri Ma. So she had arranged for a *satsang* where Sri Ma would sit with the people and hold conversation with them.

The *Satsang* was very well attended.

One person asked her: How can one attain God?

Sri Ma: By shedding profuse tears for Him!

Question : But it I am not able to do so because I am not the type?

Sri Ma : Then keep company with those who pine for and cry for God!

There was spontaneous laughter at Sri Ma's prompt rejoinders in which she herself joined in. She said again, "Look, if you yearn genuinely for His *kripā* (grace) that itself will become the means for attaining the goal" (*kyā upāya*

karne se hi upāya ho jāyega) The Prayer : 'What is the way? What is the way?' itself becomes the way!"

There were other questions and answers. Sri Ma spoke in her inimitable style of going straight to the core of a problem. Although an interpreter was necessary as the people did not understand Hindi, they were so happy that another assembly was arranged for the evening also.

2nd November :

After a day with the people of the town we resumed our visits to temples. We saw the Temple of Parthasarathi (the charioteer of Arjuna) today. Truly the South is a treasure house of beautiful architecture on a massive scale.

In the evening Sri Ma sat in a *satsang* again so that the people could talk to her. We also visited a well-known temple dedicated to *Kārtikeya*. As soon as Sri Ma arrived at the gate, an orchestra of many instruments was struck up. While the priests pronounced mantras of benediction, a well-caparisoned elephant came up carrying a garland of flowers in his upraised trunk. He put this garland around Haribaba's neck very expertly. When he advanced towards Sri Ma she stretched out her hand and took the garland in it. Sri Ma and her guests are treated in this very special way at every Temple door because the Minister Sri Vishwanath Rao has indicated to all the temple authorities that she is to be given the highest honour everywhere. He himself came to have her *darshana* and welcomed her to the South.

3rd November :

We visited the Ashram of Sri Aurobindo at Pondicherry

today (125 Miles). We were accommodated at a spacious Guest House near the seashore. Many of the residents of the Ashram are known to us. Mukundbhai's nephew Satubhai, "Bengal dada", Swami Umeshanandji and Dilip Kumar Roy came to visit Sri Ma. We were given to understand that very strict discipline was observed in the Ashram regarding time schedules. Everything was done according to rule and time. We were escorted to the *Samādhi* of Sri Aurobindo at 11 O'clock. We sat near the *samādhi* with other visitors. The *samādhi* was decorated with flowers. A large tree seemed to spread a green canopy over the *samādhi*. The atmosphere was solemn and peaceful.

The Mahatmas had asked for an audience with the Mother. We were guided to a room inside the Ashram. We saw the Mother standing quietly in what used to be Sri Aurobindo's sitting room. Sri Ma went up to her and greeted her. We saw the Mother look fixedly at Sri Ma for a long time. Sri Ma returned her glance also unblinkingly, but in her own natural and relaxed style. We all stood still looking at both of them. Suddenly the Mother blinked her eyes and gave two flowers and two chocolates in Sri Ma's hands. Sri Ma retained one flower and one sweet and gave back the other to the Mother. She in turn detached a few petals from the rose and gave them back to Sri Ma. Sri Ma then passed them on to me as I was standing next to her. I do not know what could be the meaning of this exchange of flowers and sweets.

The audience was over. We came away and returned to the Guest House. In the evening we participated in the activities of the Ashram as other guests. We watched a game of tennis in which the Mother was playing with other

residents of the Ashram. We also watched a physical fitness class for children. After the class was over, the Mother distributed some dry fruits to the children. Sri Ma who was sitting near her said, "Tell Mother that I am the smallest of these children". The Mother smiled and murmured in English "Forever the child!"

After we had come away from Pondicherry we came to know that many people had wanted to sit with Sri Ma for a while and were disappointed that she left so soon. But as nobody had suggested anything to the contrary while we were there we naturally had followed the schedule of the Ashram.

4th November :

From Pondicherry we started on our pilgrimage to the famous temple of Chidambaram (75 Miles). There are five special Images of Siva in the South depicting the five elements, namely, earth, water, air, fire and space. The *Kshitimurti* (Earth-Image) is in the temple of Sivakanchi. The *Apmurti* (Water-Image) is in the Temple at Jambukeshwara. The *Marutinurti* (Wind-Image) is in Kalahasti. We will see the Energy/Fire Image (*Tejasmurti*) at Arunachalam and here at Chidambaram we had *darshana* of Vyomamurti (Space-Image). *Chit* means pure consciousness and *ambara* is sky or space. After the *tāndava*-dance (dance of annihilation) Siva had withdrawn into the unmanifest pure consciousness; hence the Temple's name, Chidambaram.

The Temple is on a grand scale surrounded by spacious galleries. As in other temples it is fully decorated with artistic carvings and sculptures in relief. In the dance hall there are 108 carved female forms depicting the different poses of

dance as described in the classical treatise of dance, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharat Muni. The stone figurines are beautiful. The splendour of the Temple is truly awe-inspiring. The main Image of Nataraja-Siva of course is made familiar by replicas all over the country but the original is incomparably majestic. There is also a very large Image of Visnu in one of the side rooms of the Temple. We see everywhere this togetherness of the Vaishnavite and Saivite traditions.

From Chidambaram we proceeded to the Ashram of Maharshi Ramana at Arunachalam. We were informed later that a big reception party with a band and elephants was awaiting Sri Ma on the main approach to the Ashram, but our driver brought us right in evidently by a minor road. The residents who were awaiting Sri Ma's arrival were delighted to receive her quietly in a more approachable manner.

The Ashram is situated at the foothills of the holy mountain Arunachalam. Sri Ma immediately went to the *samadhi* of the great sage. Mrs. Talyarkhan then took us to see the place where he sat usually, his room where he had lived for nearly 22 years and also the room where he had attained *Nirvāṇa*.

We are accommodated in a new Guesthouse built for the Ashram by the Raja of Morvi. Although no one spoke our language we felt that we were among well-known friends. I was told that the residents also felt a similar sense of familiarity. In Sri Ma they seem to have recognised their own beloved Gurudeva. Some had even said to Mrs. Talyarkhan that it was as if the Maharshi was again in residence.

The *satsang* in the evening was very well attended. The

people, visitors as well as the residents crowded round Sri Ma and seemed to be happy and in festive mood. Sri Ma sang a *kirtan*, "hey bhagavān, (Oh Lord) hey bbagavān" for some time. Since Ramana Maharshi is known as *Bhagavān* in these parts, the *kirtan* was especially touching and pleasing to the devotees of the Sage.

5th November :

We are in the Ashram. We were shown a number of small cottages donated by Sri Arabinda Basu, a well-known devotee, for the purpose of providing secluded rooms for those who wished to practice *sādhana*. Sri Ma expressed a *kheyāla* for visiting this gentleman but he was away from home. Later he came to Sri Ma and sat with her for a while. There were other dignitaries of the town as well as ascetics who expressed their great happiness with Sri Ma's visit. One man said. "Bhagavan is not visible to us any more but Ma's presence is equally fulfilling".

6th November :

They are planning to build a hall over the *samādhi* mandir. Today there was a ceremony for laying the foundation stone. All the committee members came to invite Sri Ma to this ceremony and asked her to touch the foundation stone. They are all very happy to have Sri Ma staying in the Ashram. Although we cannot speak their language, this seems not to matter at all. We seem to understand each other quite well.

We went to see the famous temple where the Maharshi had practised his *sādhana* for many years. It is rich in architectural beauties. The courtyard has one thousand pillars. The corner of the temple hallowed by the Sage's *tapasyā* is preserved specially by the authorities. A photograph of Maharshi Ramana is placed here to mark the spot. We also visited a Devi Mandir.

We were told that the credit for preserving these holy places related to the memory of the Sage belonged mostly to Mrs. Talyarkhan. Her dedicated work had so impressed the temple priests that they had permitted her entry everywhere although being a Parsi lady she belonged to an alien religion. Sri Rajagopalachari himself had escorted her to all the inner sanctums of the Temples. She is a truly remarkable person. We saw that she was much respected everywhere as an upholder of the ancient tradition. Religions after all depend so much on the magnanimity of the people who practise them.

7th November :

Today we resumed our pilgrimage. We went to Kumbhakonan via Tanjore. Trichinapalli is 118 miles from Arunachalam. Another 57 miles were added as we made a detour via Tanjore. At Kumbhakonan we were greeted by Chinubhai (from Ahmedabad). He had arranged for our stay in an ashram on the bank of the river Kaveri. The surroundings are quiet and peaceful.

This time when Sri Ma had resided at the Arunachalam Ashram many people from Madras had become regular visitors and also close and devoted to her. One Mrs. Kalapakkam became especially attached to Sri Ma. She would sing beautifully on her visits, as she was a very good musician. One of the songs (in Hindi) was very touching. Sri Ma herself joined in and added her inimitable sweet voice to Mrs. Kalapakkam's much to the lady's delight. We noted down the words; (*hey jagatrātā etc.*) The only musician with us was Bibhu, who learnt the song and the tune and subsequently it became a favourite song in our Ashrams as well.

The Mahatmas in our party go to visit all the places and

temples on the itinerary of pilgrims. Sri Ma sometimes stays back so that the people may have a little of her company. In the evening we participated in the *satsang* as usual.

8th November:

Today we visited many famous Temples beginning with Kumbheshwaram. In the evening we paid a visit to Mayavaram (20 miles). The entire area is replete with these architectural marvels paying tribute to the piety and devotion of the Kings of the South.

9th November :

Early in the morning we started on the pilgrimage to Sri Rangam (Trichinapalli). We broke our journey at the Samadhi Mandir of Tyagaraja, the renowned poet-saint of South India. A silver image of the great musician is installed here. It is believed that Tyagaraja had achieved *darshana* of God in the form of Sri Rama.

Next we stopped at the spectacular Siva Temple of Tanjore. The image of Nandi at the entrance is 12 feet high. We have nowhere seen a Nandi of this huge size. The *Sivalingam* is also proportionately big and very majestic. We were all very impressed by the splendour of the Temple. Everything is on a grand scale to be in keeping with the size of the presiding Deity. Pilgrims can just look around themselves in awe-struck silence.

At midmorning we arrived at the gorgeous temple of Sri Rangam, the pride of South India. Mrs. Talyarkhan at the head of a large reception party received us at the entrance. After the usual ceremonies of welcome Sri Ma's car was allowed to go through many magnificent portals toward the inner sanctum. Sri Ma arrived at the main Temple just at

the time of the daily promenading of the mobile replica of the Deity. He is taken around the corridors on a palanquin borne aloft by a team of Brahmins. These privileged persons first go through a round of purification. They are then commissioned (as it were) for this holy service by the priests. We, standing at a vantage point, witnessed these ceremonies being performed with circumspection. The replica image is so covered with jewels and gold ornaments that He seems to be emitting an aura of light. A party of musicians accompany the procession.

It occurred to me that perhaps this common ritual in all major temples that we saw has been propagated for the benefit of those pilgrims who may not enter the inner sanctum. In any case since there are no electric bulbs inside the temples, the visibility is much dimmed. For the *darshana* of the Deity, the priests hold up braziers of burning camphor. Sri Rangam is a massive image of Narayana lying on His couch formed by the coils of *Ananta*. The flickering flames of the camphor torches reflected lights from a thousand jewels decorating the image. We stood bemused and spellbound.

The minister himself had come to the Temple to escort Sri Ma to the various locations of special importance. We saw the image of Garuda in a nearby shrine. The statue was big and beautiful, a fit *vāhana* for the great God. In these temples the mythic figures which are so familiar with us all become living personalities. There are no such temples in our part of the country, at least not now.

Mrs Talyarkhan had arranged for the evening *satsang* in the Temple precincts. Since our visit to Arunachalam we had been accompanied by a few of the residents. We recognised Topaswami, who was very constantly in Sri Ma's entourage. He had said to our Bibhu brahmachari that he felt Bhagavan

(Maharshi Ramana) had reappeared for him in the form of Sri Ma. We had also felt very much at home in Arunachalam.

When Sri Ma arrived for the *satsang* many important people of the town greeted her. A high platform had been put up so that the mammoth crowd could see her from a distance. I had never before seen such a gathering sitting in such an orderly fashion. I wish the unruly crowds of Kolkata and Dhaka could see how a disciplined gathering was awaiting Sri Ma's *darshana*. Moreover they did not break ranks and rush forward as soon as she appeared. It was all very agreeable but there could not be any direct dialogues with Sri Ma. She however sang *Kirtan* for them. The congregation joined in delightedly. *Kirtan* is truly a language, which overcomes many barriers.

10th November :

We went to visit a Ganesh Temple on top of a hill. Mrs. Talyarkhan had arranged for a sedan chair for Sri Ma but Sri Ma climbed the 300 steps along with us. We were told the legends regarding these temples. When Sri Rama was returning to Ayodhya from Lanka on the completion of his term of exile, Vibhishana and some others accompanied him. On arrival at this almost midway point Sri Rama asked Vibhishana to return to Lanka to take up the reins of governance. Vibhishana was very dejected at the prospect of parting from Sri Rama. Sri Rama then bestowed the Image of Sri Rangam to him saying "I shall remain with you in this Form. Carry it to Lanka. Do not put it down anywhere, otherwise I shall remain there permanently" Vibhishana started on the return journey. He was met by an old Brahmin who showed a great interest in the Image he was carrying. Vibhishana asked him to hold the Image for sometime while

he went aside for a while. On returning to claim his Image he found that the Brahmin had put it down on the ground. He was so enraged that he lifted his arm and hit the Brahmin severely. The Brahmin then revealed himself as the Deity Ganesha, who had actually manipulated that Sri Rangam should not go out of the country. Vibhishana was contrite. As a mark of his repentance he established Sri Rangam where He had been put down by Ganesha and also a Temple to Ganesha himself on the hill.

Our tradition is such a mixture of myths, legends and historical facts that nobody cares to separate the strands. What is important is that it survives as a living force sustaining the devotional spirit of generations. The focussing of the mind on a worthwhile horizon is helped by such pilgrimages. I am becoming sure of this as I see the sites and listen to these accounts.

This morning we visited the Temple of Jambukeshwara. This Image represents the water-form (*apsvarupa*, one of the five elements) of Siva. There are four great pillars here which are especially spectacular. We are all fairly impressed by the unusual magnificence of the architecture.

The two religious sects *Vaishnavism* and *Saivism* are very distinct in South India. Both are powerful traditions. There is a kind of decorum regarding pilgrimages to Temples. The *Vaishnavite* begins and ends his day by visits to the Temples of Vishnu. In between he will pay his homage to all other deities including Siva. The *Saivaite* does it the opposite way, namely beginning and ending with *darshana* of Siva. I have heard Sri Ma say that it is good to belong to a distinct brotherhood (*sampradāya*). This lends cohesion and direction

to a man's *sāadhanā*. The loyalty to one's own *istadevatā* (the Image dear to one's heart) need not stop one from paying respects to other Forms. The aim of *sāadhanā* is to realize the truth of one pervasive Reality which manifests Itself as Many.

Our next destination is Rameshwaram

11th November :

We arrived this morning at Pamvan Junction by train and changed over to the smaller gauge line for Rameshwaram. This train journey was a strange experience. The ocean can be seen from the windows of the compartment on either side. It feels as if one is in a small fast moving ship. The railway track is narrow and no land is visible near it. The vast expanse of the ocean meets the horizon. The Indian Ocean mingles with the Bay of Bengal on one side and the Arabian Sea on the other. The ocean in quiet here, not turbulent like the sea shore of Puri.

At Rameshwaram station we were met by Chinubhai, some local officials and the Temple Priest. We were accommodated at the new guest house built by the Raja of Ramnad. The manager of the Temple said he would come before noon to escort Sri Ma and the Mahatmas to the Temple.

The guest house is very spacious. Sri Ma in an explorative mood found her way up to the terrace. She saw a sheltered corner at one end and said she would take her rest there while we prepared the rooms for settling in. After a while Haribabaji sent a message saying that he would prefer to visit the Temple

in the evening rather than at noon. As it was almost time I went to the terrace to inform Sri Ma about this change in programme. She sat up and said, "But I have just promised someone that I shall be at the Temple at noon! I have to go now. Let Baba (Haribaba) not be inconvenienced. He can go later in the evening."

Since Sri Ma had been quite alone all this while I surmised that this "promise to someone" had been given on a different plane other than our physical one. I sent Sri Ma's message to the Mahatmas. Everyone knew that Sri Ma always followed Haribabaji's convenience in these matters and were surprised at this *kheyāla* to the contrary. Avadhootji came at once to join Sri Ma. Later on Haribabaji also came over to the Temple.

The Temple of Rameshwaram is also one of the most magnificent structures we had seen so far. The inner sanctum is surrounded by spacious halls and corridors. Even huge elephants brought in for ceremonial purposes are dwarfed by the rising pillars supporting the vast domes. The priests told us the legendary history of the Temple. Sri Rama, on his return from Lanka, had wished to worship Siva in thanksgiving for the successful completion of his term of exile. Hanumanji was sent to bring a suitable Sivalingam from Varanasi. The auspicious time for the installation ceremonies was passing by. Sita Devi hurriedly constructed a lingam out of sand on the seashore. The priests accepted this and began the rituals. At this time Hanumanji arrived with a

special lingam. He was very annoyed and sought to destroy the sand heap shaped by Sita. But strangely the mighty Hanuman could not shake the lingam. Then he was penitent and asked to be forgiven. Sri Rama, ever compassionate toward his devotee, consoled him by saying that the lingam brought by him would also be installed. All pilgrims would first visit the Image brought by him and then the main deity inside the Temple. Accordingly we first paid our respects to Hanumanji's Siva and then went to have *darshana* of Sita and Rama's Siva. Nobody is allowed in the inner sanctum but the priest brought out a small replica of the Image for Sri Ma to hold and caress in her own special and inimitable way of adoration of such Deities. It seems as if she is greeting lovingly a dear friend. The Image immediately becomes a Person. It is always a very beautiful and rewarding experience to see Sri Ma greet the Deities in these Temples. She alone is the true Pilgrim amongst us. It is true that we see and hear but, alas, we are not transformed to another plane of spiritual experience.

We are to stay for three days at Rameshwaram. The Mahatmas went to see Dhanushkoti, another place sacred to the memory of Sri Rama. Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to offer *puja* to Siva, so this was arranged for the next day. One lakh *bilva* leaves were put on Siva by the priests accompanied by the chanting of appropriate *mantras*. There was a feast for all the Temple-people at midday. We also partook of the *prasāda*.

Later in the day Sri Ma related an incident to Haribabaji. I also heard it at this time. When Sri Ma was resting on the

terrace of the guest house yesterday she had been "visited" by a *sādhaka*. Sri Ma sometimes relates incidents from another dimension of existence. To Sri Ma the people of this plane are as real and articulate as we are. This "seeing" is neither a vision nor a dream but an actuality for her. The *sādhaka* introduced himself to Sri Ma saying that he had been a priest at the Temple of Chidambaram. He had been practising *sāadhanā* for many years here awaiting Sri Ma's visit to Rameshwaram. He wished to have *darshana* of Siva in her company which would be the fulfilment of his *sāadhanā*. He would then like to stay with her while she proceeded on her pilgrimage. When the pilgrimage would conclude at Dwarka he would attain liberation. I got the impression that the *sādhaka* was electing to be in Sri Ma's company for a few days before giving himself up for the dissolution of all ties. In response to the prayer of the *sādhaka* Sri Ma had not changed the time of her visit to the Temple yesterday. Haribabaji listened to her with great attention and marvelled at his own good fortune in unknowingly becoming a part of this rare incident. It occurred to me that to day's *Puja* and feast also were as if a celebration of this event.

We spent another night at Rameshwaram; then it was time to continue our journey toward the Temple of Minakshi Devi at Madurai. The manager of Rameshwaram Temple, other dignitaries and the Temple priests came to bid a ceremonial farewell to Sri Ma. The manager said to Sri Ma, "Ma, Didi is an incarnation of Nandi for you!" Sri Ma laughed as did the others. She said "Yes, Pitaji, Didi is a great admirer of Nandi since her childhood!" It is true that I am captivated by statues of Nandi, by the still, ever focussed one-pointed regard of the attendant toward his *Ista- Devata* (adored deity). The statues of Nandi represent to me the ideal of adoration which in itself

is a fulfilment.

14th November :

We arrived in Madurai around 6 p.m. It is about 100 miles from Rameshwaram. After we had taken up our quarters at a spacious Dharamshala we went to the Temple where a *satsang* had been arranged for the Mahatmas from 7 to 9 p. m... Mrs. Talyarkhan had made the usual arrangements for Sri Ma's reception. As soon as she alighted from her car, chords of music were struck up inside the Temple. The priests welcomed her with flower garlands and *mantras* of benediction. Sri Ma and the Mahatmas were escorted to the dais constructed for this purpose. We saw a very large congregation of people sitting quietly, awaiting the arrival of Sri Ma. The dignitaries of the town made speeches of welcome. Haribaba went through the routine of the *satsang*. *Maunam* (silence) of 15 minutes from 8:45 to 9 pm was observed by everyone.

After the *maunam* the priests came to escort Sri Ma to the inner sanctum of the Goddess Minakshi, the Presiding Deity of the town. They were wearing ceremonial silken garbs and carrying silver staffs. They preceded our group while uniformed sentinels of the Temple formed human-chain-barriers on either side. This was more a matter of ceremony than necessity because the crowd was most orderly and made no attempt to disrupt the arrangements.

The Image of the Goddess is most beautiful. We stood bemused in front of Her for sometime. Sri Ma was also shown the place where Maharshi Ramana had practised *sāadhanā* for many years. There is a large photograph to mark the spot. The priests paid respects to the Maharshi as they did at the main

sanctum. The grandeur of the surroundings is indescribable. One can form no idea of the atmosphere unless one has visited these vast spaces dedicated to the worship of a beloved Deity. One enters a different world. The only drawback is the barrier of language.

Mrs. Talyarkhan and many others escorted Sri Ma back to the *dharamshala*.

15th November :

This morning we visited a number of Temples dedicated to different Deities. They were all very splendid. They were scrupulously well cared for and served by streams of pious devotees and pilgrims. The central pendant of this rich garland of Houses of Deities is of course the Temple of Minakshi Devi. We visited it in the evening as *satsang* had been arranged again in the spacious courtyard of the Temple. When we arrived I was amazed to see the mammoth crowd sitting patiently for a glimpse of Sri Ma. I again wished that devotees in Dhaka or Kolkata could see this disciplined gathering. The organisers most respectfully asked Sri Ma to stand for a while on the rostrum so that everyone could see her. Sri Ma graciously complied with this request. She looked her usual majestic self; the benign expression radiated a joyousness which communicated itself to all. Without speaking a word she seemed to have become as dear to the hearts of the people as their own Goddess inside the Temple. Indeed it was related to us later that she was looked upon as the living Goddess Minakshi Devi. I was reminded of the early days in Dhaka where Sri Ma was known as *mānush-Kali*, that is Kali in human form.

Mrs. Talyarkhan spoke a few words about Sri Ma to the congregation. She said that Sri Ma did not need to go on

pilgrimages. In fact she sanctifies all places she visits or resides in. It is the good fortune of the people of South India that they are getting this much coveted chance for her *darshana*. Sri Ma has come to the South to visit Herself in all the Temples. She asks only that every one of us should be devout and engage in the search for Truth, the highest calling for human beings. Mrs. Talyarkhan also explained the ritual of the *maumam* of 15 minutes and hoped that all of them would make it a part of their lives in remembrance of Sri Ma's presence in their midst. In response to repeated requests for a few words Sri Ma sang a *kirtan* in her soft and melodious voice. She sang "Sitaram, Sitaram". The refrain was picked up by the crowd. Within a few minutes the music took hold which was heartfelt and totally absorbing.

After the *satsang* was over and at the conclusion of the period of *maunam* one of the officials positioned the microphone in front of Sri Ma and requested her to say a few words to the audience. Sri Ma spoke softly to Haribabaji to say something. Haribabaji folded his hands and said, "Ma, they wish to hear your words, so please speak to these people".

Sri Ma then said "I have only one thing to say to you: to talk of God alone is worthwhile, all else is pain and in vain. Where there is no Rama, (felicity) there is *be-ārām* (that is, unhappiness)." In Bengali the word *be-ārām* means illness.

One of the officials translated her words into the language of the region. These two couplets are *mantras* Ma utters many times. I understand them to mean that the supremely beneficial thing a human being can do for himself is to live constantly in remembrance of God. Whatever else he may do, if done as service to God then his actions will also help and not hinder his search for Truth. God as Truth is the only

worthwhile aim in life to strive for. It should undergird all ways of living in the world.

After the translator had spoken, there were some questions from the congregation which Sri Ma answered. Then we heard a joint prayer for rains. The spokesman said, "Ma, we are facing a drought in this region. There has been no rainfall. So many prayers are being offered but nothing happens." Sri Ma said, "Look you yourselves are parents; as fathers and mothers of your family you decide what has to be done. You do not expect that your children will take decisions on your behalf. He who has created this world is sustaining it. Try to abide by His will. Do not lose faith in His concern for you. Whatever happens, happens because it is so ordained".

The gathering seemed pleased with Sri Ma's words. It may be recorded that after we left Madurai we were shown some newspaper accounts of heavy rainfall in the region. The newspaper also mentioned that people believed it was due to the *kripā* (grace) of Sri Anandamayi Ma.

16th November :

Today we visited the birthplace of Maharshi Ramana at Trichuri. The home where he was born, the Temple which he had visited in his childhood, as well as the school where he had studied are well looked after due to the efforts of Mrs. Talyarkhan. We saw an elephant who was a great favourite with the sage. He is also looked after properly. The Ashram has taken over the management of these places sacred to the memory of the Maharshi.

Today also the *satsang* was held in the Temple precincts in

the evening. The crowd was bigger today. Sri Ma again stood up on the rostrum for a while so that she could be seen from afar. Today she again sang *kirtan* for sometime. She sang "Hey bhagavān, hey bhagavān" which was repeated with great enthusiasm by her audience. Within a few minutes the chorus of thousands of voices filled the air. It is so difficult to describe the sublime atmosphere which is created everywhere by Sri Ma's presence and her voice singing the Names of the Lord. After the *kirtan* a group of people sang a hymn dedicated to Sri Ma. It expressed their sense of fulfilment and adoration.

After the *satsang* we returned to the *dharamshala*. Many people came with us and sat with Sri Ma in her room telling her about their experiences. Maharshi's disciple Vishwanandaji has been travelling with us and has become quite attached to Sri Ma. He expressed his predicament that he was unable to go away from her vicinity. Sri Ma smiled and said, "Why not! It is but natural that a parent should feel attached to his little girl. This body is elderly, but I am truly a little girl and deserve a place in your hearts!"

17th November :

We went to see the Temple of Kartikeya at Palani, a distance of about 65 miles. There was quite a crowd of pilgrims but being with Sri Ma we as usual faced no difficulties regarding entrance or approach to the sanctum. In the evening also we went out to see some rare architecture. At one place we saw four pillars grouped as one. This is known as the "musical pillar" because when struck with an implement it produces musical notes. We were impressed by this example of architectural expertise. On our way back we came to the temple of Minakshi Devi. Mrs. Talyarkahn said that since

nobody knew about Sri Ma's visit the gates would be closed at that time. Sri Ma said, "Never mind, we shall have *darshana* from outside". But strangely as Sri Ma approached the doors, we saw the Executive Officer running to open them for her. He said he never comes at this time but today he had just happened to be there on some personal errand of his own. Sri Ma smiled and said, "It is the *kripā* (grace) of the Goddess Herself!" The Executive Officer said to me in an aside, "Sri Ma Herself is Minakshi Devi. She just came to visit Herself here!"

The usual satsang took place again in the courtyard of the Temple. Sri Ma at the request of the congregation sang for them and stood up for a while so that she could be clearly visible. I saw signs of Sri Ma's usual impact on large crowds. The discipline of the last two days was being observed with some difficulty. When it was time for Sri Ma's departure, groups of people broke away from restraints and approached her in order to speak to her or touch her or her clothes. I again regretted that we did not speak the language.

18th November :

Today we started for the furthestmost point of our pilgrimage, that is Kanyakumari. The Temple is situated at the tip of the southernmost end of India. We made an early start. On the way we stopped at Tiruchendur to pay our respects at the temple of Kartikeya. It is a beautiful place being surrounded on three sides by the vast expanse of the ocean.

We arrived at Kanyakumari around 1:30 pm. The distance is about 150 miles from Madurai but we made a detour of another 60 miles to visit Tiruchendur. We were accommodated in the *Dharamshala* of the Temple. After

settling in, Sri Ma visited the Temple quietly on her own.

19th November :

All of us went to the Temple in the morning. The Image of the Goddess is so beautiful that we can gaze at her forever. The adornments are also spectacular. The expression is benign. The form is that of a young girl (*Kanyā Kumari*) and as such is entirely graceful and captivating.

Haribabaji wanted to see the spot where my father had sat in meditation on the occasion of our earlier visit and had seen the Devi in the form of a little girl. I pointed out the place to him. In the evening we again went to the Temple to see the ritual of evening *arati*. This was a magnificent spectacle. The lights, flowers, music and singing in honour of the Deity held us in thrall. There was a considerable crowd of pilgrims.

The surroundings of the Temple are changed beyond recognition. We had seen an open sea beach, but now the whole area is covered with shops, residences and other buildings. While we were walking towards the Temple Sri Ma said "Let us go to that house". She walked fast and paused in front of one of the houses where a middle-aged woman was standing looking out. Sri Ma acclaimed joyously, "See, this is the house where we had come on our previous visit. You remember that little girls had been felicitated by gifts of clothes, sweets and flowers (*kumāri puja*)? This is the lady who had helped us!" The woman did not understand a word of what was being said by us. Other people translated for us. After a while the woman recalled the incident and was happy to renew Sri Ma's acquaintance. I marvelled at Sri Ma's gracious acknowledgement of hospitality after so many years.

20th November :

This morning we left for Trivandrum. Mrs. Talyarkhan has gone ahead to see to the arrangements for Sri Ma's reception and stay. Trivandrum is about 56 miles. En route we had *darshana* of the massive statue of Hanumanji at Suchindram. We also saw the ancient palace of the Maharaja of Travancore. We arrived around 11 o'clock.

The manager of Vijay Mohini Mills had assumed charge of all arrangements for Sri Ma. We saw a beautiful hut constructed out of palm-leaf matting and roofed over by cocoanut fronds. It was situated in a big courtyard. It was pretty and very comfortably furnished inside. Sri Ma would stay in this *kutiā*. The rest of our party was accommodated in houses near the courtyard.

In the evening Mrs. Talyarkhan took Sri Ma to the Palace of the Maharaja of Travancore. She is well acquainted with this family. The members of the royal household had wished to see Sri Ma in their own place of residence. Beautiful seating arrangements had been made in the spacious gardens. The family gathered round Sri Ma's seat. Many princely gifts were placed at her feet. Very remarkable amongst them was a small carpet made out of the bark of a tree.

Hindu tradition is very strong in the South. I have seen that men follow the ritual of wearing unstitched silken clothes (dhoti and wrapper) when they enter the sanctum of a Temple. The private secretary of the Maharaja now approached Sri Ma as if she were the Deity inside a Temple. Truly the devout observances of all the members of the Palace were very impressive. They are truly deserving of the right to form the entourage (*pārsada*) of Sri Anandamayi. I feel that we



Ma in Ananda Ashram of Papa Ramdas, along with Mahatmas accompanying her.
Papa Ramdas explaining something to Swami Krishnananda Avdhootji.

sometimes do not appreciate our own great luck in being granted the opportunity of Sri Ma's nearness.

21th November :

We went to see the famous temple of Sri Padmanabha, the presiding Deity of the state. Sri Padmanabha is the actual Lord of the realm; the Maharaja is considered to be the chief caretaker. Generations of princely families have paid homage to Sri Padmanabha and ruled the state in His name. It is a very touching as well as an impressive tradition.

The image is housed in a gorgeous and massive Temple very famous as a site of pilgrimage. The priests welcomed us and escorted Sri Ma to the inner sanctum. Sri Ma gazed at the Image in her own style of meeting a dear person!

On our way out of the Temple we met Baba Ramdas, a well known saintly person of this region. We had been hearing about him. He was accompanied by a few disciples who were singing "*Jaya Ram Sri Ram, jaya jaya Ram*" as they approached the Temple. This *mantra* is special to him, we were told. Sri Ma went to him with outstretched hands saying "Baba! Baba!" He caught hold of her hands in both of his and exclaimed with joy at this unexpected encounter saying he had wanted her *darshana* for a long time. He said "How are you? Well I hope?" Sri Ma smiled her answer "Always!" He immediately concurred saying "Yes, that is so". We parted from him as he was on his way in and we were on our way out. It was arranged that Baba Ramdas would meet Sri Ma later in the day. One Mr Pillai is greatly devoted to him and is looking after the sage's travel programmes. Mr Pillai has retired from service (army) and has also left his home (which is here) and lives in Kanya Kumari in order to practise his *sādhana*. He had invited Sri Ma to visit his cottage in Kanya Kumari. At

Trivandrum he desired that Sri Ma visit his home. They are a devout family. Mr Pillai arranged for Baba Ramdas's *satsang* at Ramakrishna Mission in the evening. Sri Ma accompanied by the Mahatmas went to this *satsang*. Baba Ramdas answered questions from the audience. There were songs and kirtan. The much admired and respected saints of North India are quite unknown here. We come to realise the vastness of our country when we travel. But the variety and immensity of our tradition is uniformly upheld everywhere by the *satsangs*.

22nd November :

Early morning saw us on our way to a place called Bharkalli a distance of about 25 miles. We saw a beautiful Temple dedicated to the Lord Janardana (Visnu). Mrs. Talyarkhan took us to visit another Ashram nearby. We met a saintly looking foreigner who has been residing here engaged in *sādhana* for many years.

We all appreciated the peaceful and serene atmospheres of the Ashram. It is a true retreat. Mrs. Talyarkhan told us about another noted *sādhikā* of this region known as Rama Devi. Rama Devi had invited Sri Ma to visit her. So we went to this Ashram also. The evening *satsang* was held here in accordance with local arrangements. Rama Devi accompanied by about 20 young women received Sri Ma and the Mahatmas at the gate. The young women were all wearing the same coloured sari and upheld a lighted *pradeep* (small oil-wick lamp). They took their guests to the rostrum singing *kirtan* and showering flower petals all the way. It is a very beautiful ceremony.

After the *kirtan* Rama Devi spoke for a while in Malayalam which we could not follow at all. After some more *kirtan*

Sri Ma was requested to sing for them. Sri Ma sang a few lines of *kirtan*. After the 15 minutes of *maunam* it was time to go so we came away. At parting Rama Devi took Sri Ma's hand and placed it on her own head. She caressed Sri Ma's face lovingly. Sri Ma smiled her own unforgettable smile at her. So they parted.

23rd November :

Our next destination is Kaladi, the birth place of Srimat Adi Sankaracharya. We started very early to arrive before noon, as it is about 150 miles from here. On the way we crossed two rivers by launches. The cars also were taken across in this manner. We arrived around 11 O'clock at the *Matha (ashram)*. We saw the river which flows near his birthplace, said to have changed its course at his request for the convenience of his aged mother. There is a statue of Sankaracharya in the typical pose of the *jagadguru* (teacher of the world). Sri Ma stood in front of it for sometime. The atmosphere of the Ashram was serene. It seemed charged with a special air of spirituality. We all felt the abiding influence of the great upholder of our tradition of renunciation (*vairāgya*). We are to stay here for a day.

24th November :

We left Kaladi for Coimbatore today, a distance of about 150 miles. We were made welcome by Devrajbabu. He has made all arrangements for Sri Ma and the Mahatmas. He is a friend of Kantibhai Munshaw of Ahmedabad. He had heard about Sri Ma from his friend and had been very keen to meet her but somehow or other he had not been able to do this. Now he was almost beside himself with joy saying that Sri Ma herself had graciously come to grant him *darshana*. We are to

stay here for one day only but even so Devrajbabu has made perfect arrangements for our accommodation and comfort. Another family came close to Sri Ma here. This was Sri Subhas Bose's eldest brother Sri Sailesh Bose who is in service here. He had visited Sri Ma in Madras and had asked her to come to Coimbatore on her way to Mysore. So in this remote town, Sri Ma had many families gathering round her just as in other places where she is well known.

In the evening Sri Ma and the Mahatmas were escorted to the Temples which are famous here as sites of pilgrimages. The priests received her at the first set of portals with music, flower garlands and lamps. There were two caparisoned elephants on either side of the gate. They offer garlands to the guests. They are very well trained. They put their garlands around the necks of the Mahatmas. Sri Ma took hers in her hands. The Temples are equal in beauty and excellence to other Temples of the South that we have seen.

25th November :

We went to visit the Ashram of Sai Baba at Shirdi. This well known saint is no more but his Ashram is very well organised by his many disciples. It is a beautiful retreat for the devout.

26th November :

We arrived in Mysore this evening around 8 p.m. It is about 210 miles from Coimbatore. Arabinda Basu had especially invited Sri Ma to visit Mysore, when he had met her in Arunachalam. The guest house of the Maharaja has been chosen as the accommodation for the Mahatmas. Mrs. Talyarkahan has put up for Sri Ma the large and commodious tent of the Maharaja himself.

27th November :

Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to accede to our requests for a much needed rest today so she stayed in her tent while the Mahatmas went on a sightseeing tour of the city.

In the afternoon the Maharaja, his mother and some other members of the palace came to visit Sri Ma. They brought with them a wealth of flowers, fruits and other gifts. The Maharaja and his mother expressed their sense of gratification and deep obligation that Sri Ma had graced his State by her presence. Mrs. Talyarkhan spoke as an interpreter because they did not know Hindi at all but spoke in English.

Mysore is considered to be a very well administered State. The previous Maharaja was known for his great piety, uprightness and excellence of character. The present Maharaja is a worthy descendant and is well known for his progressive views and care and concern for his State. Both the Southern States that we have seen have impressed us by the high quality of their cultural standards and the gracious deportment of their princely households.

28th November :

This evening the Maharani herself came to escort Sri Ma to the Temple of Devi Chamunda, the presiding Deity of the State. It is situated on the top of a hill. We went through the spacious grounds of the palace where we saw the Temple of Bhuvaneshwari. The Image is made out of black granite and is most beautiful. The entire region is very well kept and beautifully decorated with a profusion of flower-beds and ornamental trees.

The Temple of Chamunda quite took our breath away.

The Image of the Goddess is truly magnificent. The whole place surrounding the Temple is also maintained in a manner worthy of the Temple. The whole town is visible from the hilltop. Since it was growing dark the town was a panorama of lights. Sri Ma stood looking at the vista for sometime and said, "... a garden of stars!"

On our return from the Temple of Chamunda, we were taken to see the very famous Vrindavan Gardens of Mysore. Arabinda babu was keen for Sri Ma to see everything but she did not make an extended tour. Our companions went round seeing and admiring the spectacular water fountains and the profusion of flower beds.

29th November :

After suitable farewells Sri Ma and all of us in her entourage drove to Bangalore a distance of about 90 miles. Arabinda babu has engaged a new *dharamshala* for us. So far it has not been open to any other travellers. It is very spacious and clean. The evening *satsang* took place in the *dharamshala* itself. The gathering was considerable. After the *satsang*, a large crowd sat in Sri Ma's room for a while.

30th November :

The whole day the *dharamshala* remained crowded with visitors eager to see and talk to Sri Ma. It is quite like one of our usual days in our part of the country. Sri Ma was formally invited to grace the Town Hall in the evening for a civic reception by the townpeople.

When we arrived at the Town Hall we saw the Mayor accompanied by many important people waiting at the front gate. The Mayor escorted Sri Ma and the Mahatmas to the raised platform at one end of the Hall. There was a big crowd

in the hall. The Mayor read out a welcome speech on behalf of the townspeople, expressing their sense of deep obligation and fulfilment at this fortunate event of Sri Ma's presence in their midst. Other people also spoke in the same strain.

After the ceremony of welcome, the Mayor as well as Arabinda babu requested Sri Ma to speak a few words. Sri Ma said, "All of you know that this body generally does not give speeches. Sometimes some words may come out if such is your desire. This body is aged but it is truly a little girl only. As such all children are my friends and their parents are my parents. So I am close to everyone. I can say anything to you! Sometimes I say to people that 'to talk of Hari alone is worthwhile; all else is in vain and pain.' Who is Hari? Hari is He who takes away (*haran kare*) all pain'. He is all auspicious, the ultimate haven of peace for everyone. Keep Him in your mind constantly. Let not the busy world let you forget your true destiny of blessed enlightenment. Whatever you do, do it for Him. Make Him a part of your life. He alone is of the nature of Bliss. Without Him there is no hope of peace."

Sri Ma's words were translated by the interpreter. The congregation was pleased with Sri Ma's message of leading a devout way of life which opens up the possibility of attaining peace.

December 1

Sri Ma was invited to visit a big Women's College in the city. Arabinda babu escorted her to the Collage around 11 o'clock where she was received by some important officials. The girls made her welcome by a colourful ceremony.

Thereafter Arabinda babu took Sri Ma to visit the Army Hospital. He wished all the patients to get the opportunity of

having Sri Ma's *darshana*. Sri Ma walked over to one of the beds and stood near the patient for a while looking down at him most compassionately. Later we heard that this man was very ill and he was not expected to live.

We are to spend a couple of days here.

December 3

After this very welcome interlude we again resumed our journey. The Mahatmas left in the cars early. Sri Ma will travel by train to Pandharpur. Mrs. Talyarkhan will return to Arunachalam from here. Rani Majumdar has come from Kolkata to be with Sri Ma for a while. She too will accompany Mrs. Talyarkhan to Arunachalam on her way back to Kolkata. Arbinda babu is also going with them. The three of them wished to spend a little extra time with Sri Ma so they purchased tickets for the next station from Bangalore. These three days have been crowded and busy. In any case no one ever feels that he or she had had enough of Sri Ma's company! It is always a wrench when one has to bid farewell to her. Mrs. Talyarkhan and Rani were in tears when it was time for them to get down from the train. Sri Ma smiled and said, "Should one weep for someone who is smiling!" She however assuaged their sorrow in her own special way and continued to look back at the three of them standing on the platform while our train pulled away from the station.

December 4

We arrived at Miraj very early in the morning. Miraj is 466 miles from Bangalore. Sri Ma's car, the Kaiser, sent by Kantibhai Munshaw, was awaiting her here. We drove to Pandharpur a distance of 85 miles. Some of our party had preceded us to Pandharpur. We came to the *Dharamshala*

booked for us by Kantibhai.

Pandharpur is famous for its temple of Vithaldeva, very much the special Deity of Maharashtra. The rules of entry are not so strict here as in the Temples of South India. When we arrived at the Temple we found the priests awaiting Sri Ma. They took her inside and gave her garlands and flowers for the Image inside the Sanctum. Sri Ma very happily approached the Deity. She decorated Him with The flowers and caressed Him as a most beloved person. All of us also could touch the feet of the Image to do our *pranamas*.

On our return from the Temple we met Haribabaji and Avadhoot ji who had gone on a different route to visit the hill of Kishkindhya.

We are to stay here for one day. A notable incident had occurred on our way to Pandharpur in the train. Around midnight I think I saw Sri Ma sitting up on her berth rocking rhythmically while singing softly in a language I could not understand although her pronunciation was clear. At times she laughed aloud as if in great enjoyment and as if there were others around her. She glanced at me sitting up on my bed-roll and asked, "Are you feeling scared?"

I was alone in the compartment with her. We of course know in our heart of hearts that Sri Ma is way beyond the comprehension of any of us because there are immeasurable aspects of her personality but in general we find her so gently living at our level of comprehension that we forget that she is not one of us. But in whatever aspect we see her, majestic, friendly, or strange we are never scared or repelled. She is always beautiful and fascinating. So I shook my head and stayed awake and watchful with folded hands. This session

lasted for quite some time. Towards morning Sri Ma lay down quietly.

December 6

Today we arrived at Pune. Kantibhai has come from Ahmedabad to join us for this leg of the journey. Sri Ma is using her car again. Many of our companions had left for Pune last night by train. We arrived around 10 am (125 miles). We put up in a *Dharamshala* near the station. Kantibhai's assistants were already here to make things comfortable for us.

The day brought visitors to Sri Ma's room. We have not informed anyone of Sri Ma's arrival in town, yet there is no dearth of people who wish for her *darshana*. One elderly lady seemed bemused with Sri Ma's welcoming and gracious attitude. She had suffered the loss of her husband recently. Her mood of sorrow was dispelled entirely by Sri Ma's affectionate behaviour. Sri Ma became her "daughter" and so for all of us the lady became our "nāni" (Granny).

A Punjabi gentleman, Somprakash Nanda, came in the evening. He had heard about Sri Ma at a friend's house and had been looking forward to seeing her. He appeared to be very much in tune with the atmosphere around Sri Ma. No doubt he will become one of her loyal devotees in future.

December 8

After staying a couple of days in Pune, we came to Mumbai. Swami Krishnanandaji had arranged for us to stay at the very prestigious Sannyasa Ashram at Ville Parle. Swami Maheshwarananda is the head of this Ashram and one of the most erudite savants of our times. He is very well known in this part of the country. He was not in Bombay at this time but

all the sadhus and brahmacharis came out to welcome Sri Ma and the Mahatmas travelling in her company. It is quite remarkable to see how the ochre-robed ascetics of our country pay homage to Sri Ma and accept her as a person worthy of the highest honour. Sri Ma and the Mahatmas are to spend a fortnight in Mumbai. The routine of *satsangs* twice a day was easily fitted into the routine of the Ashram.

Swami Swatantrananda, a young and dynamic scholar who is greatly respected for his learned discourses, has become very attached to Sri Ma. He said, "The more I see her I realize she is what is described as *"brahmavit"* (knower of Brahman)."

I left for Varanasi on some business of our Ashram and returned to join Sri Ma's party on December 20. Sri Ma had asked Buni and Kusum also to return to Varanasi with me, so that now we were a small group. I found Sri Ma quite at home in the midst of ochre-robed ascetics.

December 22

We resumed our journey. We boarded the Saurashtra Mail in the evening. The railway platform was crowded. It was again a familiar scene of a large gathering of men, women and children surrounding Sri Ma at the time of departure from the town she has stayed in for a few days.

December 23

We arrived at Ahmedabad. The station was full of people waiting for her. Kanti bhai who is travelling with us brought us to his house. He has put up a very large tent for Sri Ma on one of the lawns of the spacious gardens.

I received some letters from Varanasi, Manmohanda has

also come to be with Sri Ma for a few days. The news from Varanasi, confirmed by Manmohanda is very upsetting. Fine cracks in the walls of the buildings of the Kanyapeeth had in a way prepared us for the ominous news that the big round terrace had become unstable. Varanasi Ashram was our pride. We were so happy that it was worthy of Sri Ma. The spacious hall right on the river had been the venue of innumerable *satsangs*. Preliminary reports said that this entire building is sinking. So unless it is demolished the rest of the large commodious Ashram would be weakened.

I told Sri Ma about this upsetting report. Sri Ma started laughing as if I had given her some good news. She said, "Such is the nature of the world. (*jagat* that which is moving) Now it is here now it has gone! What is there to mourn over!" She then spoke to Mukund bhai who was standing near.

"The building was tired of standing up for so long, Now it wants to sit down!" Saying this she laughed again in great enjoyment. Seeing Sri Ma's reaction to the news I gave up all hopes of any solution for the safety of the hall.

December 25

Tonight we left Ahmedabad by train for Junagarh. One of Sri Ma's well-known devotees, Sri Deogan is posted as forest officer in Junagarh. He had come to Ahmedabad to visit Sri Ma. He travelled back with us. He has made arrangements for us to stay in the city.

December 26

Haribabaji and Avadhootji went to see the Girnar mountains. There are a thousand steps to be climbed, so Sri Ma did not go with the travellers. The people of Junagarh had

the most welcome chance to be with Sri Ma for sometime.

December 28

We arrived at Bhalka (156 miles) from Junagarh. This is the place where Sri Krishna had the *khcyala* to be hurt by the hunter who shot his arrow at his left foot half hidden in foliage thinking he was aiming at a deer. There is a statue of Krishna leaning against the tree. The tree is an oddity. New trees seem to be sprouting forth from the middle of the ancient trunk. The atmosphere is very solemn. We were overcome by a strange feeling of desolation here. There are two very large relief paintings here. In one is depicted a smiling Sri Krishna sitting against the tree hidden from the sight of the hunter who is aiming at his foot which alone is visible to him. The second one I found very remarkable. Sri Krishna is standing near the sea shore glancing back across the arm of the ocean toward Dwarka the city which is doomed. The artist seems to have captured an expression of mingled compassion and aloofness which is so familiar to us!

Sri Ma was very quiet and grave while we went round the place. From Bhalka we proceeded to Prabhash, the site of Sri Krishna's final farewell. Prabhash Kshetra is an important place for all pilgrims. Our companions got busy with the rituals of bathing and offering *puja* at sites sacred to the memory of Lord Krishna. This place is very beautiful and peaceful. We saw the ruins of the famous Temple of Somnath. Once upon a time it was a magnificent landmark so much so that invaders were tempted to come repeatedly for raiding and looting the premises. It is very depressing to see the remains of the once grand edifice. A new temple, however is being constructed near the sea shore. We returned to Junagarh in the evening.

December 29

We came on to Porbandar after a drive of about 3 hours starting at 6 in the morning. We were accommodated in the Raja's *Dharamshala*. The place is right on the sea coast. It looks very beautiful. The Raja's people are making all the arrangements for our comfort. The elderly Raja of Porbandar is ailing and is hospitalized in Mumbai. The Prince who was in attendance on his father drove up to greet Sri Ma and bade her welcome to his State. He expressed his sense of great obligation and good fortune that Sri Ma had blessed his State by her presence. Sri Ma smiled and made kind enquiries about his father's illness and treatment.

Tomorrow we shall leave for Dwarka the last and final site of this pilgrimage. Sri Ma said, "If possible the visit to the Temple should be arranged within the time of the full moon (*purnima*)."

In Porbandar we visited a "Gurukul" School for girls. This is a very big institution of about 300 students. The schooling is done entirely according to ancient traditions. The school is residential with all facilities provided for study, physical training, recreational outlets, sports, including archery and other martial arts. We admired the standard of achievement of this school.

We then visited the birth place of Mahatma Gandhi. It is right near the sea shore. It is very well maintained and the surroundings are very peaceful. We also paid our respects at a Temple of Hanuman. The priest is very learned and an ascetic of repute. He welcomed Sri Ma addressing her as "Seeta Devi"! He greeted Haribabaji and Avadhootji also with special marks of hospitality.

December 30

The local people took Sri Ma and the Mahatmas to many more places of special interest. We spent the entire day in sight-seeing. In the evening we assembled as usual for the *satsang*.

December 31

Dwarka is about 70 miles from here. The road is said to be not in a good condition. We made an early start. The driver of our car took a wrong turn, so we were delayed a little. Even so we arrived at the Temple around 9 am. According to our almanac the phase of the full moon would last till 10 am this morning. Many people were awaiting us here in order to go to the Temple in Sri Ma's company. Sri Ma's "friend" Prabhadevi Mukherjee is here. She is an elderly lady from a very prestigious family in Kolkata. She treats Sri Ma as a wellbeloved friend so she has become "*Prabha-bandhu*" for all of us in the Ashram. This lady donated a large sum of money to the Temple for the entire change of dress for Dwarkadhish (The lord of Dwarka). Following Sri Ma's *kheyāla* we also took charge of paying for the whole day's *bhoga*. Sri Ma asked Makhan to buy a silver flute for the Deity. Thus an air of special occasion was created in the Temple. While the priest performed the *puja*, our brahmachari Bibhu's god-given voice filled its precincts with melodious *kirtan*. A concomitance of events resulted in a celebration of some magnitude. Everyone felt a special kind of fulfillment.

January 2

We visited Bhet-Dwarka, the twin city across a short stretch of the ocean. From Port Okha, we took the ferry launch. It is a small island replete with places and sites which are reminders of Sri Krishna's *lilā* as King of Dwarka. On our

way back we stopped at Okha for a meal and rest. We returned to Dwarka in the evening.

With the *darshana* of Dwarkadhish our pilgrimage was concluded. To travel with Sri Ma is always a rewarding experience. The Mahatmas acknowledged that this journey through South India in Sri Ma's company has been truly satisfying and will ever remain memorable.

Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to speak a little about the ascetic she had "seen" in Rameshwaram and who had said he would be with her on her travels till she came to Dwarka. Avadhootji had been very much interested in this incident and would ask her questions about it sometimes. Before the *satsang* on their last evening at Dwarka, Sri Ma said, "See, what a strange concomitance of incidents just happened as if ordained beforehand. The ascetic had said in Dwarka I shall attain union. He had also said Thursday and *purnima* (full moon).

"I heard him say this but I could not promise anything because my movements depended on so many factors. At Porbandar at one time we were requested to await the arrival of the Prince. This would have delayed us but coincidentally he arrived a day earlier than expected so we could start early on Thursday morning. In spite of going astray for a few miles which could have taken a serious turn, we arrived at the Temple well within the specified time. Prabha-bandhu was inspired to make a special occasion of this *darshana*.

"We have come to Dwarka twice before but those visits have not been remarkable like this one. As you saw a festive occasion was created quite spontaneously. The special *puja* and *bhoga* with *kirtan*, Gita-*path* (recitation of the Gita) etc, as if marked the celebration of an event of great significance,

so every thing happened as if to highlight the occasion of the enlightenment of the *Siddhabābā*."

I noticed that Sri Ma gave the ascetic a name by referring to him as "*Siddhababa*". At night, after everyone had retired Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to send for Manmohan babu, who had come to Dwarka to be with her. She told him to take the three *Sivalingams* which were lying in Varanasi ashram pending installation to Vrindavan. The three were to be installed in a temple to be constructed for the purpose. One was to be named '*Siddheshwara*'. She said. "See here is another concomitance of events. At Bhalka and Prabhash we saw innumerable *Sivalingams*. The legend is that they were not installed by anyone but emerged spontaneously after the cessation of the *lilā* of Sri Krishna. Coincidentally Manmohan being here I was reminded of the *Sivalingams* and also the little piece of ground acquired recently in Vrindavan. The name *Siddheshwara* also occurred to me. At the conclusion of a *lilā* the spontaneous coming of *Sivalingams*! So every thing is just so."

I marvelled at the quality of graciousness which fulfilled in such meticulous detail the prayers of the nameless ascetic of Rameshwaram.

(END OF ACCOUNT FROM DIDI'S JOURNAL)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sri Ma Anandamayi Returns to Northern India

"Why do you say I am going away! I never go away anywhere. I am always with you."

-Sri Ma Anandamayi

Sri Ma Anandamayi visited the states of Morvi and Bhavnagar on her way back to the North. The State of Morvi had suffered the tragic death of its Prince. The elderly Raja Sahab had abdicated his throne in favour of the Prince. Now the whole family was in deep mourning. They requested Sri Ma's presence in their hour of need. Sri Ma in response to their prayers arrived in Morvi on a visit of condolence.

The bereaved family received Sri Ma who in her own inimitable style assuaged sorrow and showered peace and serenity. When the family parted from Sri Ma, it was with tears in their eyes and requests for visiting them again. The Raja's saloon was attached to the train so Sri Ma travelled in comfort back to Bhavnagar.

Jayantilal Mehta, a devotee of some standing, looked after Sri Ma's party. Arrangements for suitable accommodation were made by him. The Mahatmas being with Sri Ma, she followed the routine of *satsangs* every morning and evening. During the day, she once strolled out to visit the cottage of Bharat brahmachari, a young man who had given up the world to practice *sādhana*.

After three days in Bhavnagar Sri Ma came to

Ahmedabad. Here she was received by Mukunda Bhai, Kundan Ben, Lila Ben and many others who were all long-time devotees.

The local devotees arranged for the Mahatmas to visit the Yoga Ashram at Utkantheswara. Sri Ma with her entourage spent three days in Utkantheswara. Haribabaji was especially pleased with the Yoga Ashram. The Trustee of the place Shankar Bhai joined Sri Ma's retinue for a while.

Sri Ma was very well known in Gujarat, so there were crowds wherever she was. After staying for a few days in Ahmedabad, Sri Ma proceeded to Bhimpura Ashram on the river Narmada. This Ashram is approached by boats from Chandod on the other side of the river. Sri Ma usually stopped at the temple of Tikamji in Chandod when going or coming away from Bhimpura because the elderly Mahantji was greatly attached to her and would request her presence as many times as possible. No matter how large Sri Ma's retinue, the Mahantji very hospitably entertained the whole lot with light refreshments on every visit.

The little Ashram on the bank of the Narmada river was in very good condition. The local devotees from Rajpipla had made it their business to maintain it and also to enlarge it from time to time. A large crowd had assembled to welcome Sri Ma. For a few days the remote sanctuary took on a festive air. The milling crowds were very orderly. They sang *kirtan* for Sri Ma and performed *ārati* to her in their own characteristic style. The Ashram now was as if a Temple with its presiding Deity in residence, the difference was that this Deity was a radiant living presence delighting the hearts of all.

A local barber came with a request that he would like the privilege of paring the nails of Sri Ma but she was always so busy that his prayers went unheeded. Chance came when Sri Ma boarded the train at Chandod on her way back from Bhimpura Ashram toward Dabhoi. The barber was seen running along the platform toward Sri Ma's compartment. Didi gauging Sri Ma's *kheyāla*, allowed him to enter the compartment. He sat at Sri Ma's feet touching them delicately with great reverence. He brought out his instruments and used them gently. He seemed overcome. While paring the nails he broke out into a song of farewell which seemed to be an adaptation of a very popular Hindi film song. The words were somewhat like this :

"If you must go, we have to bid you farewell.

But all of us have one prayer,

Think of us once in a while because you we shall

Always remember.

The song touched the hearts of all who were standing around. Who knows what depth of fulfillment was achieved by the barber plying his humble trade. To be able to touch Sri Ma's beautiful hands and feet is in itself a rare experience.

In Dabhoi Jamna Bhai welcomed Sri Ma and her guests. From Dabhoi Sri Ma came on to Baroda. Sri Ma was given a welcome-reception at the local Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya, a prestigious school for girls. The girls entertained Sri Ma with a display of all the arts and skills they were learning in the school. The audience was impressed by a feat of archery. A fine thread was seen over the seat of the guest of honour.

One student cut this thread from a distance by an arrow so that garland descended on to Sri Ma's neck in a perfect circle.

The principal requested Sri Ma to speak a few words to the girls. Sri Ma began by her usual offer of friendship toward all young people which at once created an atmosphere of joyousness. Sri Ma then elaborated her five-point programme for students. The girls were very happy. No doubt many of them came closer to her as time went by.

From Baroda Sri Ma visited a nearby town called Petlad at the repeated request of Sri Ramanlal Sheth. He was a man of some reputation in this part of the country. His acts of charity and public benevolence were well known. At Petlad he had constructed a spacious Ashram for the comfort of ascetics who may need to abide at one place for a while. He himself lived apart from his home in a part of this Ashram, in the manner of an ascetic. Shethji escorted Sri Ma round this estate. He was very happy to have Sri Ma visit his place of *sādhana*.

The Second Samyam Saptaha

Haribabaji and Avadhootji had travelled to various other places of interest separately. They joined Sri Ma at Vindhyaachal Ashram, where she came from Gujarat on January 26, 1953. The second *Samyam Saptaha* from January 30 to February 7 took place in the hill-top Ashram. The ambience of the Vindhya mountains is conducive to a way of life given over to *sādhana*, for time spent in search of Truth. The first *Samyam Saptaha* had created a great enthusiasm for this function. The Ashram filled up with men and women dedicated to the rigour of entire days spent in one pointed

effort toward self-realization. The presence of Sri Ma Anandamayi added a hundredfold to their sense of the worthwhileness of this pursuit.

While sitting in Sri Ma's room many participants gave expression to their own thoughts, One Mahantji, an ascetic of some repute, said, "I had come here to sit in meditation in front of Sri Ma during the time of lunar eclipse. While we were so sitting, around 3 am. I thought to myself, 'What exactly is an awakening of the *kundalini sakti* talked about in *Yogasastra*?' After a while I felt a sensation at the base of the spine as if a strong impulse was rising in a staccato fashion. I have never had this experience before. It was as if my prayer was granted by Sri Ma, although I had not spoken to her orally."

Sri Ma smiled and said, "Pitaji, what you felt was a vibration of the latent power. You had a glimmering of the real experience." Other participants related their own feelings and impressions about the *Samyam Saptaha*.

One participant said, "I am feeling sorry that the Saptah is over."

Sri Ma said, "This feeling itself is the reward of this life of rigourism."

Holi in Vrindavan

Sri Ma started on her travels again. She and the Mahtamas came to Varanasi on the occasion of Mahashivaratri.

Haribabaji was now ready to return to Vrindavan to his own Ashram. He made sure that Sri Ma would come to be his guest during the festival of Holi which is celebrated with great enthusiasm in Vrindavan.

After Mahasivaratri Sri Ma left for Vrindavan. Although the Ashram now was commodious enough to provide for Sri Ma's retinue, she went directly to Haribabaji's Ashram as she had come to Vrindavan at his invitation. He had made elaborate arrangements for her welcome and accommodation.

A rather strange and tragic incident took place in Vrindavan at this time. A fire broke out at night in the Sanctum of the Temple at Nimbarka Ashram. The caretakers were alerted by the smell of the smoke, but when they rushed inside the Temple they were horrified to find that even the Images of Radha and Krishna had not quite escaped the flames.

Mahatma Dhananjaydasji sent word to Sri Ma. He was wellknown to her. At this distressful time he depended on her to guide him. Sri Ma came to Nimbarka Ashram and at once went to the Temple where she caressed the damaged Images saying, "God, so it is your wish to reveal yourself in this form."

In order to help out the Mahantji one of Sri Ma's devotees Bhuvan M. Chakravarty agreed to go to Jaipur to fetch new images. Unfortunately the Nimbarka Ashram was seen not to be united in their efforts toward a restoration. A few people were against the Mahantji and they were currently engaged in law suits. Didi and other members of Sri Ma's retinue felt concern about the difference. Didi was inspired to speak to Mahantji. She said to him, "You belong to a great tradition. Your own eminent guru Santadas Babaji was a greatly esteemed ascetic. He appointed you to this post in order to take care of the Ashram. Now if the situation is such that in the interest of the neccessary installation ceremony you need to

abdicate your position you should do so. The most important thing is to see to the smooth running of the installation so that this tragic and dreadful incident may be atoned for and the temple restored to its original beauty and splendour." The Mahantji said, "I consider Sri Ma has come in the guise of my own guru. I shall be guided by her."

The atmosphere of strife changed. All parties gathered together to perform the rites of restoration. The festivities were attended by Sri Ma. Mahantji handed over charge to the people who had opposed him. He accompanied by one or two companions left the Nimbarka Ashram on a career of the wayfarer (*paribrājaka*). In general ascetics are supposed not to stay anywhere for more than three nights but keep constantly on the move. The party in opposition themselves came to Sri Ma for advice and guidance. Truly, for Sri Ma there was no opposition. In her presence misunderstandings evaporated. The dispute which had been going on for many years was ended.

The festival of *holi* is celebrated very widely in Vrindavan. Somebody presented a big hand-spray to Sri Ma. She had the *kheyāla* to spray coloured water on everybody. Men, women, children, animals, even shrubs and plants received a sprinkling of rainbow colours. The festival is for Vaishnavas, the devotees of Krishna. Pandit Sundar Lal, an old man who used to engage Sri Ma in sportive dialogues, now said to her, "We are easy targets, I dare you to do this to Haribaba."

Haribabaji being an ascetic and temperamentally not suited to this kind of revelry had as usual shut himself in his room for the whole day. Sri Ma with the hand-spray in her

hand approached his room. He came out to see what the commotion was about. Sri Ma sprinkled a little colour on him much to the enjoyment of the crowd. Followed by her retinue, who were singing *kirtan*, she went up to Swami Akhandanandaji's residence. When he emerged his ochre robes were sprayed with colours. He smiled at Sri Ma who laughed and said, "It is true that Pitajis are ascetics, but if they had been living in remote hills or forest hermitages it would be different. But if they choose to live in Vrindavan, then they will be touched by other colours too." So the colour-festival was concluded amidst an air of great enjoyment.

At Varanasi the Ashram was preparing for many festivities. The Vasanti Puja had become a regular feature of this Ashram since its first performance in 1944. Sri Ma arrived in Varanasi on 7th March to be met with the sad news of the passing away of Ruma Devi. She had been ailing for sometime and was in the care of the girls of the Kanyapeeth. The last rites of an ochre-robed *sannyasini* were performed with care and circumspection.

The people of Varanasi were happy to be able to attend again the morning sessions of *satsangs* with Sri Ma. Sanyal babu, Amulya dada, Baidyanathji and other regular participants were joined by Dr. Pannalal and also Gopal Thakur from Allahabad for a while.

After the Vasanti Puja, the Ashram became busy with the Gita Jayanti performed by Gopal Thakur. The big Ashram was teeming with people. The Raja Sahab of Solan, Maharaja and Maharani of Tehri Garhwal and the Raja and Rani of Amb came to be near Sri Ma on these occasions. These families

were related with each other. They were also well known to the usual crowd surrounding Sri Ma — so it was an extended family of devotees who celebrated all functions together. The little Kumar Sahab of Amb was seriously ill for a while. But the anxiety of his parents was soon dispelled by Sri Ma's grace. They knew that she had averted a disaster which would have been such a tragedy for all concerned.

From Varanasi Sri Ma travelled to Kolkata. She visited Puri also but only for a couple of days. After these short visits she travelled right across the country to Hardwar arriving at Baghat House on April 30.

Janmotsava At Baghat House (1953)

Jogibhai had requested Sri Ma's presence at his *dharamshala*, Bhagat House at Haradwar for the month of May. Sri Ma nowadays was obliged to restrain her wayward travel schemes during this time because many eminent Mahatmas were expected to come for the function of the Birthday Celebrations.

This year the duration would be almost one month from 2nd of May to the 31st. Jogibhai made suitable arrangements for the accommodation of the devotees who would assemble from all over the country. Now that Sri Ma was well known in the world of ascetics, preparations were made for their reception also. A big rostrum was erected for the daily *satsangs*. Everyday some eminent speaker would grace the occasion and delight the congregation with an erudite lecture. Krishnananda Avadhootji was fully involved in this large scale activity. This aloof ascetic was seen to be devoted to Sri Ma. He took upon himself the responsibility of the flower

decorations. Experts were commissioned from Vrindavan to make a cottage of flowers for the final day's *puja*. He also engaged learned brahmins to read the *Durgasaptasati* every day. Other festivities were set in train. The very generous host gave unstintingly for ceremonial feasts for sadhus. Hardwar is a holy town. It is a town where one may see the residences of every order of ascetics in the country. Baghat House saw a veritable galaxy of ochre-robed scholars and savants — many of them the heads of their own orders. Mahamandaleshwar Swami Maheshwaranandaji of the Sannyasa Ashram (Mumbai) came to visit Sri Ma at the beginning of the function. Sri Ma had stayed in his Ashram in Mumbai but he himself had been away at the time. After their first meeting, he became a frequent visitor. Other Mahatmas, Swami Swatantranandaji, Mahamandaleshwar Swami Purnanandaji, Mahamandaleshwar Swami Brahmanandaji and many more came to add to the splendour of the function. The Janmotsava got organised around the programmes of the ascetics because people had learnt to give them first priority. Sri Ma's movements also became restrained. Since she could not just travel randomly or walk away from *pujas* and *āratis* of her own due to the press of people, she would lie down quietly on her bed. It was considered more than enough that she at least stayed in one place!

After the Janmotsava, Sri Ma in her turn responded to the numerous invitations for her presence in the Ashrams or residences of many eminent ascetics. She paid her first visit to Surat Girl Ashram where she was welcomed by Swami Swatantrananda. Swami Maheshwarananda was also there to greet her.

By almost imperceptible ways Sri Ma's Vāni, "*Hari kathā kathā āṛ sab vrthā vyathā*" was coming into focus more and more. Sri Ma's personality was such that there seemed no contradiction between the presence of the ochre-robed ascetics amidst the teeming hordes of ordinary men and women and also children. Sri Ma brought the ideal of total renunciation right within the purview of the ordinary man. The intermingling of renunciation and life in the world was especially emphasized by the *Samyam Saptahas*. This was one function to which eminent *Mahātmās* could be invited. A platform worthy of their erudite speeches was provided. The ordinary folks in the normal course would never have had the chance of coming near such ascetics. They also got the opportunity of listening to the Sacred Texts which they knew by names only and also of becoming familiar with their own living traditions of one-pointed search for Truth. The exemplars were right in front of them for providing inspiration.

Samyam Saptaha in Kolkata

Sri Ma continued to travel after leaving Hardwar. She visited Raipur (Dehradun) Ashram for a while. Dhananjayadasji (Mahant of Nimbarka Ashram) was staying in retreat in this Ashram. Sri Ma spent sometime with him and his loyal companions in this remote place. Sri Ma had been driven over in a car by Mahalakshmi's eldest son Kunjan. On their way back they came to one of the mountain streams in sudden spate, which happened very often in this region. Kunjan halfway across was overcome by fright because he felt the car was beginning to float. Sri Ma sitting in the back spoke to him, "Do not stop, drive on!" Kunjan in reflex action

speeded up and splashed over to the other side. He confessed that although he knew that it was the right thing to do under such conditions he was about to stop so that his passengers could get out of the car which would have caused a major mishap. He was perhaps naturally a little nervous because he had Sri Ma in his car, but he realized that she herself was the ultimate safeguard.

Sri Ma spent a lot of time in this part of the country because Kishenpur Ashram hosted a few functions including the annul Durga Puja in October.

The metropolitan city of Kolkata was desirous of observing the *Samyam Saptaha* of this year, the third of the series. The previous one had taken place in the remote Ashram of Vindhyachal. Many people expressed doubts as to the suitability of Kolkata as venue for this function which was mainly silent *dhyana* sessions alternating with the reading of scriptures etc. The devotees of Kolkata, however, demonstrated that they were capable of spending a week of highly organized spiritual endeavour in an atmosphere of quietude. The hours of *maunam* were observed in perfect discipline. The usual unruly crowd was restrained and observed all regulations. It was quite marvellous to see men and women hurrying along to arrive in time for the hour of *dhyana*. It was as if the ideals of *Samyam* as pronounced by Sri Ma were being accepted as the norm of life.

Sri Ma proceeded on her travels after the *Samyam Saptaha*. In between her visits to Puri, Jamshedpur and other places, she often stayed at Aptap Mitra's residence in Dumdum. This was like a retreat from her usual crowded

programme but even so the place would become full of devotees. To Sri Ma, of course, the quiet intervals were the same as the hectic days spent elsewhere.

Purna Kumbha at Allahabad 1954

This year 1954 started with the tragic accidental death of a large number of pilgrims during the most prestigious of Hindu festivals. This was the first *Purna Kumbha* at Prayag in independent India. Elaborate arrangements had been made for the accommodation of lakhs of pilgrims. All ascetic orders were represented. A huge temporary township had come up with electricity, post office and banking facilities. Broad roads linked the spacious camp sites of all our spiritual leaders. A great air of festivity prevailed. Pilgrims could visit as many camps as they liked, listening to learned discourses or joining in singing *kirtan*.

Sri Ma's camp was spacious with many cottages and a hall for *satsangs*. The temporary structures were made comfortable with paddings of hay on the earthen floor covered over with heavy canvas cloth. Almost 300 people had assembled to be near Sri Ma on this occasion.

On February 3 just before dawn relays of people started out on their walk to the confluence of the rivers (Sangam) for the ritual bath. The *mela grounds* were spread out on the other side of the river Ganga because this year the river was flowing near the bandh (earthen rampart between the city and the river) as it happens sometimes. There were six or seven pontoon bridges across the river. The camps were all on the Jhansi side of the river so the approach to the Sangam was over plain ground. The pilgrims approaching from the city

were required to walk down the slope of the bandh. The tragedy occurred here because the authorities had not prepared different routes for incoming and outgoing crowds. There was a terrible melee and panic stricken trampling which resulted in the death of hundreds.

On the other side of the river large crowds moved toward the confluence of rivers. A vast concourse of people is a magnificent sight but it creates problems. Groups get separated and miss out on familiar landmarks. Sri Ma herself instructed the people in her camp to stay in close formation and to sing aloud some *kirtan* which would identify them, namely "Haribol" or "Rama Sri Rama". The devotees chose to sing "Jai Ma, Jai Ma". Later they realized how knowledgeably Sri Ma had instructed them in group-movement within moving multitudes when all landmarks lose their identities. Many who lost their way could find their way back to the group by the sound of 'Jai Ma'. Swami Paramananda had organised big boats for the people of the camp but the sheer press of people disrupted all arrangements.

On the eve of the day of bathing Sri Ma was in a strange mood. She was again and again retiring to her own cottage and speaking desultorily about the camp affairs. She was asking everybody to be careful to stay together in batches etc. In the morning the camps emptied of all devotees who went toward the sacred rivers. Sri Ma was restless and grave. Didi who knew Sri Ma's ways a little was made nervous and felt a presentiment of mishap. Around 9 am, Sri Ma suddenly exclaimed "There, there, they are being trampled! Suffocation!" Didi feeling alarmed about her own people

said, "No, no, no Ma, nothing will happen to our people!" Sri Ma said, "I see terrible sights, terrible sights!" Poor Didi with her limited vision tried to divert Sri Ma's *kheyala* believing this would avert whatever disaster was impending.

The tragedy occurring at this time on the other side of the river was not known to the pilgrims on this side of the river till the end of the day. Sri Ma had asked once, "Have you any news?" But the camp people not knowing any thing did not even understand the significance of the question.

By nightfall the terrible news of utter disaster became a common topic of hushed conversations. Swami Paramananda, Dr. Pannalal, Didi and a few others sat in Sri Ma's cottage and compared notes of their experiences of the day. Dr. Pannalal asked, "Ma, you knew of this tragedy at the time of its occurrence, because you uttered the words, 'There, there they are being trampled! Suffocation!' Did you see them dying? Were you there?"

Sri Ma said, "Those who escaped or were saved were seen also. And also those who shut their eyes forever. At the spot where this happened this body itself was being trampled-this body felt suffocated."

Dr. Pannalal asked, "Did you take away their suffering by being with them?" Sri Ma said, "This was not like the suffocation people experience. Just as I participate in your smiles, in your talks in your concerns, but I am as I am. Who after all is manifested as suffocation, pain-where is the line? To take away suffering means a separation. Here (with this body) the smiles, talks or tears and suffocations are of the nature of that only. In this equilibrium, there is neither sharing nor taking away. It is as it is. The question is of need

not have happened-but it is the part of the same *lilā*-there is no question of giving and taking here."

Sri Ma's travels had become to some extent subject to Haribabaji's programmes. He wished Sri Ma to come to Vrindavan for the festival of Holi this year also. Before proceeding to Vrindavan Sri Ma spent some time in Vindhyachal and also in Varanasi. The Ashram had become very commodious. The Kanyapeeth occupied almost half of the sprawling buildings. The girls had their own dormitories, schoolrooms, kitchens, quarters and a beautiful temple room. They were very happy when Sri Ma spent some time in Varanasi Ashram.

Gopal Thakur came from Allahabad to perform his Gita Jayanti, which had now become an annual feature.

Mahashivaratri on March 3, was celebrated as a major festival. Sri Ma made unique arrangements for maximum participation. All devotees who wished to perform *puja* during the entire night were asked to submit their names to the office. It was seen that more than 200 people were keen to perform the *puja*. Not many of them knew how to set about it, only that they wished to observe Sivaratri in Sri Ma's presence.

Sri Ma commandeered a team of eager volunteers. All open spaces were earmarked for the temporary installation of Sivalingams. Sivalingams decorated with flowers and garlands were placed in big receptacles (round brass plates or *parāts*). A dozen or so small mats (*āsanas*) were arranged in a

big circle around the Sivalingam. In front of every mat were arranged the paraphernalia of the puja : A *panca pātra* (a small receptacle containing Ganga water), a small plate containing flowers *bilva* leaves, a few fronds of green *durvā* grass, a little rice and sandal paste, red and white; in very small earthen pots the four items for the special *puja* were arranged alongside each *āsana*, namely, milk, curd, ghee and honey. Lamps were placed everywhere and also josstick stands. Sri Ma walked around all the places rectifying mistakes adding beautifications. The names of the worshippers were written on slips of paper and placed on each particular *āsana*, so that he would know where to sit.

Time is calculated in *praharas* for this festival that is from 6 pm to 9 pm (1st) from 9 pm to 12 midnight (2nd) from midnight to 3 am (3rd) and from 3 am to 6 am (4th). A complete puja was to be performed in each *prahara*. Under Sri Ma's aegis, it had become the custom for devotees to occupy their *āsanas* around 7 pm after bathing in the Ganges and putting on unstitched silken clothes. They would sit the whole night, leaving their seats only after the last *arati* around 4 am. The girls of the Kanyapeeth were following the ritual for many years. They arranged their own places in their own big hall in two large circles. The girls kept their musical instruments near at hand, so that in between the *pujas* they could recite the beautiful stotras to Siva as well as sing *kirtan*.

Every gathering was presided over by a knowledgeable brahmachari of the Ashram who guided the participants in the details of the ritual with appropriate *mantras*. The night was made melodious by the extraordinary voice of Bibhu Brahmachari singing the classical hymns to Siva. The *kirtan*

stopped for the duration of the *puja* for each *prahara*. Sri Ma visited all the sites frequently, noting the need for the replenishments of any requirements. The worshippers sitting quietly in their own places experienced the fulfillment of a beautiful undertaking. The whole night flashed by too soon. Many people who could not have imagined themselves doing such a vigil by themselves were happy. Everyone realised that such performances were possible only in Sri Ma's presence.

After the festival Sri Ma resumed her travels. Haribabaji was expecting her in Vrindaban. Sri Ma and her retinue detrained at Hathras Junction where a special bus was awaiting the travellers. A few miles short of Vrindavan the bus went out of order. Sri Ma got off and calmly started to walk along the road. Didi hastily followed her. After a while Didi saw two tongas (horse carriages) passing her. She tried to stop them but they paid her no attention, but when Sri Ma beckoned them to stop, they did so immediately. Sri Ma was accommodated in the first tonga. She very cheerfully said she would go ahead alone and her retinue could follow as best as they could. Didi begged a place for herself in the second tonga and thus they arrived at Vrindavan. Sri Ma was proceeding to Haribabaji's Ashram but she was informed that this time the Mahatma was awaiting her in the new Anandamayi Ashram itself. Sri Ma and Didi came to find a *kirtan* party ready for receiving them. Haribabaji made her welcome with flowers and flower-garlands and *kirtan*. The whole ashram was decorated with paper chains and festoons of leaves and flowers.

It was very thoughtful of Haribabaji to take upon himself the management of Sri Ma's visit to her "own" Ashram. He knew that for Sri Ma all ashrams were the same. Didi and Sri Ma's other companions appreciated the Mahatma's adoption of their Ashram as one of his own.

The festival of Holi was at hand. It was also Haribabaji's birthday. A new room had been constructed in Sri Ma's Ashram especially for Haribabaji. He was invited to come to occupy this room. The whole Ashram had taken on a festive look. The Mahatma was received with ceremonial fanfare and escorted to this room. Didi performed *ārati*.

Holi is special to Vrindavan. The whole town celebrates the colour-festival in memory of Sri Krishna's playful engagement with the *gopis* (dairy-maids) on this occasion. The Sindhi devotees of Udiya Babaji came to invite Sri Ma to their Ashram. This tradition had been established since the time of Udiya Babaji. If Sri Ma was in Vrindavan on the occasion of Holi she participated in their celebration at the shrine of Jhoolalal, the Image worshipped by Sindhis. They made no distinction between the Image in the shrine and Sri Ma. Her presence was a joyous event for them.

Haribabaji and Avadhootji invited Sri Ma to visit Hoshiarpur. So Sri Ma undertook the journey to Hoshiarpur in the last week of March. Sri Ma stopped at Delhi for a couple of days. The devotees of Delhi were now happy owners of a new Ashram at Kalkaji. It was still incomplete but Dhiren Dutta and others were elated to be able to receive Sri Ma at this site. They thought that now Sri Ma would not be obliged to stay in *Dharamshalas*, temple-verandahs, tents or other temporary

dwellings when she came to Delhi but would be able to stay a while in the Ashram.

Sri Ma spent about a fortnight in Jullundhar and Hoshiarpur. She was quite well known in this part of the country now, thanks to Haribabaji's devoted allegiance. He accorded to her the highest mark of respect as a most honoured guest. In fact he did not differentiate between Sri Ma and his own *ista-devata*. Those who recognised Haribabaji as a single-minded ascetic totally dedicated to the way of *sādhana* quite naturally became members of Sri Ma's ever-increasing family of devotees.

From Jullundhar Sri Ma went to Almora to attend the installation ceremony of Siva on the Samadhi of Bhaiji on April 16. The small Ashram became the venue of cheerful activities. Jogi Bhai came from Hardwar and Hari Ram Joshiji from Lucknow : they were the two great admirers of Bhaiji. Hari Ramji was especially happy at the augmentation of the significance and importance of the little shrine sheltering the remains of Bhaiji.

Sri Ma said, "See, Sivaji has already shown his influence indicative of his presence!" She was referring to a miraculous incident which had taken place earlier. Panuda had brought the Sivalingam from Varanasi. At Kathgodam, by mistake the box containing the Sivalingam was shoved in inside the bus under the seats instead of being strapped on to the roof along with other baggage. Along the mountain-path, at one of the hairpin bends beyond Ranikhet the bus overturned at the edge and started to fall down to the gorge below. It was checked in its fall by a big tree growing a little below the path. The

branches supported the bus. All the passengers managed to climb out of the bus, and on to the path. The drop to the gorge below was sheer, had it not been for the tree of sufficient strength, all lives would have been lost. Panuda managed to extricate the box containing the Sivalingam. All other baggage had fallen off when the bus turned over. When the passengers came to know about the Sivalingam, they became convinced that his presence had been instrumental in saving their lives. On the day of the installation ceremony these passengers came to the Ashram with offerings of flowers, sweets and *ārati* to Siva. So, locally, the fame of the little temple spread far and wide. The hill people accepted with great joy the presence of Siva amongst them.

Sri Ma stayed in Almora for a while. The devotees wished to celebrate the Janmotsava in Almora this year. Since many Mahatmas would come for the ceremony, Sri Ma was prevailed upon to abide in one place. Almora was a quiet hill town. Over the years it had become a place of retreat for many foreigners. They had become frequent visitors to the Ashram. The Ashram itself was now very spacious and commodious. The central large terrace was magnificent with its view of surrounding high mountains. Parashuramji had devoted himself to the work of beautifying the Ashram. The devotees of Almora and all neighbouring hill towns co-operated with him fully.

Slowly the Ashram began to fill up with guests from all over India. This function had become more and more elaborate as the years went by. Programmes of religious

functions, *satsangs* etc. were meticulously chalked out. The only distinctive feature was that Sri Ma remained completely passive. In all other celebrations she was the moving spirit. The devotees learning from her ways tried to arrange programmes in such a way that everyone would be busy with spiritual endeavour in some way or other.

From May 2nd the Ashram was the scene of constant activity. The joyful nature of the common objective united all participants. Strangers became friends; groups of people enjoyed the rare privilege of living in close proximity to Sri Ma Anandamayi. The memory of these days would remain like precious dreams.

The Mahatmas held *satsangs*, gave discourses; there were *rāsa-līlās* and *kirtans*. Haribabaji's disciples were in the habit of enacting skits depicting high religious ideals at the end of the *satsang*-hour. These were humorous and very enjoyable. There were many talented youngsters among Sri Ma's devotees. They also joined in this form of entertainment. The Mahatmas were pleased at this commingling of cultures and the prevailing atmosphere of a happy united family.

The night of 23rd May saw the culmination of all worshipful efforts toward a deeply fulfilling act of faith : the magnificent *puja* at pre-dawn toward the *ista-devatā* of the entire congregation. At dawn everyone was rewarded by the *darshana* of Sri Ma's divinely beautiful person which seemed so ethereal and so dear to every heart.

Sri Ma Anandamayi prolonged her visit as many people had come from long distances to stay with her. One day she

was sitting with some women in her own room. She was making them laugh with her imitation of village dialects of Bengal. She said, "A woman from Sylhet said to me, (in the dialect) Ma, please grant me only four boons, just four! (*Chhāiddā kathā*) I don't want anything more, just let the lawsuit be in our favour, save our self-respect, grant us a little money and let me recover from the illness, that's it, nothing more, just these four requests to you!"

The verbatim rendering of the language of Sylhet used by the petitioner sounded very amusing. Sri Ma continued, "Do you know what I said to her? I said, 'See, mother! Try to find Him, He who is the repository of everything. Call upon Him. Pray to Him. Tell Him about all your troubles. He is perfect, isn't He? He alone can fulfill all desires. He dispels all unhappiness. Call upon Him. Think of Him. Pour out your heart at His feet. He is all auspicious. He is Peace and Bliss; what else? He is the innermost life-force, your own self-*ātmā*!' Didi, I told her these 'four things!'"

Sri Ma saw Didi making notes of her words. She said, "Didi, why do you write these things down? Erase them, erase them-what is there to write about!" Since Sri Ma continued in the dialect of Sylhet, everyone became helpless with laughter. Didi wrote, "Although Sri Ma at times becomes very fun-loving and almost as if one of the ordinary folk, there is always an aura of purity and sacredness about her which keeps her apart from us."

Sri Ma stayed in Almora for nearly two and a half months this time. On the eve of her departure from Almora, the people surrounded her as if to prolong the moment of parting. They said, "Ma, you are going away. How shall we fill this

emptiness in our lives now?" Sri Ma answered, "Why do you say I am going away? I never go away anywhere. I am always with you (as intimate) as the breath of your breath! This is absolutely true. This body never speaks an untruth!" The people looking upon her radiant countenance took heart and prepared themselves for the parting.

Sri Ma came down to Bareilly on June 27. Bareilly was full of devotees of Sri Ma. They made adequate arrangements for the large retinue. One day a new comer, a lady, asked Sri Ma to give her initiation, not knowing that Sri Ma never did this for anybody. Before others could explain all this to her Sri Ma asked her, "Which name of God do you like best?" The lady responded by uttering a Name. Sri Ma said, "That's it. This is your *mantra*! Meditate on it and do its *japa* as much as possible."

Dr. Pannalal was sitting near them. He said to the lady, "You are very fortunate! You have received your initiation from Sri Ma. It is a unique occasion! Do your *pranāma* to your Guru." The lady in a bemused state of joy made her obeisance. Sri Ma's expression took on a far away look as if she was not quite with them. In this mood she called out, "Who wants this? Come and take it, come and take it!"

The women who were sitting around approached her one by one; all of them were initiated by Sri Ma in the same manner. This *lilā* of "initiation" was the first of its kind. The women brought flowers and sweets, incense and *arati*. For them truly their *ista* and Guru became one!

Sri Ma continued to travel widely. Didi had been suffering from back ache for some time. During the Janmotsava in

Almora, the pain had become excruciating. Sri Ma had sent Didi to Kolkata for proper medical examination and treatment. Her absence was noted by Haribabaji who became very concerned about Didi's health. He initiated a number of religious rites, praying for her recovery. All the Mahatmas were used to seeing Didi near Sri Ma, so everyone felt her absence keenly. Didi returned from Kolkata to Varanasi and then travelled to Dehra Dun on July 21st to join Sri Ma who was moving around these hill-towns at the time.

Since the last few years the festivals of Jhoolan and Janmashtami were being celebrated with great enthusiasm at the Varanasi Ashram in the Kanyapeeth. This year also in answer to Ganga Didi's invitation Sri Ma came to Varanasi on 9th August to be with the girls during these celebrations.

The Coming of Gopal to the Ashram

On one of her previous visits to Varanasi Sri Ma had been approached by local people regarding an idol of Gopal, that is, the child-image of Sri Krishna. Batukda as their spokesman had said that the owners of the idol were no longer able to provide for its upkeep and had stopped sending money to the priest who was looking after it. The priest himself being a poor man was seeking to place the idol in some ashram, otherwise he would be obliged to consign it to the river. Sri Ma said, "I have nothing to say. Ask the people who manage and own the Ashram."

Paramanandaji and Didi, thinking that it was Sri Ma's *kheyāla* that Gopal should be received in the Ashram, gave their consent. Sri Ma was about to leave for Vrindavan. She gave instruction that Gopal should be taken to Vrindavan.



With Gopalji (the child Krishna) in
Varanasi Ashram

Due to some unforeseen difficulty this was not done. In the meantime the priest dreamt that Gopal was telling him not to send him away from Varanasi. So Gopal remained in Varanasi till it was time for Sri Ma's return to town for the festival of Jhoolan.

On her day of arrival Sri Ma arranged for a decorated seat for Gopal near her own *chowki*. Batukda went in a car to the city to fetch the idol. When he returned he was seen to carry the idol very carefully in his arms. Everyone was astonished to see Gopal. He was the size of an eight month old baby. He was apparently carved out of black granite and the execution was faultless. He was in the classical posture of a crawling infant. He was on his knees and left hand. The right hand was raised in a gesture of as if, demanding or asking for something. The slightly cupped little palm is usually depicted holding a *laddu* (a sweet in the shape of a tiny ball).

This little image of Gopal had an extremely engaging expression. Dr. Panna Lal who was staying in the Ashram at the time said, "Ma it seems Gopal is ready to climb on to your lap!" The rituals of greetings and welcoming ceremonies were performed. Gopal was dressed in new clothes and placed in Sri Ma's lap. She sat with him for a while. Everyone admired the new comer. Soon Gopal began to show his miraculous powers. So many people dreamt of him. He was showered with gifts from grateful devotees whose problems had been solved by his grace, as they believed.

Gopal was installed in one of the small rooms of the Ashram. To anticipate a little : in a few years a magnificent temple was built next to the Ashram. The devotees had hoped

to install a statue of Sri Ma inside this temple. It would be a fitting site of pilgrimage for people coming to Varanasi from all corners of India. Sri Ma said, "The temple is yours so you may do what you like with it, but here is Gopal who may be installed in it if you so wish." Didi gauging Sri Ma's *kheyāla*, guided others into accepting this idea. So the magnificent new temple became Gopal Mandir. He was placed in the splendid sandalwood throne which had been sent from Mysore for Sri Ma. Sri Ma asked the permission of the management before Gopal was enthroned in this royal seat. Thus, little Gopal who had come to the Ashram, wrapped in a cloth only, now was surrounded by all the splendour and magnificence that is possible in this world. The temple and the throne were seen to be worthy of him. The little black infant-image of Krishna became a general favourite. Sri Ma named him *Kālo Manik*, that is "The Black Gem."

The New Ashram in New Delhi

Sri Ma paid a short visit to Vindhyachal. She returned to Varanasi on August 19. Dr. Panna Lal had been a keen auditor of incidents from Sri Ma's early life. He had made a note of the incident of the garland of red hibiscus flowers found by Bhaiji on the hillside of Chunar. Sometime back Dr. Panna Lal had asked Sri Ma to point out this spot while they were driving to Vindhyachal. This road to Vindhyachal from Varanasi passes along the foothills of Chunar. Dr. Panna Lal's eldest son-in-law Rameshwar Sahai was the Chief Conservator of Forests in Uttar Pradesh at this time. He helped to mark out the exact spot where the garland had been lying. He now carried out Dr. Panna Lal's wishes of planting a

grove of five sacred trees on this spot, that is a *pancavati*.

A function was arranged on August 19, as Sri Ma would be passing this place. Dr. Panna Lal escorted Sri Ma to the spot where a crowd had assembled to await her arrival. The trees were planted in her presence. Thus due to the thoughtfulness of Dr. Panna Lal an important *kheyāla* was commemorated in a very suitable manner.

After attending the celebrations of Janmashtami and Nandotsava with the girls of the Kanyapeeth Sri Ma travelled to New Delhi. Many people were eagerly awaiting Sri Ma because they were wishful of welcoming her to their new Ashram. First amongst such devotees was Rajmata Anandapriya of Tehri Garhwal. She and the Maharaja and Maharani had come to the railway station to receive Sri Ma. Sri Ma went to Gautam Nagar first to the new house built by the Rajmata. She stayed here overnight. Next day she went to Pankaj Sen's new house in Timarpur for one day. Then it was the turn of the new Ashram at Kalkaji. The devotees of Delhi were now the proud owners of a building and grounds where they could make arrangements for Sri Ma's sojourn. Haribabaji came from Vrindavan to add to the gratification of the people of Delhi. The occasion was marked by the famous *nāmayajna*, the speciality of the devotees of Delhi. Dhiren Dutta, the moving spirit of the *kirtan* as well as the organization of the Ashram precincts, was very happy. It had been his dream that here should be a round hall for the celebrations of *nāma-yajna* as the singers walk in a circle round the central altar throughout the day. Now at last there was a beautiful round hall in their own Ashram.

Nobody or no buildings however could curtail the random flights of the "bird on the wing", (*udā pākhi*). After a couple of days only Sri Ma went by car to Kharkhoda (30 August, 1954) to the Paramahansa Ashram.

Sri Ma returned to Delhi but started on her travels almost immediately. She came down to Kolkata after stopping at Kanpur and Varanasi. This journey to Kolkata was for the purpose of visiting Manmohan Ghosh who was hospitalised there after a very major operation. Manmohan Ghosh, one of the veteran devotees of Dhaka, had settled in Varanasi after the tragic events of 1946-47. He had been very ill and was taken to Kolkata for treatment. Sri Ma accompanied by Paramananda and Buni came straight to the P.G. Hospital from the railway station in a taxi.

Manmohan Ghosh was a devotee of extraordinary stature. His total surrender at Sri Ma's feet had been tested severely again and again, but he had never been found wanting. This time due to gangrene, one leg had had to be amputated in order to save his life. The old man, who was active by nature, now lay crippled and helpless, but he received Sri Ma composedly. It was characteristic of him that he could see humour in dire situations. He now brought a smile on the faces of his visitors by describing his present condition in jokular terms. Sri Ma's all-comprehensive compassionate glance and gracious presence however must have soothed his sufferings considerably.

Sri Ma went to Dum Dum for a while and then returned to the Hospital to sit with the patient till it was almost time for her return journey to Varanasi. Even in this short time people

had come to know of her presence in the city. The Ashram became full of an eager crowd awaiting her *darshana*. Sri Ma paid a short visit to the Ashram on her way to the railway station.

In Varanasi she attended a Bhagavat Saptaha. A talented young scholar of outstanding merit Srinath Shastriji came from Vrindavan to conduct the ceremony. He was acquainted with Dr. Panna Lal who introduced him to Sri Ma. This was the beginning of the close association of the scholar with the Ashram. He became devoted to Sri Ma.

Didi had been ill off and on. She had been staying in Varanasi while Sri Ma visited other towns. On the occasion of Bhagvat Saptaha the Ashram filled up with devotees from far and near. Mrs. Kalpakkam Padmanabhan from Madras was desirous of recording Sri Ma's voice on her own tape-recorder. Sri Ma had no *kheyāla* to sing or talk to this machine. She said, 'One must not speak of God in vain.' But she yielded to Mrs. Kalapakkam's entreaties and sang for her for sometime. Strangely, when the lady replayed her cassette, all other conversations and songs were heard but it was blank where Sri Ma's voice should have been on record. Mrs. Kalpakkam said, "I wanted to see some miracles near Ma, so I am pleased that she has shown me a little of the power of her *kheyāla*!"

In mid-September Sri Ma went to Allahabad for three days to stay with Gopal Thakur at Satya Gopal Ashram. She then again went to Kolkata to visit Manmohan Ghosh in the Hospital. From Kolkata she went to Puri and then Jamshedpur. The devotees of the steel town were transported

with joy at this unexpected advent but as usual they quickly organized themselves for Sri Ma's reception and the management of the affairs of her retinue.

Durga Puja at Ranchi (1954)

The time of the annual Durga Puja drew near. This year the venue was the new Ashram at Ranchi. This new house had been donated to the Ashram by Dr. Priyaranjan Ghose, a young dentist of the town. He had participated in the Samyam Saptaha in Kolkata the previous year. Since then he had become a devotee of Sri Ma. The house he was building for himself was now the Ashram. Sri Ma had sent Didi to Ranchi to guide the new and inexperienced devotees in the ways of preparing for this most magnificent of all festivals. Didi found them full of enthusiasm but very fearful about monetary support. The Bengali population in Ranchi was not large. The Puja-Committee realized that expenses were mounting by leaps and bounds, whereas contributions were limited. Didi laughed at their apprehensions. She assured them that ordinarily it was right to work within a budget but where Sri Ma's *kheyāla* was concerned funds would be available without fail and that they should not worry about money. Within a short while the devotees of Ranchi realized the truth of this statement. One businessman volunteered to supply the tin-sheets for the roofing of the extensive pandal; another supplied the posts and so on. With the coming of Sri Ma, the little Ashram took on the aspects of a colourful hub of various puja-activities. The people of Ranchi in large numbers attended *kirtans* and *satsangs*. Sri Ma as usual deployed groups of people for various activities. Some were put in

charge of decorations, some were responsible for buying and putting in stock large amounts of food grains, some for buying the daily supply of vegetables and fruits etc. Those who were qualified were engaged in the formal reading of the *Durgasaptasati* for the three days of the main *puja*. Women were engaged in performing *Kumari-puja*. In short the seemingly unwieldy crowd was seen to be organised into multiple occupations all adding to the general air of a beautiful religious function. Kusum Brahmachari performed the ceremony of installation as well as the *puja*.

The devotees of Ranchi were bemused participants and congratulated themselves again and again for being given the opportunity of living in an atmosphere of the miraculous.

It was time again for bidding farewell to one group of people in order to respond to other invitations. Sri Ma proceeded to Vrindavan where Haribabaji was awaiting her eagerly. He had come to the Anandamayi Ashram and had taken upon himself the responsibility of making it ready for Sri Ma's coming. He had it decorated and himself received Sri Ma at the gate with his *kirtan* party and then escorted her to her room.

Sri Ma was prevailed upon to visit Jullundhar yet again. The Mahatma himself with the help of Avadhootji saw to all arrangements for this tour of the places, which were dear to his heart. Haribabaji's spiritual preceptor's (Guru) Ashram in Hoshiarpur was an important landmark. Haribabaji was partial to band-parties which leant some pomp and splendour to the reception parties. It was seen that he was also very

pleased with festoons of paper chains and other colourful paper decorations. In time Sri Ma's Ashrams also came to be decorated in this fashion whenever the Mahatma was expected to grace a festival. Panuda, in general, heading the reception-committees, became an adept at organising band-parties along with *kirtan* parties for receiving the Mahatmas.

This time also Sri Ma visited Khanna and went to the *Samadhi-Mandir* of Triveni Puriji Maharaj. Sri Ma was quite well known here since the Mahatmas had celebrated her Birthday in Khanna in 1952.

Sri Ma had distinguished visitors on October 23. The High Commissioner of Pakistan Raja Gaznafar Ali Khan came to see her bringing with him his friend and colleague the Deputy High commissioner. Raja Gaznafar Ali Khan was well known to Sri Ma, but his colleague saw her for the first time. He was overwhelmed at this first *darshana*. He seemed to be transported into a different region. In this bemused state he started to perform the *namāz* while reciting verses from the Quran. This state of transportation lasted for almost half an hour. Sri Ma sat quietly looking upon him in her own inimitable aspect of total comprehension.

The visitors were scheduled to leave in the evening but due to this phenomenon they stayed overnight. The local people made suitable arrangements for them. The Deputy High commissioner, a highly educated, middle aged man, said to his friend that he did not know what had happened to him but he had experienced a bliss unimagined before. He wished to resign his post and stay in any of Sri Ma's Ashrams in order to live a life of renunciation. But apparently the pull

of the world was too strong for the time being. Next day he took a lingering farewell and departed for their Embassy.

After her sojourn in Punjab Sri Ma returned to Vrindavan on October 24. Didi had not been able to accompany Sri Ma on her travels for quite sometime. She had become almost bed-ridden due to severe backache. There was a shadow of depression over the Ashram because of Didi's ill health.

The festival of light, *Deepavali*, was at hand. The Ashram was decorated tastefully by the younger members of the community. The tradition of honouring brothers by sisters on the second day (*bhāiyā-dwooj*) was always observed in the Ashram in a special way. Usually the entire congregation sat in rows while Didi placed sandalwood mark on everyone's forehead one by one, including women. Sri Ma had said that this was a *brahmabindu*, a reminder of the ultimate aim of life and an acknowledgement of a communion of spirit. It had been started by Swami Shashwatanandaji years ago and people were happy to continue with it. This year, Didi being bed-ridden the devotees were sad to think that they would have to miss out on this charming ritual. But Sri Ma said, "Every year Didi comes to you with the *tikā* (mark to put on the forehead); this year all of you can approach her one by one and so receive your *tikā*!" So Sri Ma started a new trend, which pleased everyone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Samyama Saptah in Mumbai

"Sri Haribabaji, Sri Krishnananda Avadhootji, Sri Swatantranandaji, Sri Chakrapaniji and the Mahant and Sannyasis of the Sannyāsa Ashram were present and gave illuminating discourses. The last item of the daily programme 'Conversation with Mataji' was no doubt the most popular one. Although Juhu is about 12 miles distance from the heart of the city, often 20 to 30 cars were parked in the compound while the greater part of the congregation came by train and bus."

Kolkata had been the venue of the third *Samyam Saptah*. This had fired the imagination of the devotees of Mumbai, another metropolitan city. They wished to host the function for the year 1954. S. N. Sopory, a dedicated devotee, was the moving spirit behind this enterprise. He had planned to hold the function in the Sannyasa Ashram, a place already familiar with Sri Ma and her ways. But due to unforeseen circumstances this plan had to be abandoned. Before a crisis-situation could develop all problems were solved in an almost spectacular fashion. A new comer to the fold of Sri Ma's devotees, B.K. Shah, offered the use of two unoccupied big residences on Juhu beach. The property belonged to his friend, a business entrepreneur. B.K. Shah himself undertook the task of such repairs and renovations as the houses required. A suite of temporary rooms made of wood was erected on the roof of one of the houses for Sri Ma. A huge *pandal* was put up in front for the routine of *satsangs* etc. Within a short while everyone came to know B.K. Shah. His

quiet unassuming demeanour hid his dynamic personality. Some of the older devotees were reminded of Bhaiji when they came in touch with B.K. Shah. People began to depend upon him almost unconsciously. His unostentatious but effective management brought about a new level of efficiency in the affairs of the Ashram. He began to be known as "Bhaiya" (brother) among the devotees. He in turn came to know the Mahatmas, who were Sri Ma's V.I.P. guests for the *Samyam Saptaha* and also many of Sri Ma's close companions, chiefly Didi, who was, at this time, very ill indeed.

The *Samyam Saptaha* was seen to be the most appreciated of all functions taking place in the Ashrams. There were signs that its popularity would increase year by year. Participants came from far off places. The Mahatmas were pleased to see the dedication toward an ascetic way of life in the people who ordinarily would not know anything about such a regimen. The Raja Saheb of Baghat (Jogibhai) of course was one of the first to arrive. The Maharaja and Maharani of Tehri Garhwal, the Raja and Rani of Amb came with Sri Ma's party. Although unused to the rigours involved they participated fully in the routines. Everything was made easy and possible by Sri Ma's presence. A multitude consisting of *sannyasis* (ascetics), brahmacharies, business magnates, scholars, state officers, princes and also very ordinary people, mingled together to form a colourful mosaic of a worshipful congregation. The *Samyam Saptaha* ended on the happy note of a general *bhandārā* (feast) for all.

Didi's Illness

B. K. Shah had been taking note of Didi's ill health and the

frequent visits of doctors to her bedside. One day he spoke quietly to Sri Ma, "Ma, Didi calls me 'Bhaiya', so may I assume the responsibility of a brother and arrange for her treatment?" Sri Ma immediately granted him his request.

Panuda made him acquainted with the history of Didi's illness. Didi had been examined in Kolkata as well as in Delhi. In Mumbai also Kantibhai Munshaw had called in many doctors to Didi's bedside. But somehow Didi did not respond to any kind of treatment. The backache had become so severe as to make her bed-ridden. Sri Ma was on the point of leaving Mumbai. Reservations had been made for Didi and the girls who took care of her for going back to Varanasi. Before leaving Vrindavan Sri Ma had sent for Renu from the Kanyapeeth at Varanasi to come over to take charge of Didi's nursing which Renu took up most willingly. In the beginning Renu had Gini to help her. Sri Ma delegated Kamalda as escort for Didi's entourage which consisted now of Renu, Vishuddha, Billoji, Manadi and a servant.

Bhaiya requested Sri Ma to permit Didi to stay back in Mumbai so that doctors could examine her for a proper diagnosis of her malady. Sri Ma at once agreed to this change of plans. In retrospect, it seems to have been a landmark in the way of Sri Ma's being in this world because it marked the beginning of the end of Didi Gurupriya's life of active participation in the ongoing drama of Sri Ma's travelogue. Didi was the last of the close companions of the days of Dhaka, a person who had seen Sri Ma in her states of samadhi, in her majestic aura of divinity in Shahbagh and Siddeshwari and other innumerable situations of miraculous dispensations of mercy and grace. Didi, the closest of Sri Ma's constant

companions, never lost her awe of the personality she served; she always approached Sri Ma with trepidation and humility. Didi was replaced by an entourage of younger men and women near the person of Sri Ma. These young people were devoted and dedicated to the best of their abilities but it seems the quality of unquestioning surrender was not demanded of them. Sri Ma herself became more approachable or rather the majesty was veiled still further.

All this however lay in the future. At this time in Mumbai, Bhaiya accommodated Didi and her companions in his own spacious flat in Breach Candy House on the seashore. The best doctors, eminent surgeons examined Didi and held consultations amongst themselves. Kamalda and Renu and Vishuddha came to know Bhaiya very well as well as Dr. Surabhai Seth, the In-charge of Nanavati Hospital, who was related to Bhaiya. Didi's severe backache was diagnosed as bone TB. The doctors advised a plaster cast for the back to immobilize it. Bhaiya realised that it would be the most severe trial for Didi to be obliged to stay away from Sri Ma in so helpless a condition. He consulted with various experts. They agreed to a halfcast from the shoulder to the knees; when lying inside it the patient would be immobile but she could be lifted out of this cast at times for a little relief from this helpless condition. Bhaiya had a special trolley made for Didi. It was like a hospital gurney but made of polished wood and steel and narrow enough to go into the First Class Railway compartments. Bhaiya made sure that Didi could travel in some comfort in case Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* that she should.

Renu was given some training by professional nurses. She

was tall and strong enough to lift Didi out of the cast or put her in again. Didi was very conscious of the magnanimity of Bhaiya and his family. She knew that the quality of the medical care and loving concern that she was receiving from almost total strangers was due to Sri Ma's *krpā* (grace). The entire Gujarati community of devotees adopted the little family staying at Breach Candy House as special guests. The ladies were ready to render any help that could be asked of them. Amongst this quiet group of women was Lila Ben, the wife of B.K. Shah. She was so unassuming and retiring that it took Didi and Renu a while to recognize her as the mistress of the house they were staying in. Lila Ben was quite an accomplished person; in her quiet and unobtrusive way, she was a very competent chate-laine.

While Didi continued in Mumbai Sri Ma travelled around in her own unpredictable ways, but remained in the state of Gujarat. Sri Ma wrote many encouraging letters to Didi, such as:

"Sorrow is impracticable The mind becomes weak due to illness. It loses judgement. Didi all her life has been non-caring, robust, ready for any contingency, is it not expected that she should be the same now? It is true that the pain is excruciating. She has to lie in bed for a while, so what!"

"You have never wanted any comfort of the world. The body is now in an awkward situation (demanding attention). Try to keep your mind away from this predicament. All your life you have been brave; not regarding any obstacle-now also this very perspective is expected (of you). (You should) think whatever He does is for taking me beyond the duality of convenience and inconvenience. His dispensation! Joy!

(*ānanda!*)".

Sri Ma visited the Ashram at Bhimpura giving delight to the elderly Mahantji of Tikamji Temple at Chandod on the other side of the river. The Mahantji would visit her frequently while she resided at Bhimpura. This region is replete with the sites of great *tapasyā* (rigorous *sādhana*) performed by ascetics of note. One such was the Ashram at Ganganath. The head of this ashram Swami Kailashanandaji was the *gurubhāi* (disciples of the same guru) of Balananda Brahmachariji Maharaj of Deoghar. Sri Ma now was invited to this Ashram. It was like a meeting of family members. Sri Ma's entire retinue was treated to a feast on the occasion.

Sri Ma came to Ahmedabad to attend a Bhagvat Saptah at the house of Kantibhai Munshaw. This function was as well organised in every detail as one would expect from such an executive as Kantibhai. His spacious house and gardens remained teeming with crowds of devotees for seven days. The Saptah was concluded on December 19, 1954.

Sri Ma had been invited to visit many nearby places. She went to visit the Yoga Ashram where a Gujarati Mahatma was in charge.

He had lived there for 18 years, practising his *sādhana*. Arriving at his residence, Sri Ma unaccountably hesitated for a few seconds. She looked at Mukundbhai, her escort, who assured her that the house was an ashram lived in by ascetics only. Everyone knew that since leaving Dhaka, Sri Ma had not entered the residences of any of her devotees or rather any homes of householders. In effect she was like a wandering mendicant and such was evidently her *kheyāla*.

Mukundbhai later came to know that the house where the yogi resided was actually a home belonging to a family who lived on the top floor. The rest of the house was given over for the use of the yogi. Mukundbhai was so distressed to realise that he had unwittingly given wrong information to Sri Ma that he cried like a child. Sri Ma then said, "Do not be unhappy. It was ordained because it has fulfilled Bhaiji's words uttered a long time ago. He had said, 'Why should you not enter a home which is used for *sādhana* only?' So you see Bhaiji's wish has been fulfilled today." Mukundbhai was comforted by Sri Ma's words that whatever had transpired was meant to be so.

Sri Ma also visited a small institution for children named 'Ananda Bal Mandir'. Some time ago a gentleman had written to ask her permission for establishing such an institution. He had dreamt of such an enterprise. Sri Ma had written back to endorse his good intentions of rendering service to children. Now she saw the school, which was being run by the gentleman, his wife and his sister, all dedicated to the care and concern of its residents. Sri Ma sang for the children and gave them fruits and sweets. The children in their turn recited hymns quite impressively in honour of her visit.

On December 21st Sri Ma left Ahmedabad for Bhopal. At Baroda Junction Sri Ma spent sometime in the waiting room with her retinue as well as Kanti bhai, Chinu bhai, Mukund bhai and their wives. Sri Ma was in a light-hearted mood. By uttering pleasantries she kept her audience in fits of laughter for quite a while. Nobody actually understood her oblique references to the ways of the people around her but her sheer delight in her experience of this variety kept them totally

amused. She said, "Do you know how many things I eat everyday? Some dishes are sweet, some tart, some hot and some bitter! There are foreign dishes too!"

The way she described the multiplicity of these offerings evoked spontaneous laughter from her audience. Sri Ma's effervescent fountain of laughter was pure enchantment because she laughed only at that which she found absurd in her vicinity.

From Bhopal Sri Ma undertook the return journey to Varanasi to attend the annual Gita Jayanti in the Ashram to be celebrated by Gopal Thakur and his disciples from Allahabad.

Didi was now ready to join Sri Ma. Bhaiya reserved a full 6-berth compartment for Didi in the train so that she would cause no inconvenience to other travellers. Her trolley was rolled into the compartment. In this way her companions could travel in comfort also.

At Itarsi Junction Didi was happy to have *darshana* of Sri Ma, who came from Bhopal. Sri Ma had brought a special garland for her and greeted Didi with great kindness. From Itarsi Didi and Sri Ma travelled together to Varanasi.

A number of functions were celebrated at Varanasi. The time coincided with the winter vacation of schools and colleges, so a lot of families arrived at the Ashram to stay near Sri Ma for a fortnight or so. The Gita Jayanti was well attended. Evening *satsangs* also were very satisfying for all the devoted persons waiting the year round and looking forward to Sri Ma's visit to Varanasi. Many delightful dialogues were held with Sri Ma everyday. Amulya Kumar's

books are a treasure house of these conversations which he recorded faithfully everyday.

On January 1, 1955 Manmohan Ghosh came back to Varanasi. Sri Ma received the crippled old man in the Ashram. She then personally saw to the arrangements for his comfort in the nearby house where he was to live for a few more years. Manmohan Ghosh adjusted to his crippled state by taking up the study of Scriptures very seriously. He proved himself worthy of being one of the special band of people who had witnessed the emergence of the Ma of Shabdhag into public life.

Sri Ma's journeys to various nearby places continued while Didi remained at Varanasi Ashram. Sri Ma visited Vindhyachal, Patna and Rajgir. On the occasion of this year's Saraswati Puja Sri Ma had been invited to the house of Gopal Swarup Pathak at Allahabad. Sri Ma spent a couple of days at Allahabad returning to Varanasi on January 29. In the meantime Haribabaji Maharaj had arranged for many religious rites to be performed all with the aim of bringing about Didi's recovery. He could not reconcile himself to the fact of Didi's bed-ridden condition. He came to Varanasi to see to these rituals. He had all along initiated various ceremonial undertakings with a view to alleviating her pain. He would sit near her bedside and say words of encouragement. He firmly believed in the remedial efficacy of rituals.

Under his supervision all rituals were performed with scrupulous care. He was convinced that Didi would be able to get back her health soon. While the Mahatmas were invoking

divine healing powers, Bhaiya was bringing doctors to her bedside. Bhaiya came accompanied by Dr. Balram from Delhi. Dr. Balram was a specialist. He examined Didi and gave the opinion that she had responded very well and had made remarkable progress toward recovery. Everyone was pleased. It was also his opinion that Didi should stay in a cool climate during the summer months, Jogibhai immediately requested that Sri Ma should come to Solan for the summer. He would make arrangements for all the Mahatmas who would like to come and stay near Sri Ma during the Janmotsava in May.

Haribabaji had left for Vrindavan. He was expecting Sri Ma in Vrindavan during Holi again. This year a new temple was being built in Vrindavan Ashram to house the Images of Sri Gauranga Mahaprabhu and Nityananda Mahaprabhu. Sometime ago Manohar had expressed a keen desire for such a temple. It seems Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to fulfil his wishes because the temple and the exquisite images happened quite fortuitously. So Vrindavan was next in line for witnessing the gathering of devotees for this celebration. Didi also made the journey, but she was still in the trolley.

The installation ceremony was accomplished amidst great fanfare and rejoicings. The statues, executed by Nitai Pal, the famous sculptor of Krishnanagar, captivated the hearts of all. The privileged person who sponsored the installations was Dr. Pannalal.

Sri Ma's Injury

On 31st March, Sri Ma sustained a slight injury to her foot. She was standing on the steps of the new temple awaiting

Haribabaji who was going to hold the evening *satsang* on this spacious verandah. Somehow she twisted her ankle and sat down where she was standing. The Mahatma had arrived, so Sri Ma dissuaded her companions from making any fuss. She continued to sit where she was. By her direction wet cloths were put loosely on the ankle so unobtrusively that not many knew anything about it.

After the *satsang*, Sri Ma again dissuaded her companions from seeking help from Delhi, Mumbai, etc. They knew that Bhaiya's telephone calls were very effective and he would have summoned the best doctors to Sri Ma or escorted her to them. It was Sri Ma's *kheyāla* to be treated by the local Civil Surgeon Dr. Mallick. He came immediately but it was already quite late. He bandaged her ankle lightly saying he would like to take her to the hospital for X-rays.

Sri Ma was put on a chair and carried to a nearby room instead of her own, which was upstairs. Next morning Dr. Mallick came to escort her to the hospital. Here not only the staff but some of the patients also at once surrounded her. They came to have *darshana* of Sri Ma. They were happy to find her near them so unexpectedly. After the Radiologist had done his work, Sri Ma returned to the Ashram. Dr. Mallick was of the opinion that there was a hairline crack and the foot should be put in a plaster cast.

Didi and others were very reluctant to subject Sri Ma to this ordeal without getting a second opinion. Delhi after all was so close and so many distinguished doctors would be too ready to be of service to her. But Sri Ma's *kheyāla* was otherwise. She said, "Let Pitaji (Dr. Mallick) do as he thinks proper." Then in order to please her retinue she said, "If I can-

wish you can show the x-ray plates to other doctors later." Dr. Mallick came with the paraphernalia of a plaster cast. He himself knelt down and examined anew Sri Ma's delicate small foot. At the last minute he decided against the plaster; he said he would tie up the foot with elastic crepe bandage. He did this glancing frequently at Sri Ma's face as doctors do to watch for reactions. Sri Ma laughed and said, "Pitaji, you will not get any signs from here! Whatever happens to this body is acceptable."

A little misled by Sri Ma's unchanging serene expression, the Doctor made the bandage too tight. During the day there was swelling all around it but Sri Ma would not allow anybody to touch it till Dr. Mallick himself came and removed it hastily. He was full of remorse. He now did a more comfortable job with a lighter bandage, coming to know Sri Ma a little better each time he visited her.

Sri Ma continued to attend all the activities of the Ashram. The congregation did not realize at all that Sri Ma was in any kind of pain or discomfort. Didi and her attendants left for Solan via Delhi on April 11. It was decided that Sri Ma would follow later. Didi's doctors however delayed her in Delhi. Courses of injections were prescribed which would continue for a few days. Sri Ma paid a visit to Delhi for a couple of days, more in order to be with Didi over the New Year (April 15) than anything else. Many doctors were ready to take charge of her foot but she elected to go back to Vrindavan to her own doctor. Dr. Mallick was now ready to allow Sri Ma to walk on the foot for a few steps with the support of a companion. He removed the crepe bandage. Only a light bandage remained as a supportive measure. It was just three weeks since the injury.

Janmotsava in Solan 1955

On April 24 Sri Ma and her considerable retinue arrived at Kalka Railway station. Jogibhai had arranged for an ambulance for Didi (because of her trolley), a bus for the many attendants and a spacious car for Sri Ma. Arriving at Solan they found everything in perfect order as was usual in Raja Saheb's household. Sri Ma's house at one end of the Tennis Court (erstwhile) was well maintained. Everyone settled in for a prolonged sojourn in these gracious surroundings.

Devotees started arriving in Solan from far and near. A pattern of *satsang* came into being. Sri Ma would sit at one end of the spacious verandah in the forenoon. She would answer questions for a couple of hours. In the evening also there would be reading of the scriptures and then dialogues with Sri Ma. Krishnananda Avadhootji came to stay near Sri Ma for a while. He enriched the *satsangs* with his erudite speeches every evening for one hour. Sri Ma strolled on the tennis courts sometimes. Sometimes she sat in her room surrounded by five or six young people and answered her letters. All letters written to Sri Ma, unless requiring immediate answers, were stored in a bag. This bag increased in size as Sri Ma's swift movements and busy programmes precluded her from listening to them. But now with a settled routine, the letter reading sessions became frequent. All letters were read out scrupulously, even three or four from the same person. Each person would read one letter, listen to the answer and write it down. Then it was the next person's turn. Sri Ma hardly ever paused for a reply. She spoke decisively and clearly. On rare occasions she would ask the answer to be read out to her while

she made minor alterations. The big bag of letters, the most constant item in Sri Ma's baggage, began to lose its bulk in Solan!

Conversations with Sri Ma :

Question : Ma, how can we get rid of agonising thoughts?

Answer : There are two kinds of agonising thoughts; one kind which pertains to the world and the second a desperation for spiritual felicity; the second is the remedy for the first. He is peace, He is serenity, the *Atmā*-you can experience so. When you become desperate for ultimate peace then you will be rid of all agonising thoughts of the world.

Question : Whenever I sit for my *sādhana* I am sure to be disturbed by something in the house or the children. I never get any time to myself!

Answer : If you change your attitude this will not happen. The children are images of *God-balgopāla* given into your care, the household is your *grhasthāsrama* isn't it, a place where you render service to God in many ways. If you can look upon all your work as service (*sevā*) to Him only then you will not feel irritated. What else is there but He?

A young man wished to know if she had something to say to people like him.

Sri Ma : Time is important. Do not waste it. Do not forget that your heritage is Immortality. You and your friends spend a lot of time together-why don't you devote some of it to the quest? Perhaps you may read a scriptural text together, maybe once a week hold a *satsang*. Make use of the time given to you. Help each other to formulate questions. The answers will come!

Question: If a person commits suicide, can he attain to a higher state?

Answer : Such actions lead to inauspicious consequences; you go from one darkness to a further darkness. Why it should be so is not a proper question-actions carry their own results, such is His will. But if one abides in contemplation of God then he is free of all fears and dreads. He is your own, the innermost self-the *ātmā*, whether in a *satsang*, or by your own self, call upon Him, pray to Him, otherwise the screen cannot be removed. Do not try to give bribes to God-that is not right. If you seek to deceive, then you will yourself suffer.

The slayer and his instigator are both culpable aren't they? Auspicious actions are also of a similar nature. Any effort however small will bring about a good result.

Question : The world has us in its grip. It is difficult to get away from it.

Sri Ma : Don't you wind your watch or clock once a day? Tell your self that a few minutes of each day belong to God. Become the manager (caretaker) of your household (not the boss or head). If you discharge your duties thinking that you are rendering service to God in this way, then also you are close to God. In time you can become a true servant of God.

If you see 'stone' you do not see God and if you see an Image then you do not see 'stone'. The question 'Where is God' is a quest which will bring about a transformation. It is necessary to bring about the realization that God alone is manifest everywhere in every way. The world is changing all the time. Constant change is its nature but where there is a touch of the Divine, there is no question of transitoriness. The

changing world reveals constant destruction-this is not the region of the manifestation of Truth-here there cannot be Reality-in-itself! The destruction-prone world does not go beyond itself. What is required is the cessation of the process, the destruction of destruction (*nāsher nāsh*)."

After a pause Sri Ma said, "The nature of worldly pleasure is such that it generates disquiet. It cannot be otherwise. If fulfilled there is hankering for more, if unfulfilled, there is sorrow. If is necessary then to try to control the mind with meditation and *japa*. When you go on a journey, you pack the things which are necessary for it; you do not burden yourself with a lot of extra baggage. The quest for truth is also a journey, equip yourself with suitable gear. How? Adopt ways of behaviour which will be supportive-that is intake of good wholesome food in just sufficient measures; some time must be given to *dhyana* and *japa*, or the reading of scriptures, singing or listening to devotional music. Even if these practices are distasteful in the beginning, perseverance may bring about the change of heart, an interest in the pursuit of one's own true self-*ātmā*. The way will open out for you. Worldly thoughts will drop away by themselves because that which is inessential ceases to be effective.

"It is the nature of fire to burn. It is not possible that you should approach a fire and not feel the warmth. So remembrance of God repels all that is not good from your vicinity. The saints say that nobody can accumulate so much sin as cannot be annulled by God's Name! Just as you cannot amass so much material that cannot be reduced to nothing by a spark of fire! Keep to your practice. The scriptures and all Masters say that efforts toward God-realization can never

be in vain. Surround yourself in God remembrance. It is to be hoped that sooner or later one's attention will become focussed and undeviating. After all God as Truth is within you! So actually you strive to find your own Self, to make a recovery, which is of the nature of bliss! He alone is!"

Solan filled up with devotees. The princely household looked after the ever-increasing crowd most competently. Everyone was pleased with the quality of hospitality and gracious entertainment. Sri Ma's Birthday on May 10 (1955) was celebrated with great rejoicing and auspicious ceremonies. Kusum Brahmachari had the privilege of performing the *puja*.

In general Sri Ma left all towns after big functions, perhaps to ease her devotees of the burden of management. In Solan, Jogibhai was all too ready and capable of supporting the large gathering of people clustering round Sri Ma. A very relaxed time was enjoyed by all after the very successful celebration of the Janmotsava.

On May 27, Brahmachari Kantibhai brought some flowers to Sri Ma to commemorate the naming ceremony of the previous year. He had been named Raghunath Das. Bharat Bhai was given the name Bharadwaj and Hiru Brahmachari had become Haraprasad. Sri Ma now had the *kheyala* to give names to other young people. Kusum Brahmachari was named Shukdevananda, Panu Brahmachari became Gambhirananda. A Gujarati young man from Narmada was staying with the devotees for some time. Ma gave him the name Dattatreyananda. Jogibhai arranged for a lavish feast for all to mark the occasion.

Sri Ma from time to time had the *kheyala* to give new names to people who became close to her. Sri Ma had already named Blanca Schlamm (the Austrian teacher at Rajghat) Atmananda. The American young man in her retinue (Jack Unger) was known as Jayananda; The French doctor (Dr. Weintrob from Alsace-Lorraine) was named Vijayananda. Colin Turnbull (from Oxford, England) was known as Premananda in the Ashram.

At this time the prestigious All Faiths Conference was taking place in Bangalore. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan was President-Elect. Dr. T. M. P. Mahadevan, a scholar of international reputation, wrote to the Ashram for a message from Sri Ma for the conference. He had met Sri Ma during her visit to South India in 1952.

It was not Sri Ma's way to make pronouncements. Realizing the importance of the request Didi and others made repeated appeals to awaken Sri Ma's *kheyala*; after a while Sri Ma spoke these words:

O thou Immortal Self!
A pilgrim on the path from
Mortality to Immortality.
Eternal self ever the wayfarer,
Abide thou in Thyself.

Two summer months were spent in Solan. At the end of June Sri Ganesha Datta Goswamiji came from Rishikesh to invite Sri Ma to the Saptarishi Ashram for the next Samyam Saptah. Actually the 6th Samyam Saptah was held in Rishikesh as New Delhi had already been accepted as the

venue of the fifth.

The pleasant summer holidays at Solan were drawing to a close. Many new members became attached to the ever-expanding family of devotees. Kripalji came with her little daughter Guneeta to stay with Sri Ma during this time. Chitra Ghosh and Jharna Sarvadhikary, the two friends, came from Kolkata. Chitra had returned from her studies in the U.S.A. A German young girl Miss Eva Bosch spent long hours with Sri Ma conversing with her in private.

Gopal's mother' came from Varanasi. She was a widowed lady, originally from Vrindavan. When Sri Ma first knew her, she was almost out of her mind mourning the death of her pet cat! She was so attached to this cat that her friends would call her "*Berāler Ma*" (Cat's Mother).

Sri Ma had listened to her lamentations, not once but many times, patiently and with great kindness. Sri Ma gave her an Image of Gopal and asked her to lavish her love on him. She would become known as "Gopaler Ma" (The mother of Gopal) She was accommodated in Varanasi Ashram. Sri Ma made all suitable arrangements for her. Gopaler Ma somehow acquired another cat but unfortunately this cat ran away from her, plunging her in sorrow. Sri Ma sent for her to come to Solan. Now Sri Ma listened again to her grief-stricken accounts of the latest tragedy in her life. The audience to this dialogue was either amused or impatient but Sri Ma's total absorption in the story of the missing cat could not be doubted. Sri Ma again and again spoke words of consolation and understanding.

It has been seen many times that a man, a woman or child

with focussed attention and sincerity of purpose was pleasing to Sri Ma. Evidently desultoriness has no great spiritual merit.

On July 5, 1955, Gurupurnima was celebrated with great enthusiasm. Many remember that this occasion was enlivened by the *pushpānjali* (offering of flowers) *mantras* pronounced by Niraj Nath Mukerji of Allahabad. His repertoire of *mantras* was enormous. His pronunciation was clear and his voice deep and strong. Whenever he was available he would be a favourite person with the congregation for leading with suitable *mantras* for the offering of *pushpānjali*.

Moti: Moti was a big palace dog who had attached himself to Sri Ma. He would walk behind her when she strolled on the grounds or sit near her chair or *asana*. Whenever Sri Ma happened to distribute sweets, he would come forward for his share, which he took from her hand. He did not bother if other people were distributing edibles. On the day of Sri Ma's departure from Solan, Moti met with an accident on the road. He was found to be lying at one end of the Ashram Verandah. He did not come near Sri Ma. She herself went up to him and offered him a sweet but, alas, he did not take it but just licked her fingers. This was their last meeting as he died soon after.

Mid-July saw Sri Ma and her considerable entourage on its travels again. Didi Gurupriya came to Mumbai so that her doctors could assess her state of recovery. The well-known German radiologist, Dr. Kronenbergar, took the x-ray photos. Dr. Baliga, the surgeon-in-charge gave his opinion that the bones had knitted suprisingly well. What ordinarily should have taken a couple of years had been achieved within a few

months. The plaster was removed. Didi would later wear a steal and leather brace as support to her back. Haribabaji was informed that Didi had made an almost miraculous recovery.

Sri Ma also was kept informed of Didi's condition. On leaving Solan, she had gone to Dehradun, Hardwar and then Delhi. At the request of the devotees of Vrindavan she spent the festivals of Jhoolan and Janmashtami in the city of Sri Krishna.

Maharani Vijayaraje Scindhia of Gwalior had long wanted Sri Ma to visit her State. The Maharaja of Gwalior was the Governor of Madhya Pradesh. In mid August Sri Ma went to Gwalior for a visit. It was like a state-visit. The princely household could not do enough for Sri Ma's reception and comfort. The Maharani was a devout *Vaishnava*. She became very attached to Sri Ma. She and her people extended lavish hospitality toward Sri Ma as well as to all her companions. Sri Ma came away from Gwalior on August 18, 1955.

Sri Ma left Vrindavan on September 10 for Etawah and Mainpuri at the invitation of Bhargavaji. There was great rejoicing at these places. Bhargava and Bajpayee were devotees of long standing. They made suitable arrangements for Sri Ma and her retinue.

Sri Ma proceeded to Kanpur, Allahabad and then to Varanasi. The devotees of Kolkata were celebrating this year's Durga Puja. They were keen that Didi Gurupriya should also come to Kolkata. Didi was in Mumbai. Although she had recovered from the bone disease, she was suffering from stomach upsets, nausea and weakness. Some people were of the opinion, especially her cousin J. C. Mukerji, that

Didi should be brought away from the 12th floor of the high-rise building to the ground floor. Whatever the merits of this opinion Bhaiya immediately placed his own residence at Vile Parle at Didi's disposal. He had constructed a cottage for Sri Ma at the side of this house. The cottage was surrounded by lawns and beds of flowers. Sri Ma came to this cottage on October 9, 1955. This was Sri Ma's first visit to Sunayana House, Vile Parle. Subsequently this house became a major center of activities for the entirety of Sri Ma's ever expanding family. Bhaiya's adoption of Sri Ma's concerns was total. She got in the way of asking many who were in need of special medical care to go to Mumbai. Over the years relays of people came to Sunayana House and were treated at the nearby Nanavati Hospital. Dr. Surabhai Sheth was another man completely dedicated to this service of Sri Ma.

Didi was helped on to her feet for a few minutes and made to walk a few steps. Everyone was delighted to see Didi again on her feet albeit in a shaky condition. The devotees of Kolkata invited Bhaiya and Leelaben to visit their city to participate in the function of Durga Puja. They had never witnessed this peculiarly Bengali festival so they eagerly looked forward to it.

Sri Ma and her entourage arrived in Kolkata; as usual it was a tale of crowds, functions, *kirtans* and more crowds. This time Sri Ma stayed in Nirmal Chakraborty's house. After the successful conclusion of Durga Puja Sri Ma with a few companions retired to Dum Dum to Aptap Mitra's cottage. She could stay here away from the crowds for a few days. Not that Sri Ma was troubled by crowds. This was apparent because she visited Kolkata again after a few days.

Sri Ma asked Didi to go to Vindhyachal and stay there for a few days. Vindhyachal is a health resort and the hilltop Ashram was one of Didi's favourites.

Sri Ma herself travelled to Deoghar and then on to Rajgir, from where she came to Ranchi to grace the occasion of the installation ceremony of Kali in the new Ashram. The image being sculptured by Nitai Pal was seen to be specially beautiful.

From Ranchi Sri Ma came to Varanasi to attend the ceremony of Annakut on November 15, 1955. Sri Ma went to Vindhyachal for a day before leaving for Delhi. Didi had preceded her to Delhi for a consultation with her doctors as she had not improved during her stay at Vindhyachal.

Samyam Saptaha at the New Delhi Kalibari :

Sri Ma had come to Delhi to attend the 5th Samyam Saptaha which was held in the compound of the Temple of Kali. This function passed off with its characteristic hallmark of disciplined *sādhana* undertaken by a large number of devotees. The stage where Mahatmas sat was resplendent with the brightness of ochre robes, yet everyone missed Haribabaji Maharaj who had gone away to Hoshiarpur where he had been taken ill.

After the Samyam Saptah Sri Ma was prevailed upon to stay for a few days in the newly built Ashram at Chandraloka (Delhi).

Sri Ma travelled down to Varanasi but returned to Delhi in response to the prayers of the devotees of Haribabaji. She was told that Haribabaji was seriously ill. Sri Ma went to

Hoshiarpur and fetched him by plane to Delhi. She put him (in consultation with his devotees) under the medical care of Dr. Santosh Sen. He was admitted to Dr. Sen's Nursing Home for an operation.

Sri Ma stayed in Delhi while the Mahatma continued ill in the Nursing Home. Delhi being the capital city of India was full of important personalities. Many of them found their way to Sri Ma. Raja Gaznafar Ali Khan had become well known in the Ashram. Sri Ma herself paid a visit to the Rashtrapati Bhavan on 7th December by invitation. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan sat with her on the lawns, conversing familiarly for quite a while. The scholar was always pleased to be able to talk to her.

Sri Ma stayed in Delhi over the New Year 1956 in response to the prayers of all devotees who were happy to begin it with her *darshana*. She resumed her travels but kept in touch with the people of Haribabaji Maharaj. She returned to Delhi just before his discharge from the Nursing Home. He was accommodated in the new Ashram for a period of rest. After a month or so Sri Ma saw him off as he left for Hoshiarpur. Didi in the meantime had been settled in Varanasi Ashram. Sri Ma had given over her own room for Didi's use. When she herself came to the Ashram she occupied one of the small rooms in another part of the building.

All those who had come to know Bhaiya amongst Sri Ma's devotees were shocked to hear of a new Government policy regarding the nationalization of all Life Insurance Companies. In a surprise move, on January 22, 1956, the New India Assurance Company was taken over by the

Government of India leaving Bhaiya and his entire personnel stranded with the left over business of General Insurance which at that time was next to nothing. All the workers however were given a choice either to remain with the parent company or to come over to the Government. Some loyal and brave souls elected to stay with B. K. Shah (Bhaiya). At this time of severe trial, Bhaiya remained calm. He came to Delhi. No doubt he derived from Sri Ma's gracious presence whatever was needed to make him tide over this crisis. He had built up New India almost from scratch. Now he started again from the very bottom. Twice in one lifetime he proved the dynamism of his leadership. Within a few years the New India General Assurance Company became one of the leading ones in the country. In spite of this upheaval in his business career, he maintained his guardianship of Didi's affairs without any slackening of interest or efforts.

Ānanda Vārtā :

It has been recorded that the Ashram's quarterly magazine *Ānanda-Vārtā* came into being in 1952. Atmanandaji's dedication to this newsletter forged a very strong link between devotees from far and near. She began to correspond with foreigners who wished to get in touch with Sri Ma. She told them about her movements and probable place of residence. She asked them to send their questions, getting answers from Sri Ma whenever possible. In this way hundreds of people other than Indians found their way to Sri Ma over the years.

Sri Ma spent some time in Varanasi in February, 1956 to be with Didi who was still not too well. A well-known philosopher Dr. Boss came to meet her from Lucknow.

he was a visiting professor to the University. Within a few days he became very attached to Sri Ma.

The Dutch couple Dr. and Mrs. Bake also became enamoured of Sri Ma's songs. The Professor was a musicologist and was studying folk music of India on behalf of Oxford University. Husband and wife visited Ma many times.

M. Jean Herbert, the well-known French author, came to Varanasi at this time. He had seen Sri Ma almost twenty years ago. He had already written about Sri Ma and had translated the *Sadvāni* into French. He now met Vijayananda. (Dr. Weintrob) and also other foreigners who were staying in the Ashram, Jayananda (Jack Ungar) and Premananda (Collin Turnbull).

The Countess de Gang became devoted to Sri Ma after her *darshanā* in Varanasi Ashram. On her return to her country she wrote to request a memento from Sri Ma. Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to send her one of her own used *asanas*. Another lady Mme Miriam Orr became enamoured of Sri Ma after seeing one of her photographs in Paris. She wrote regularly and was happy to receive Sri Ma's *vānis*. She wrote to Atmananda for some *prasād* from Sri Ma. Sri Ma happened to be passing her fingers through her hair when Atmanandaji made the request. Sri Ma stretched out her hand. Atmanandaji was overwhelmed to see Ma was holding out a few fine soft hairs to her. Sri Ma then said, "No, no, this is nothing; send her some sweets." Atmanandaji however knew what would be more precious to the lucky recipient.

An Australian lady Edith Mason had come to Almora.

Their first meeting was remarkable. She sat bemused gazing at Sri Ma for a long time. Sri Ma also looked back into her eyes without blinking for the whole time. Edith Mason's ejaculations, "Wonderful! Wonderful! spoken softly broke the spell of silence. Only she and Sri Ma knew what they had received from each other!

Atmanandaji witnessed many a coming together of a seeker and Sri Ma. One Miss Violet Sydney, an American, became devoted to Sri Ma. She used to stay at Clarke's Hotel whenever she visited Varanasi. Once finding Sri Ma away in Vindhyachal, she invited Atamanandaji to the Hotel for a *matri-satsang* (talking about Sri Ma). While they sat on the broad verandah of the Hotel, they were astonished to see Sri Ma in a car near the entrance gate. They hurried forward and Miss Sidney was overjoyed to get a *darshan* so unexpectedly. Sri Ma said, "I thought I would see my mother on my way to the Ashram." Everyone marvelled at the quality of yearning, which had summoned Sri Ma quite a long way out of her usual route.

Richard Lannoy, a well-known photographer, came to India to collect material for his book. He saw Sri Ma and this lent meaning to a life-long commitment to his search for the beauteous form, which is Truth as seen by the artist.

Sri Ma had her own mode of communication with foreigners. Language evidently was never such a barrier as to be wholly frustrating. Evidently all those who could sustain the all knowing glance knew they had come home.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sri Ma and the Kanyapeeth

"You are extremely fortunate to be living in the special realm of Lord Siva Himself and on the bank of the Holy river. You have such dedicated and competent elder sisters to look after your health, studies and spiritual welfare. Be obedient to them. You should always be truthful and open in your behaviour. It should be your aim to live in harmony with your surroundings. Do your duties scrupulously. If you see another's duty undone for some unavoidable reasons then go to her help as a matter of course. Do not carry tales. If you think someone or something is wrong then try to set it right by talking amongst yourselves in friendship and understanding. Major lapses must of course be reported to the elders. Make proper use of your playhour as well as your study hours. Studies are for broadening of the mind and enlightenment, not only for passing examinations. If you suffer a failure, do not be dejected but tell yourself you will do better next time.

Young girls are like flowers who naturally find their place at God's feet. Live with the Image of God you love. He alone is the true Guardian for you. So learn to live ever in God-remembrance. This is the road to happiness."

-Sri Ma to the Kanyapeeth

During the years of the Mahāyajña the Kanyapeeth gained in stability because Sri Ma paid frequent visits to Varanasi. She had always laid emphasis on study for the

young girls. These studies had been conducted so far in rather a haphazard manner. Billoji, who had some experience of teaching, had introduced a system of classes, organized by the ringing of bells. Kshamadi and Renudi had taught the girls in this class system. Since the majority of girls were Bengalis their schooling was done in Bengali script. At this time Ganga Devi, a scholarly lady, came to reside in the Ashram. She undertook the schooling of the girls and prepared them for examinations in Kolkata, where she herself had been educated. This entailed the inconvenience of taking the girls to Kolkata and arranging for their prolonged stay. This did not answer at all because the girls did not achieve much success in their exams either.

At this time Miss Lalita Pathak (better known as Buāji in the Ashram) had become a devotee; she being a teacher knew other scholars in Allahabad and Varanasi. It was suggested that since the Kanyapeeth was now permanently settled in Varanasi there was no reason why they should not learn in Hindi and use the Devanagari script. The girls could appear for the various examinations of the Sanskrit University itself. Didi very enthusiastically endorsed this view. It was a question of requesting scholars in Varanasi to teach the girls of the Ashram. The first name in this respect was that of Padma Mishra, a person of remarkable talents and a scholar of distinction. She was already teaching in Banaras Hindu University. Buāji invited her to the Ashram.

Padmaji showed interest and quite spontaneously offered to teach herself! She came to the Ashram to have *darshana* of Sri Ma. Sri Ma was sitting out in the courtyard surrounded by the usual crowd. Padmaji bowed in front of her. Sri Ma spoke

a few words of greeting and welcome.

After a while Lalita Pathak and Bithu on behalf of Didi took Padmaji to the Kanyapeeth. They were impressed by Padmaji's immediate acquiescence in the role of guide and mentor for the young students presented to her. Padmaji talked to the bright young girls dressed in yellow and looking as fresh as flowers. Padmaji seemed to have found a job worthy of her talents. The schooling of the Kanyapeeth took on a new dimension from that day. The beginning of the triumphant future was made that day. Padmaji herself seemed to have found what she was looking for in rendering this service to Sri Ma.

On February 25th an inauguration ceremony of the new school was performed in the hall of the Kanyapeeth. Sri Ma herself sang the mantra "*satyam jñānam anantam brahma*" for a while. The girls recited a hymn to the Goddess of learning, Devi Saraswati.

Padmaji's sponsorship of the little school influenced other scholars of Varanasi. The retired teacher Sri T.R. Bhandarkar was prevailed upon to come daily to teach the girls. This prestigious saintly scholar became very pleased with his young students. The beautiful bond between the *guru* and scholars remained unbroken till his death. Under his guidance Sanskrit became a living language for the Kanyapeeth.

Over the years, it was felt that Sri Ma's *kheyāla* remained with the Kanyapeeth. The school flourished and in time became the most prestigious private institution for the study of Sanskrit in Varanasi. Didi's dream of an ashram where

young women could live in safety and comfort while following a life of spiritual dedication was realised.

Varanasi Ashram became the venue of many functions one after the other. Sri Ma paid a visit to Vrindavan in between for the intallation ceremony of five Siva *lingams* in the newly constructed temple in the Ashram on March 10. She was requested to stay on in Vrindavan for the colourful festival of Holi as well.

Acceding to Haribabaji's request Sri Ma went to Hoshiarpur. The Chief Engineer of Punjab Sri P. L. Varma had become attached to Sri Ma. He was a disciple of the famous architect le Corbusier who had built the new Chandigarh. He was very keen to escort Sri Ma to Chandigarh and wished to show Sri Ma his dream city. Sri Ma visited Chandigarh with him on April 8, 1956. Varmaji was happy to show Sri Ma the many architectural innovations of this capital city. He remained devoted to Sri Ma and rendered significant help to the organisers of the Ashram whenever they required the expertise of a skilled engineer.

Sri Ma came to Varanasi on April 12, just before the Bengali New Year.

On April 13 a most heart-warming ceremony was celebrated by the Kanyapeeth as well as the whole Ashram. This was the First Sannyasa-Utsava of Swami Muktananda Giriji or Didima as she was known generally. Didima was as perfect a human being as is possible in this world. She truly was a *sthitaprajna*. The Ashram was proud of her. The Annual Vasanti Puja was next celebrated with much enthusiasm, as Sri Ma was present in the Ashram. The girls

were quite proficient in all aspects of the *Puja*. They could render help to the priests, the cooks as well as provided the music for *āratis*. Some of the girls had also emerged as good musicians.

On Mahanavami (April 19) Sri Ma was given a yellow *chunari* by Ramaji Saxena. This special silk cloth is usually offered to the Goddess. Sri Ma wrapped it around her like a shawl. She picked up a pot of *prasād*, a mixture of cereals (*khichhri*), and started to distribute it to the people around her. In a trice a crowd collected round her. She walked to the main gate and sat down on the steps leading down to the lane outside the Ashram. A colony of fishermen live near the Ashram. Like a wireless message the news spread that Sri Ma was serving *prasād*. Dozens of children and their parents ran in from the nearby lanes and received the *prasād* from Sri Ma's hand. Orthodoxy got thrown overboard. Sri Ma made no distinctions as to the recipients. All castes and creeds were mingled together to create a *Jagannatha kshetra*. Narayana Swamiji put a little *khichhri* in Sri Ma's mouth also and he himself, the most orthodox of brahmins, ate a little of this luminous *prasād*. Sri Ma by a touch of her hand brought about a gleeful and clamorous participation of the entire colony of fishermen in the *Puja*.

Sri Ma's Janmotsava in Varanasi

This year (1956) saw Sri Ma attain her sixtieth year. It was a matter of great rejoicing amongst her devotees. They were desirous of celebrating it with as much fanfare as possible. Varanasi Ashram was chosen as the venue of the function. A big *pandal* was put up on a large piece of vacant

ground near the main road, which was later on acquired for the charitable hospital in Sri Ma's name. Leela Ben, Bhaiya's wife, took charge of the decorations. Although May is a summer month, nobody seemed deterred by any thought of discomfort.

Careful arrangements were made for the reception, accommodation and suitable programmes for all the scholarly Mahatmas who would grace the occasion. A unique feature of such functions near Sri Ma was the presence of all Heads of ascetic orders without even a whisper of doctrinal difference rising to disturb the harmony of a devout atmosphere. The ordinary people had the opportunity of listening in rapt attention to the charming discourses of Swami Akhandanandaji (Vrindavan). His resonant voice was suitable for every kind of *kathā* (discourses). He was equally proficient in Vedanta and the *lilā* of the child Krishna.

The large Bengali congregation was entertained by the *Ramayana-gān* of the two brothers known as the Ram Rasayan Party, who had a large repertoire of dramatic renderings of the incidents from the Epic (Ramrasayana). Prot. Tripurari Chakravarty had international fame as a speaker on the *Mahābhārata*. He spoke in Bengali and in English to other than Bengali audiences. Sri Ma requested him to speak in Hindi in Varanasi. The Professor took up the challenge and managed somehow to make himself understood using all three languages to begin with. Later he acquired some proficiency in Hindi.

The Gujarati ladies performed their *garbā* dance in the pandal one day. For the citizens of Varanasi the best part of



Ma being weighed in eight metals during her
Diamond Jubilee Celebration in Varanasi Ashram.
-May, 1956



Another scene from the concluding function of the Diamond Jubilee.
Ma sitting on the famous "Lion Throne" built of eight metals as conceived
by Swami Krishnananda Avadhootji, the great ascetic.

the *mahotsava* was the programme of classical music every evening in the pandal. In the presence of Sri Ma the elite musicians of the city performed to the great delight of the audience. Ustaaad Bismillah Khan, Pandit Kishan Maharaj, Pandit Samta Prasad and others happily responded to the invitation of the management committee. Ustaaad Ali Akbar Khan and Pandit Ravi Shankar played a *jugalbandi* one evening to make it memorable.

Sri Ma received the maestros in her room. She told Ali Akbar Khan that his father's cousin Ustaaad Aftabuddin Khan was a great friend of her father's, both being dedicated to the *sāadhanā* of music. All musicians were pleased and gratified to have Sri Ma as an auditor and considered it a landmark in their professional careers.

The Maharaja and Maharani of Tehri Garhwal and Jogibhai wished to arrange for the most prestigious ritual of *Sahasra-Chandi-Path* (The ritual had been inaugurated in the absence of the Maharani since she was delayed for a couple of days. When she arrived she was disappointed to see that the reading was not *samputita* that is, every *Sloka* (verse) is read bracketed by another couplet before and after. This takes a much longer time. The Maharani, although disappointed, did not say anything because it was already being performed.

The sacred rite was concluded and all the related functions performed with meticulous care. At this time the Maharani spoke to Sri Ma about the *samputita pāth*. Sri Ma said immediately, "Can you not arrange for it again, just as you had it in your mind to do?" Everyone was taken aback because only 15 days remained for the Janmotsava to be over. It

required elaborate preparations, diverse materials were needed and most importantly, a number of dedicated Brahmins were to be invited who would read the sacred text from morning till evening according to specific rules. It was pointed out to Sri Ma the next day being (20th May) a Sunday, no shops would be open for making the necessary purchases. Sri Ma said, "Try. It is Surajkumari's (the Maharani) wish, so see if things can be procured somehow!"

This was an instance of Sri Ma's *kheyāla* acting as a magic wand! A chance visitor to the Ashram, listening to the problem, offered the facilities of his own large shop in the city. The problem of utensils was solved. Other requirements were provided in the same fortuitous fashion. A large number of Pandits were initiated as readers. On the day of the inauguration, the devotees were nonplussed by the problem of seating arrangements. The squares of carpet for the readers were just too many for the hall. Sri Ma leant her hand to the placing of the *āsanas*. Within a short while the requisite number of seats were arranged neatly with space to spare!

Thus not only one but two *Sahasra-Chandi-Pāths* were achieved by the organisers much to the bemused admiration of all devotees. The Maharani's *satsankalpa* (auspicious resolution) was fulfilled by Sri Ma's *kṛpā* (grace).

Other dedicated men were so impressed by the organised *satsang* for large congregations that they requested the loan of the pandal for a local function of some moment, namely the 12th meeting of Akhil Bharatiya Ramayana Sammelan. Sri Nagesh Upadhyayaji, the convenor, was happy to entertain the members who came from far off towns. He connected this

function with Sri Ma's Janmotsava by requesting Didi to head the reception committee.

Krishnananda Avadhootji participated wholeheartedly in the Janmotsava. He said to Didi that he had a vision of Sri Ma seated on a lion. One of the very well-known Images of the Goddess Durga is so depicted and is known as "*Simhavāhini*". He was keen to see his vision realized if possible. Didi and all her advisors were put in a quandary because they knew Sri Ma would have no *kheyāla* for such ostentations and yet she was always so gracious toward the Mahatmas. After some consultations, the order for a Lion Throne was given to Nitai Pal, the renowned sculptor of Krishnanagar to be made out of eight metals. (*ashtadhātu*)

Avadhootji was pleased with the lion. It was exquisitely sculptured and being more than life-size, looked very majestic. There was a dark coloured velvet couch on its back. Small silver steps could be attached to the lion by which Sri Ma would climb on to his back.

Avadhootji was also keen on flower decorations. He had sent for his own decorators from Vrindavan. They created a flower-cottage to house the golden-lion throne on the eve of the *puja*.

A light scaffolding of fine lattice-work was covered by the small white fragrant flowers of summer. The stage looked like a beautiful white house of flowers. The lion-throne was positioned in the middle of this delicate tapestry of blossoms.

All this magnificence dwindled into insignificance when Sri Ma arrived in the pandal. All eyes were rivetted on her

gracious person, the very personification of majestic beauty. She was prevailed upon to mount the steps on to the lion. She sat for a moment with folded hands and then lay down quietly on the couch in her usual inert way on all such occasions. The *puja* was performed by Kusum Brahmachari. At dawn the large congregation had the privilege of touching Sri Ma's feet one by one. Their worshipful vigil was amply rewarded by the *darshana* of Sri Ma's ethereal and luminous person as she was supported down the throne by the Mahatmas, Jogibhai and others.

At the conclusion of the festivities Prof. Tripurari Chakravarty remarked, "I have read about many *yajnas* of ancient times. This truly has been a *rājasuya-yajna* no less! It has been made possible by Sri Ma's own divine qualities of magnificence and splendour (*aishwarya*).

Sri Ma at Paramartha Niketan :

There is a beautiful ashram called Paramartha Niketan in Rishikesh on the other side of the sacred river in Hardwar. The head of this ashram was Mahamandaleshwar Shukdevananda Maharaj. Every year he would arrange for a retreat and *satsang* for Mahatmas for 3 to 4 months. This year Sri Ma had been invited very specially to take part in this *satsang*. She with a few companions arrived in Hardwar on June 6. They were received at the station and escorted to their destination by car and a motor-launch to cross the river. A small cottage was placed at Sri Ma's disposal. The premises were very spacious and full of flowering shrubs and trees. There were many other cottages for Mahatmas. It was quite like a hermitage of yore described in sacred texts.

Sri Ma was given a seat on the dais where other Mahatmas sat during the time of *satsang*. By now it had become well known that Sri Ma did not give speeches or discourses but some time was always reserved for a question and answer session with her. It was noticed that the entire congregation would wait patiently for this halfhour of time after the *maunam* of 8.45-9 p. m. every evening.

Didi had suffered a relapse. She was in Varanasi suffering from a variety of maladies. Acceding to Haribabaji's request Sri Ma paid a visit to Varanasi to see Didi. They travelled back together to Dehradun. Didi's doctors wanted her in Mumbai for a thorough assesment and further treatment. Sri Ma settled Didi in Kalyanvan (a nearby ashram to the main Ashram at Kishenpur) and went back to Rishikesh where the Mahatmas were awaiting her return with eagerness. According to them no *satsang* was complete without Sri Ma's gracious presence.

After sojourning in Rishikesh the Mahatmas came to Dehradun at the request of Didi and others of Sri Ma's Ashram. *Satsang* continued in Kishenpur Ashram. Haribabaji's beloved '*rāslilā* party' performed in the hall every morning. He was desirous that Didi should be able to attend, so *satsang* was arranged in the main Ashram. He came to Didi's bedside everyday to enquire about her welfare. His faith in the efficacy of religious rites was unshaken. He believed whole-heartedly that Didi would make a recovery to her former robust health.

After almost a month at Dehradun it was time to disperse. Sri Ma in response to the invitation of Prabhudatta Maharaj

agreed to go to Jhunsi for Gurupurnima and also to Varanasi.

Haribabaji left for Delhi with his large retinue on July 17th. While the train was awaiting the time of its departure, Haribabaji started to perform his evening *kirtan* on the platform. The Stationmaster was put in a dilemma. He hesitated to flag off the train while its prestigious passenger was saying his prayers on the platform. Luckily for him the *kirtan* was concluded soon and Haribabaji entered the compartment reserved for him. The train started seven minutes late!

Sri Ma arrived in Varanasi after visiting Jhunsi on 21st July, 1956. The riverside portion of the Ashram had been declared uninhabitable. Two beautiful small temples had been built on either end of a long terrace. The first one contained a *yajna-kunda* where daily oblations were offered to the fire which was being maintained after the *Savitri-yajna* (1947-50). This sacred fire was brought away from this endangered building and placed in the original *yajna-kunda* in the middle of the courtyard. A small temporary structure had been erected to provide shelter to the *yajna-kunda* (subsequently it was installed in its old site with suitable rites of such celebrations).

The girls of the Kanyapeeth requested Sri Ma to stay in Varanasi Ashram to attend the functions of Jhoolan and Janmashtami (August 1956).

The girls were very happy when it transpired that Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to grant their request. They put in their best effort for these special celebrations. Since the time of Ganga Devi it had become a custom to observe a week of festivities

beginning with Jhoolan (full-moon) and ending with Nandotsava, that is the day after Janmashtami (The birthday of Sri Krishna). The students put up cultural shows every evening in their Hall. One end of the Hall was curtained off as the stage. The elaborately decorative wooden swing was brought out and hung in the middle of the hall. Sri Ma sat on this surrounded by the entire congregation of women. Sri Ma sometimes invited a few male members also of the Ashram to witness some of the *lilas* enacted by the girls. These privileged folk stood out on the adjoining verandah and watched the stage (or more probably Sri Ma on her swing) from the open doors and windows. Dr. Panna Lal came for the play on Milarepa; Patala. Narayana Swami, Bhubanda and a few others were granted this privilege by Sri Ma.

The Kanyapeeth had many talented girls as its members. Rama gave a beautiful performance as the young Ramanujacharya at the feet of his guru Sri Yamunacharya. Pavitra was so effective as Christ that many in the congregation were overcome with tears. Jaya and Tara gave a brilliant rendering of the fight between the Goddess and Mahishasura in the form of dance drama. Vishuddha as Nachiketa impressed everyone.

Renu was very talented in this field. She wrote out the plays, instructed the girls and in general managed the dramatic effects. Pushpa provided the music and taught the dance-sequences. The performance of the girls attained great success. There were no stage props and only minimal changes in dress.

During these evenings in the Hall of the Kanyapeeth Sri

Ma seemed totally absorbed in the affairs of the girls. She talked with them, spent a lot of time with them and even participated in performing in *lilās* herself. For Sri Ma there was no line of demarcation between make-believe and reality. When she was depicting a role, she became the person! She herself directed one play. It happened like this : Beludi (Didi's youngest sister) had brought a blue saree and silver ornaments for Sri Ma. When decked in these she had the *kheyāla* to do a *lilā*.

The next evening was earmarked for Sri Ma's *lilā*. She said to Renu she would do the *lilā* of the '*Chhadma Yogi*'. The *lilā* is about Sri Radhika's mood of estrangement (*abhimāna*) from Sri Krishna. She has retired to her bower with her friends (*Sakhis*). Sri Krishna assumes the disguise of a yogi and approaches the bower to seek an audience. Presented to Sri Radhika he endorses her disapproval of Sri Krishna by embarking on a tirade against him. Sri Radhika however cannot allow this and she tells him to go away. The friends see through the disguise. Sri Krishna and Sri Radhika are reunited and all is joy in the bower of flowers.

It cannot be said that this *lilā* could be enacted in detail. As soon as Sri Ma appeared dressed in coloured clothes with a tiger-skin wrapped around her, the audience of women broke out in shouts of "Jai Ma! Jai Ma!"

As Sri Ma had no time to rehearse her companions, she would whisper dialogues to the *Sakhis* surrounding her. It was all impromptu. Nothing mattered, however, because wherever Sri Ma was all was joy and delight. One thing lives in the memory of the author (one of the *Sakhis*) very

distinctly. Sri Ma had given the role of Radha to Buba. She had described very vividly how Buba was to be dressed. A long black plait of hair should be visible through the shining gauze-like vell covering her head. As Buba's hair was brown and light we added black tassels to it to create this impression. Sri Ma was very disappointed with Radha's sari and ornaments. She went on saying, "Don't you have anything prettier?" But the resources of the Ashram were limited.

How fortunate was the Kanyapeeth ! Sri Ma for a few minutes created Vrindavan in Varanasi.

Ganga, Chandan, Vishuddha, Jaya, Jyoti, Rama, Pavitra, Anjali, Geeta, Gunceta, Indu, Sandhya, Kanti, Mala, Tulsi, Vani, Lakshmi are all to be remembered as experiencing the grace of Sri Ma as "Friends" (*Bandhu*).

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sri Ma Resumes Her Travel

"You are asking if I love you? I say to you that unless I loved you, you could not love me; verily, you cannot love me as much as I love each one of you!"

— Sri Ma Anandamayi

While Sri Ma was in Varanasi Didi had gone to Mumbai to meet her doctors. She was accommodated in Ville Parle at Sunayana House. Dr. Surabhai Seth led the team of eminent surgeons of Mumbai, Dr. Baliga, Dr. Arulekar and others to examine the patient. They were pleased with the improvement in Didi's condition.

Dr. Seth himself once more helped Didi to stand up on her feet. He even guided her and helped her to climb a few shallow steps. This was very good news for everyone. Sri Ma was informed immediately. Another person who was given the news of Didi's recovery was Haribabaji Maharaj. All his efforts toward this end had borne fruit it seemed.

In Mumbai also the devotees observed the occasion of Jhoolan Purnima (20th August 1956) with *Puja* and *kirtan* and distribution of *prasad*. The congregation was happy to have Didi with them even if Sri Ma was away in Varanasi.

Sri Ma paid her yearly visit to Allahabad for three days (September, 2, 5 and 6) at Satya Gopal Ashram. She also went to Vindhyachal and other nearby places but returned to Varanasi. The rains had come because it was monsoon-time.

Sri Ma never discriminated against elements also. Because of her constant movements she got exposed to the weather. She contracted a severe cold and a temperature. Sri Ma said, "I had the *kheyāla* that it was a long time since I was ill in bed. Now there is this "*Temperaturānanda!*" (*jwarānanda*). I shall stay in bed for a couple of days!" Although physically ill, she herself was radiating happiness as always.

Durga Puja was at hand. Benoy Banerjee of Kolkata, a devotee of long standing invited Sri Ma to the annual Durga Puja festival to be performed in his own new house this year.

Durga Puja is the special festival of Kolkata. Crowds always became unmanageable even in open pandals and spacious surroundings. The devotees could not imagine how a single household would manage this magnificent affair for three days in Sri Ma's presence. Sri Ma's *kheyala* was, however, enough for any kind of seemingly impossible enterprise. Not only was the Durga Puja celebrated with all due ceremony but also a Bhagavat Saptah. In Sri Ma's vicinity all anomalies vanished like bubbles on water. The Bengali congregation participated devoutly in a Vaishnava ceremony right at the venue where a *Shakti Puja* was being organised.

This year Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to grace the *puja mandap* of a nearby house belonging to a Brahmin who was used to performing this *puja* according to his own restricted means. One year ago Sri Ma had visited this house and it so happened that a few helping hands had been extended to this gentleman. This year the *puja mandap* was found to be constructed more spaciouly. The *puja* was also elaborately arranged. In fact the Brahmin had had a dream regarding a special image of Durga.

Sri Ma's *kheyāla* had fulfilled the dream of the Brahmin for an adequate celebration of the yearly advent of his own special Deity.

Sri Benoy Banerjee's residence after the prolonged celebrations seemed suddenly empty on October 15 when relays of people left for different destinations.

Sri Ma left for Ranchi. Didi and many others went back to Varanasi. One of the girls of the Kanyapeeth, Jyoti, was ailing for sometime. She was now hospitalised under the special care of Dr. Anil Maitra. Dr. Anil Maitra had come to know Sri Ma through looking after Mukti Maharaj, who had been hospitalised some time back. Dr. Anil Maitra the M. O. had taken special care of the old ascetic in ochre robes. He came to know Sri Ma when she came to the hospital to see the patient. Dr. Maitra was ever ready to render medical help to all who sought it. His mother often took care of the patients from the Ashrams by cooking especially for them so that they could observe orthodox dietary rules while in the hospital.

After Kolkata it was the turn of Ranchi to organise celebrations of *Pujas* in the newly established Ashram. If Sri Ma's retinue had hoped that she would be able to get some rest in Ranchi away from the importunate crowds of Kolkata they were taken aback to see the throngs gathering around her. The town of Ranchi seemed to have discovered Sri Ma!

After these festivities, mainly Lakshmi-Puja (19th October), Sri Ma left for Puri. The Maharajkumar of Chhota Nagpur drove her in his car to Muri Junction where she would entrain for Puri.

The French lady Miriam Orr had been in correspondence with Atmanandaji. It was her great desire to visit India to see Sri Ma but so far she had not been able to do so. Now she was in China as a member of a delegation. She had requested the Chinese Government to book her return passage through India. This lady had come to Kolkata and was proceeding to Ranchi with great excitement. But Sri Ma had left Ranchi and was at Muri Junction. Many highranking officers came forward to establish contact. One Sri Bakshi, a retired ICS officer who had become devoted to Sri Ma, arranged, with the help of the Station Master at Muri to get in touch with Madame Orr when her train halted at Muri. She would be told that Sri Ma was at this station rather than at Ranchi and so would be requested and helped to alight right there. The officials kindly saw to it that the train awaited her convenience for a few minutes. After ten long years of awaiting Miriam Orr was granted her heart's wish. Confronted by Sri Ma's radiant form, she seemed overwhelmed. Being an European she hugged and kissed Sri Ma again and again. Mme. Orr could not let go of Sri Ma's hands, which she covered with her kisses of adoration. The people surrounding Sri Ma marvelled at this meeting of a loving heart and its Beloved.

When Mme. Orr had regained her composure, she was accommodated in Sri Ma's retinue. She was given refreshments and she along with all others proceeded to Jamshedpur en route to Puri.

After the usual programme of visits to various places and general *satsang*, Sri Ma left Jamshedpur for Puri via Kharagpur. At Kharagpur Junction she was required to wait

for a couple of hours for her train. She rested in the waiting room for a while and then came out to stroll on the platform. As she was strolling up and down she saw a woman holding a child by the hand walking hurriedly away. Sri Ma called after her, "Mother, where are you going?" The woman paused but seemed too distracted to pay heed to Sri Ma. Sri Ma again called out to her. Then she halted and walked back to confront Sri Ma. Her story was poured out in agitated words. She had come to the city to seek medical help for her husband, who was ill in their village home but she had been disappointed and was now rushing back to the invalid. Sri Ma spoke words of encouragement. She said, "Do not be agitated, here is a doctor who will guide you!" Dr. Anil Maitra, who had accompanied her from Kolkata, came forward and spoke to the woman. He gave her his card and address. He told her to bring her husband to Kolkata and meet him at the hospital. He would take charge of the rest. The woman seemed overwhelmed and yet she hesitated to agree. Sri Ma at once gauged her difficulty. She glanced at the people surrounding her. Immediately an adequate sum of money was collected and handed over to the woman. Now she shed tears of gratitude and went away to do the needful for her husband.

Sri Ma arrived in Puri on October 21st. Mme. Orr was accommodated in a nearby hotel. She happily became a member of Sri Ma's retinue-following her on her strolls near the seashore or sitting quietly with her on the sandy beach while the breakers crashed down in unending series in front of them. People who go to Puri beach become inured to the roar of the ocean as accompaniment to all conversations.

After a pleasant interlude at Puri Sri Ma came on to Kolkata for a flying visit. She went to see Jnan Mukherjee in

Calcutta Nursing Home. This very talented film-director unfortunately passed away young. He was Didi's cousin, one of the sons of Swami Turiyananda.

Sri Ma travelled back to Varanasi on October 25th in one of the new air-conditioned trains which had just been introduced by Indian Railways.

Sri Ma proceeded to Vindhyachal next day. She continued to travel back and forth from Vindhyachal till December 1, the night of Deepavali or Kali-Puja. The Image of Kali had been made by the noted artist Nital Pal himself. The Image had accompanied Sri Ma from Kolkata. When it was unpacked and installed in the Chandimandapa for the night's *puja*, everyone was captivated by its beauty and expression.

The *puja* was performed by Bishuda with his usual meticulous care and full dedication. It is customary to consign these earth images to the sacred river to preserve their sanctity. History was repeated at Varanasi Ashram when the devotees expressed their reluctance for this last ritual. Once before in Dhaka the Image of Kali had been kept back. Under similar circumstances now Bishuda offered to take away the Image for its daily worship at his own house. The beautiful Image was preserved in this way much to the satisfaction of all devotees.

The function of *Bhrātridvitiyā* is observed on the second day after Kali Puja. This year Didi was able to walk down the rows of the waiting congregation to put the sandalwood *tikā* on their foreheads as *brahmabindu*. Much satisfaction was felt at this improvement in Didi's health. The previous year the devotees had approached Didi's bedside to receive this mark on their foreheads.

The Car Accident

Sri Ma continued to move from Varanasi to Vindhyachal. At this time a very strange accident to Sri Ma's car occurred which put everyone under great mental stress. As written above the Rajmata of Tehri Garhwal had bought a small English car for Sri Ma. Dashu had been trained in driving by Jogibhai's experienced drivers. After receiving his license he had been in the habit of driving the Austin. On December 4, Sri Ma accompanied by Buni, Bimla, Belu (Didi's sister) and Swami Paramanandaji left for Vindhyachal via Chunar. In general, the car being small not more than two people went in it apart from Sri Ma and Dashu. But it being a short trip they thought they would manage.

After Chunar they came across a road -repairing gang. Dashu sounded his horn. The workers walked away to one side of the road leaving the middle and one side free for the car. Suddenly without warning a man with a wheelbarrow ran across the road right in front of the car. Dashu braked down hard; the car swerved dangerously and stalled at an angle on the brink of the deep ditch bordering the road. The man fell near the car with his head under it. Sri Ma and the others all immediately stepped out of the car. Belu went up to the man to see how much he had been hurt. His eyes were open. There was a smear of blood on his forehead. Sri Ma took off her towel, she rinsed it out and wiped the blood from his face.

If the villagers had allowed Swamiji to take the man to a nearby hospital, maybe he would have survived but they sent word to the nearest police post and said that they would await the arrival of the police.

Sri Ma sat near the man tending him with the damp cloth. She passed her hands from his head to his feet three times. While her hand was on his head, he slowly closed his eyes and breathed his last. Much later the post mortem report revealed that the man had sustained no injuries but had died of heart failure due to shock.

After the death of the man Sri Ma walked away to the fields nearby and sat quietly under a tree awaiting events. The accident had occurred around 12.30 noon. The police came at nearly 4 p.m. They towed Sri Ma's car on to the road again and drove the whole party to the police station at Chunar where Dashu as the driver was charged and put under arrest. Swamiji requested the *thanedar* (the Police-officer in charge of the police-station) to allow Dasu to drive Sri Ma and her companions to the nearby Vindhyachal Ashram but this plea was out of the question for him to grant. He could not release Dashu and the car was impounded. He however stopped a passenger-bus and made arrangements for Sri Ma and the others to board it. The bus would take them to Mirzapur. From there they would be on their way to Vindhyachal.

While Swamiji and others were awaiting the arrival of the police, he had requested several people driving by to inform the Ashram at Varanasi about their predicament. Sri Ma herself had stopped a military truck driver. Some of the men knew her and promised to inform the people at Varanasi Ashram. As a result of these messages two cars started immediately for Chunar. Dr. Gopal Dasgupta collected Patalda in a taxi since his own car had been taken out by his son Ratan. After a while Ratan came back to find Panuda at his house with the news of the accident. Ratan and Panuda started for the same destination immediately.

Dr. Dasgupta's taxi overtook the bus. It was stopped so Sri Ma and her companions could alight from it. Thus it was around 6 p.m. when Sri Ma arrived at Vindhyachal Ashram. She did not look any different from her usual self, but Didi guessed that something was very wrong from the grave expressions on other faces.

Swamiji and Patalda continued in the bus to Mirzapur to see if they could make some arrangements for bail for poor Dashu. Panuda in the second car caught up with them. It was evening; they had no great hopes of finding the Magistrate in his office. They ventured to go to his house. Here they were very glad to meet the Commissioner of Varanasi, Sri Shiveshwarkar who was visiting with the Magistrate. He was surprised to see Panuda and Swamiji and Patalda. He knew them well because he was a frequent visitor at the Ashram at Varanasi and a devotee of Sri Ma. He recommended their case to the Magistrate who in turn spoke to the In-Charge at Chunar instructing him to release Dashu on bail.

It was already late evening. Panuda and Patalda found a lawyer who helpfully prepared the necessary papers. At Chunar Police Station the Police Inspector went out of his way to accommodate them. Panuda was reluctant to leave Sri Ma's car at the Police Station. The Police Officer released Dashu on bail and allowed them to take away the car as well on condition that it would be brought back in the morning. They arrived at Vindhyachal Ashram around 12.30 am. Sri Ma had not retired but was awaiting them. Poor Dashu had undergone a hard time. After a few hours of rest Panuda and Dashu took the car back to the Police Station as promised.

Sri Ma kept enquiring about the man who had died. After the post-mortem examination his body had been released to his family who lived in a remote village. The Inspector helped Panuda to find this family. Fulfilling Sri Ma's *kheyāla* the family was offered monetary help toward funeral services, which they accepted. So ended this very odd incident. After several months. Dashu was exonerated from blame by the Court, so all was regular again.

Sri Ma continued at Vindhyachal. Twelve years ago Gopal Thakur of Allahabad had performed the first Gita-Jayanti ritual at Vindhyachal. Since then every year in December he had observed this ritual near Sri Ma. He had passed away in 1954. But the Gita Jayanti had been observed in Varanasi Ashram in his absence. This year his disciple Deva Prasad was in Vindhyachal. In Sri Ma's presence he enthusiastically arranged for the Jayanti on 6th December.

On the concluding day of the *puja*. Sri Ma herself oversaw the seating arrangements and made sure that there would be a profusion of flowers. Gopal Thakur had always a big supply of *puja* paraphernalia. His daughters used to sing his favourite songs during the *puja*. Now the congregation tried to remember these hymns and render them adequately. They faltered over one of his favourite songs, Sri Ma then herself joined in and not only supplied the lines but the tune also. A fulfilment for the faithful to know that prayers reach their marks and are also acknowledged so graciously.

This was a sad time for Didi and all devotees at Varanasi because time had at last come for breaking down the river-side building of the Ashram in order to preserve the main

Temple, Ashram and the Kanyapeeth. Mr. Varma, the Chief Engineer, came to Varanasi accompanied by other officials to see how this may be done without causing damage to the super-structure. It did seem a tremendous loss but it had to be borne with fortitude. The ramparts from the side of the river came up slowly as ballast to the whole Ashram. The terrace had added considerably to the spaciousness of the courtyard. Now it was to be diminished in size.

Sri Ma continued to travel back and forth from Vindhyachal to Varanasi. At this time she experienced a sharp discomfort in her ear but the doctors among her devotees were not able to cure this "ailment". As Sri Ma's physical condition did not effect her demeanor, she did not seem to be ill. But for a few months the ear-ache and discomfort in her throat continued to defy all efforts of the concerned doctors. Didi naturally was very upset. Her worried state communicated itself to all devotees. People constantly came to make enquiries. Bhaiya and Leela Ben came from Mumbai; Kanti bhai and his wife from Ahmedabad. Dr. Sudhin Majumadar from Kolkata came with his friend who was an ENT specialist. The best that anybody could do was to pray to her to have the *kheyāla* for recovery. The condition fluctuated, not seemingly in accordance with any outward causes. Sri Ma kept all her engagements, travelled long distances to Mumbai, to Delhi and to Vrindaban. In Delhi one of the old devotees Charu Babu propounded a theory regarding Sri Ma's indisposition. He said that he himself sometime previously had prayed to Sri Ma to save the life of Sisir Sen, the eldest son of Dr. J. K. Sen. Sisir Babu was dying of a strange disease in Kolkata. Charu babu begged that he should recover otherwise

Dr. J. K. Sen would have to suffer this tragedy in his old age. Sri Ma had made a quick rejoinder. She said, "Is it not stated in your Scripture that one should retire from the world and proceed to hermitages after middle age? If people followed precepts then they would not suffer the trials and tribulations of the world which are inevitable." Saying this Sri Ma retired to her room. She became listless and for a while lost her radiant looks. But Sisir Babu in Kolkata took a turn for the better and slowly recovered his health. Charu Babu was quite convinced that Sri Ma had taken on his suffering (in her own way). He said to other devotees, "The best way to ensure that Sri Ma moves about according to her own *kheyāla* and her own radiant personality is not to put our own burdens on her. We should learn to abide by our own *karma*-sequences."

These were no doubt very wise words but, alas, not many could resist the temptation to pray for relief and respite from tragic hardships. Many years earlier Prof. Birendra Chandra Mukherjee had occasion to write to Didi, his sister, in similar terms. He had pointed out that Sri Ma's illnesses were in a way responses to the experiences of the people around her and also those who were not in her immediate vicinity. Sri Ma's indispositions were indicators of her worldwide concerns. The only way we could be of service to her was to watch for her *kheyāla* and not do anything to the contrary.

For Didi and other persons surrounding Sri Ma, these philosophical explanations were not very comforting. In spite of doctors and remedies, sooner or later everyone came to the conclusion that it was best to leave Sri Ma to make her own recovery at her own *kheyāla*.

All devotees, each in his own way, tried to help, Jogibhai inaugurated religious rites in order to pray for Sri Ma's health. Binuda from Kolkata had the idea of organising a *japa* in Varanasi for the same purpose. Others individually engaged in prayers or special *japa* for Sri Ma's recovery.

Sri Ma was seen to be almost her normal self at times, at others grave and aloof in her demeanour. When she was in Varanasi Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Gopinath Kaviraj came every day to sit quietly in her presence.

This condition continued over the New Year (1957) and a few more months. Sri Ma was sometimes requested to stay in one place and take complete rest but all who were close to her knew that such measures were meaningless in her case. As she said sometimes, "There is no difference between outward or private behaviour here." She probably meant that outward interaction with other people and being all by herself were not opposite conditions for her.

Shivaratri and Holi were spent in Vrindavan. As was usual, these functions meant a big gathering of devotees. This year two spacious buildings, the Gita Bhawan and the Bhagawat Bhawan, were inaugurated with all proper ceremonial rites.

In Vrindavan one of the new doctors experienced a little of Sri Ma's boundless compassion for all those who would like to be of service to her. Dr. Sharma, a newcomer, examined Sri Ma's throat and was horrified to find it in a bad inflamed condition. He said he would like to give her an

injection but was dissuaded by the words of those who knew Sri Ma better than he.

In the evening when Sri Ma had a little time she asked for a solution of herbs to be prepared for her. A few basil leaves, some *neem* (margosa) leaves, a little ginger and one or two cloves were boiled in a pot of water. Sri Ma rinsed out her mouth with this warm concoction, allowing the steam to touch her throat a number of times. Next day when Dr. Sharma came to see Sri Ma she opened her mouth for him to see her tonsils. He was astonished and exclaimed, "This is a miracle! There is no trace of inflammation!" He bowed again and again at Sri Ma's feet quite overwhelmed to see such an overnight healing. Sri Ma smiled gently. Her devotees knew that more than the herbs her own *kheyāla* had brought about the change. Evidently her *kheyāla* had been evoked by the doctor's concern and his own helplessness in the matter. Whatever the reason, it was good news for all devotees.

Janmotsava in Ahmedabad (1957)

The devotees of Ahmedabad had prayed for this year's (1957) *Janmotsava* to be held in their town. The end of April 1957 saw the gathering of participants. Kantibhai Munshaw himself was obliged to be abroad at this time but his wife, his children and his house were at the devotees' service. Thakorebhai, Chinubhai, Mukundbhai, Mooljibhai and many others organised themselves for a grand function. Luckily for them Sri Ma seemed to be in good health, so all *satsangs*, *kirtans*, ceremonial rites and subsidiary functions went off very well. Many Mahatmas graced the occasion. The attendance of ochre-robed ascetics had now become a part of

all celebrations held under Sri Ma's aegis. On May 16-17 (3 a.m.) The *puja* was performed with great circumspection by Kusum Brahmachari. The devotees had the rare privilege of touching Sri Ma's feet in the morning while she lay in *Samadhi* covered by a new Banarsi Sari and surrounded by a huge garland of lotus flowers.

After the successful conclusion of the *Janmotsava*, the devotees of Ahmedabad were obliged to bid a sad farewell to Sri Ma. Other towns eagerly awaited her arrival. Sri Ma spent some time in Mumbai and then went to Pune. Mr. Bhoota, had constructed a small residential unit for Sri Ma adjacent to his own very big house on Ganesh Khind Road. Sri Ma abided in his town for a while. There were no crowds here, so she could follow her own *kheyāla* about her daily routine.

Dilip Kumar Roy was living in Pune. He came to visit Sri Ma very often. Sometimes he sang for her in his own very melodious and inimitable style.

On June 6, 1957 Sri Ma visited his place of residence by invitation. It was a very melodious evening because Dilip Kumar himself sang *kirtans* and *bhajans*. The audience listened in bemused silence. After the *satsang* he spoke a few words about Sri Ma to the assembled people. He said, "In 1924 I had occasion to talk to my Gurudeva Sri Aurobindo about Ma. He had said, "There are many saints who attain to *Siddhi* (fulfilment) by their efforts and are full of joy. But it is rare to find someone who can pass on the peace which is theirs. Ma is that unique person. **To be with her is to be at peace.**"

Sri Ma left Pune on June 20, 1957. She was accompanied by Swami Paramananda, Buni, Udas and Bharatbhai. Didi remained in Pune for rest as recommended by her doctors. Sri Ma went up to Hardwar and Dehradun. She continued to move around these places. The festival of Guru Purnima on July 11 was celebrated at Hardwar. The occasion was especially marked by the initiation of Brahmachari Gauranga into the monastic order by Didima or rather Swami Muktananda Giriji Maharaj. He could not have had a better guru for the purpose. This incident of an ultimate renunciation (*sannyāsa*) occurred in the Ashram after an interval of almost seven years. After the Savitri Yajna at Varanasi Narayana Swamiji and four others had entered the monastic order. The others were Prakashananda (Brahmachari Prakash) Swarupananda (Brahmachari Swarup) Chinmayananda (Brahmachari Mrinmay) and Keshavananda (Brahmachari Keshav). Now Brahmachari Gauranga became Swami Chaitanyananda Giri.

Sri Ma spoke a few words to all the brahmcharis and ascetics of the Ashram assembled for the most prestigious of all ceremonies. She said, "Time is passing. Devote yourself assiduously to your way of *sāadhanā*. A strong resolution is required either to succeed in this path or perish in the effort. Undeviating, one-pointed and relentless application is the only way to fulfilment!"

After this function Sri Ma went up to Dehradun. Here also she moved continuously from one Ashram to another. She attended various functions organised by devotees. People in the hope of invoking Sri Ma's *kheyāla* to abide in one place proposed sacred rites and rituals. But it was known by now that these were temporary measures to contain the flights of

the "Bird on the wing."

Sri Ma's health fluctuated alarmingly at this time. In spite of constant prayers she did not seem to have the *kheyāla* to normalise her health. Doctors found nothing wrong with her clinically. But it was clear that she was not her radiant self. Pandit Kavirajji came from Varanasi to visit her on hearing of her indisposition. She had the *kheyāla* to talk about her illness with this most worthy interlocutor.

"In general, efforts are purposive. Here (in this body) there is no such problem. Every nerve, its vibrations is visible (to me). Just as if you enter a room with a lamp in your hand you can see every detail of it (when it was not visible before). To say this is also not enough, because here I am everything—nerves, veins, arteries, tendons. The movements are I and the onlooker also, of course, if you can use such a word as 'I'."

After a while, Sri Ma said, "You see this body laughing, talking, walking around; so you may also see what you consider to be states of illness or *samādhi*. Here there is no question of differences in the way of being. The breath moves—it stops or fluctuates as it will—that is all.

"The seeing of this haphazard movement of breath also fluctuates. If there is no *kheyāla* for seeing this then that will happen which all of you will consider the last phase. Here (in Sri Ma) there is no wish or will so all routes are open as it were. How beautiful all this is! On 7th (August) the movement was seen in the naval region. When this happened the whole of the lower body became cold. There was *spandan* on either side of the spinal movement. The three were rising

together towards the head. The three energies or movements were proceeding in the same rhythm from the root to the apex".

Kavirajji was astonished to hear Sri Ma describe these movements. He said, "Yes Ma, the scriptures say that when a yogi is getting ready to pass away (die) he feels the joint rhythmic upward movements of the three major powers in his body, the *susumnā*, the *idā* and the *pingalā*."

Sri Ma said, "All variations depend on the movements of the breath. In this body there are no boundaries—everything is open. Ordinarily both in this world or in the sphere of *sādhana* the breath of life is continued, one depends on the other. In the world one says my wife, my house, my children, my friend, my enemy etc (a sense of separation). The *sādhaka* looks to his goal, then he is enlightened; the one illumination makes him see everything at once, the path, the goal all are He only—what else?"

Didi was inspired to ask a very grave question: "Ma, if all is open and without any hindrance or obstacle then how is this body of yours manifested? What is the condition of its existence?"

Sri Ma smiled a little and said, "Before I answer this question. I would like to say something to Baba (*Kavirajji*). Is it possible for those who have died or those who have attained liberation to appear in their recognizable forms?"

Kavirajji said, "Yes Ma, it is possible".

Sri Ma said, "Baba, can the question of *karunā* (compassion) arise simultaneously with *nirvāna*

(liberation)?"

Kavirajji said, "If one talks of compassion it will automatically raise the question of *duhkha* (sorrow).

Sri Ma : "Would you say that compassion is obstructive for liberation?"

Kavirajji : There are two views on this. According to one Buddhistic tenet, compassion does not obtain where liberation is. There is the other view that even in liberation there is this integral compassion which is actually Buddhahood. Just as bliss personified is without any object, without any "other" beyond it.

Sri Ma : "If so, then compassion is not ruled out. Just as a fire is an unending source of heat. No matter how much warmth you take away from the fire it remains fiery in itself. When you say God. He is perfect. He cannot be diminished by anything. He is under his own law. He is totally free."

Kavirajji "The sun and the rays descending through space, are they different or the same?"

Sri Ma. "They are one only. There is an integral unity between to be and to do. He, who also is He, who acts."

"If you say being is different from becoming then you will be positing a will power. Divine will and human will. If human will is exercised then it can be the instrument for touching the root. To know the root and to be the root is one only. While you perform actions they will remain separate. But all is one itself. Where is the other? Such enlightenment is called integral action (*svakriyā*)."

Kavirajji : "Is the enlightenment beyond language?"

Sri Ma : "Absolutely! there is no question of language or nonlanguage. If you posit language, then that is one dimension. Perfection is touched by lacunae. Where there is perfection, there is infinity. This is why everyone should abide by his own stand. Wherever one is situated is his starting point. One has to keep walking; while one travels one meets other wayfarers. Sometimes it is lonely also. The main thing is to be focussed on the goal, then there is no scope for losing one's way. That is why it is said that He alone is, in the form of scriptures, (the pointers) or the way (for the seekers). If the beloved alone is seen anywhere or everywhere then there can be no conflict. Generally it is said that worldly pursuits are to be eschewed but there comes a time (a stage) where there is nothing either to be eschewed or welcomed. That alone is. The question of being awake or in darkness is irrelevant. It is natural that queries should arise. The queries are justified and are raised for resolution."

Kavirajji endorsed her *vāni*. It is needless to say that perhaps he alone understood entirely the significance of it. Didi also felt that her question had been answered although obliquely. This was a manifestation of Compassion. (*Karunāvatāra*).

The function of Janmastami was celebrated in Kishanpur Ashram. The Kirtan-party from Delhi came to perform their own particular form of the *Nāma-yajna*.

After this function the usual break-up of the gathering took place. Jogibhai left for Solan. The Maharani of Mysore and her party departed to their distant state. The Kirtan-party

went back to Delhi. Most of the Ashram people along with Didi and her own retinue left for Varanasi. Sri Ma had the *kheyāla* to stay on in Kalyanvan for the time being. Swami Paramananda, Haraprasad, Bharadwaj, Narayana Swami and Keshavananda remained with Sri Ma. After a few days she went up to the hill top Ashram at Raipur.

Initiation by Sri Ma :

One day Hansa Devi, an old devotee of Dehradun, brought a profusion of flowers and *bilva* leaves for Sri Ma and offered them at her feet. The companions standing around noticed that the *bilva patras* had something written on them with white sandal paste. Narayana Swami took up a few but could not make out the exact lettering. Sri Ma said, "It is the six syllable mantra of Siva." Then Narayana Swami said that it was indeed so. Sri Ma had already distributed a few of these leaves among the people surrounding her. Now the recipients came up and prayed that she would pronounce aloud the mantra for them. Sri Ma however did not have this *kheyāla*. She asked Narayana Swami to say aloud the mantra for each recipient. Soon all the *bilva* leaves had found devout recipients. A relative of the Raja of Askote and her daughter were among this group. Next day they came with elaborate *puja*-ingredients, like incense, sweets, flowers, clothes, etc. These were offered at Sri Ma's feet. They bowed to her acknowledging her as their *Guru*.

In this way and other ways many people began to acquire the right of saying that they had received their initiation (*dikshā*) from Sri Ma herself.

Sri Ma came back to Varanasi Ashram on 30th August

1957. People were happy to see her almost in her normal health. It was time for the annual Bhagavat Saptah. This rite had been started by the late Kumar Bhattacharya, some years back. His widow had requested Sri Ma to keep up the tradition in Varanasi Ashram in his memory. Sri Ma had made her usual reply. "Whatever happens will be acceptable". (*jā hoye jāi*).

Coincidentally someone or other happened to come forward every year to organise this religious rite of one week. This year also someone offered to assume responsibility. Sri Ma's presence lent grace and splendour to the simplest of rites. The Bhagavat Purana would be read in the morning by Pandit Sri Nath Mishra, sitting on the specially decorated *chowki* (rostrum) set up for the purpose. The morning session was devoted to the reading of the scripture in Sanskrit. At least one extra reader was initiated to do a parallel reading to cover up for any mistakes committed inadvertently by the main reader. Others were initiated for the role of *jāpaka* to do *japa* along with the reading and also "listener". The evening session was given over to an exposition of the text in Hindi by the reader. At the conclusion there would be *puja* and a *bhandārā* (feast) for all. The Bhagavat Saptah was concluded on 8th September, 1957.

Many devotees had arrived in Varanasi for this function. Among them were Dr. Panna Lal, his eldest daughter Lila and her husband Rameshwar Sahai. There had been a terrible tragedy in their family. Lilaji's only son Kameshwar (Tutu) had been selected for working in the Nuclear Lab of Paris. Here he had met his death under circumstances which could not be explained by the scientists who were in charge of the

programme.

Sri Ma had written to all of them immediately. Now she in her inimitable fashion participated in the feelings of the bereaved family. Everybody was impressed by the composed demeanour of the grieving mother. She said to Sri Ma, "Ma, I do understand and accept the dispensation of God. But sometimes I am just unable to bear the anguish." But this was made possible for her by Sri Ma!

Tutu himself was close to Sri Ma since his childhood. Sri Ma had given him a *mantra* which he always practised faithfully. Sri Ma had once suggested that he should take up a job in India after completing his education. But he was very much interested in nuclear physics; he could not resist the temptation of the chance to work in a prestigious laboratory. Thus ended a promising career.

It was the time of the annual Durga Puja. In general this festival was not celebrated in Varanasi Ashram which was the venue for the Puja in April. This time Didi's eldest sister, the widow of the late Nirmal Chandra Chatterji, was very keen to arrange for the puja in Sri Ma's presence. Sri Ma graciously agreed to stay on in Varanasi for attending this puja.

Soon the Ashram became full of visitors from other towns. Jogibhai who always attended this puja came from Solan. The people of Varanasi had the rare opportunity of attending not only this magnificent puja as well as the subsequent ones of Lakshmi Puja and Kall Puja.

One of the visitors was Som Prakash Nanda from Pune. He had met Sri Ma when she was returning from her tour of South India (1952). He had asked Sri Ma to visit his home. Sri

Ma went to his house but alas, he did not know that she would not enter it. She walked around a little and said to him, "Your puja room is full of paintings and many Images of God. isn't it?" This was true and Nandaji was convinced that Sri Ma had "visited" the room inside his house. Some years later he had the wish to send a considerable amount of money to the Ashram at Varanasi. Didi who received the money did not know who the anonymous donor could be. Sri Ma said, "Write to Nanda in Pune. Maybe it is he." Nandaji was overcome to get this sign of Sri Ma's *kheyāla* for him. He became one of the special followers of Sri Ma. He even admitted his little daughter Snehlata in the Kanyapeeth. Snehlata spent a few happy years with the girls of the Kanyapeeth.

Another new comer who became a devotee after the first meeting with Sri Ma was Nigam K Chakraborty. He and a friend came to the Ashram to find Sri Ma sitting on the terrace surrounded by her usual retinue of young women. He seemed quite taken aback and continued to look around him in some astonishment. After some conversation with Sri Ma, he said, "Ma, I must tell you something ! Some time ago I had a vivid dream. In the dream I saw myself and a friend sitting on a terrace in one of the big houses of Varanasi. The terrace was right on the Ganges and even extending over it. This terrace was surrounded by green shrubs and trees mainly a big *bilva* tree. I saw seated on this terrace a vision of awe-inspiring beauty. There were buildings around it. As soon as I entered the main gate of the Ashram I recognized the vision of my dream. The same friend is with me. There are some differences. Sri Ma was a little younger in my dream although she is the same radiant personality. I do not see the *bilva* tree. The terrace also is much narrower than the one in my vision.

How is this possible?"

The Ashram people were astonished to hear about his dream. They explained to him that the terrace indeed had been reduced to less than half its original size and the *bilva* tree also had to be sacrificed when the riverside building was demolished. It was truly strange that he had seen the Ashram, as it had been a few years earlier. Nigam Kumar talked for sometime with Sri Ma about his strange dream. He was very happy to have her *darshana* so unexpectedly because he had not known that she was in residence when he came to see the Ashram.

On October 24 Sri Ma left for Vindhyachal after this prolonged stay in Varanasi. Didi was not too well, so she stayed back in the Ashram. On October 31 all the ashramites were over-joyed to see Sri Ma walking into the courtyard. They were just happy to see her and did not enquire into the reason for her sudden arrival. During the night Didi had been very ill with recurring nausea and pain. At one time she at the end of her endurance had prayed for release. Now Sri Ma standing in Didi's room said, "Yes I saw that you were very distressed and so I had the *kheyāla* to come." Didi was overwhelmed that her mute cry of distress had fetched Sri Ma from Vindhyachal. She in general did not believe in sentimental displays but now in her weakened condition Didi folded her hands humbly in prayer and recited in her own mind, one of her favourite hymns.

It is not that you have

Bestowed less on me

Who is undeserving and unfit!

Neither have you withdrawn your grace

Because I am unworthy!

I have not welcomed your gifts

I have not looked back in gratefulness!

Never have asked for acknowledgement

But have showered your blessing unstintedly.

Samyam Saptaha in Delhi

The Samyam Saptaha of the year 1957 took place in Delhi. Shyam Sunder Aga was keen to organise this function. Swami Paramananda had undertaken the task of supervising the completion of the Ashram at Kalkaji. Due to his untiring effort the big circular hall and other buildings were ready just before the Samyam Saptaha. He had received significant help in this work from Narain Dasji. Varmaji, the Chief Engineer also had rendered crucial help all along.

Sri Ma came to Delhi from Varanasi. The Mahatmas came from their various monasteries. The lay devotees arrived from every corner of the country, a few from abroad as well. Jogibhai was of course one of the first to arrive. The massive central hall was spacious enough to accommodate the seating arrangements of almost 200 *vratees* (initiated participants). It was truly a unique mingling of human beings, united by the same goal of attaining spiritual felicity. They had put their trust in Sri Ma as their guide in this endeavour. The long stage was resplendent with ochre-robed heads of monasteries who also acknowledged Sri Ma as the ever shining beacon light of this hazardous undertaking.

It was an odd sight to see men and women who ordinarily did not care for austerities sit quietly for the hours of meditation as well as all the other programmes taking place in the hall. Regular participants were of the opinion that this Samyam Saptah was as resplendent a function as the one in Mumbai (and also Kolkata) a few years ago.

Much to the delight of local devotees Sri Ma continued in Delhi for sometime. The people of the town soon began to flock to the Ashram. Being the capital city, many "Very Important People" began to take full advantage of this rare opportunity. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first President of Independent India, had met Sri Ma in Sevagram (in 1942). She was now invited to the Rashtrapati Bhavan for a formal *puja*, *bhoga* and *arati* on 2nd December, 1957. The President and his family paid their homage. Babu Rajendra Prasad, being the extraordinary man that he was, evidently had recognised in Sri Ma a person who so naturally and gracefully stood within and yet beyond all human perceptions.

The Ashram got used to the visit of Central Ministers, foreign dignitaries and other leaders of society. Babu Jagjivan Ram and his wife came as frequently as possible to visit Sri Ma. At this time the American film star Jennifer Jones was also in Delhi. She had already met Sri Ma in Vindhyachal. She wished to be with Sri Ma for a few days before leaving for America. She had many conversations with Sri Ma and it seems she was profoundly influenced by Sri Ma.

Atmananda had a busy time translating for foreign visitors. Some of the wives of the Ambassadors to our country had rewarding conversations with Sri Ma. The Ambassador of Syria spent some time with Sri Ma talking about his own

spiritual aspirations (14 December). There were many others. The main disadvantage of writing about Sri Ma's way of being with the people who came to her is that nobody kept a record; infact the fluid nature of the group milling round Sri Ma precluded a steady recording of events. So much important material in the form of dialogues with worthy interlocutors are just lost to posterity.

From Delhi Sri Ma came to Vrindaban around the middle of December. The Raja Sahab of Mandi had been posted to Brazil as India's Ambassador to that country. He and his wife had returned after almost four years. They were keen to spend as much time as possible near Sri Ma. They had been in Delhi with her. Yuvraj Karan Singh of Kashmir first came to Sri Ma in the company of the Rani of Mandi. His mother, the Maharani of Kashmir was already well known to Sri Ma. It was the dearest wish of the Rani Sahiba of Mandi that a separate cottage should be built for Sri Ma in Vrindaban. At this time she was happy to be able to perform the ceremony of laying of the foundation stone. Subsequently a beautiful house was built for Sri Ma on this plot of ground.

In the last week of December 1957 Sri Ma went back to Delhi; she paid a short visit to Modinagar and then went up to Hardwar and Dehradun. This week proved to be a very sad one for the whole family of devotees. They sustained the grievous news of the untimely death of three of the most well-known and supportive people of the Ashram. Dr. Sudhin Majumdar of Calcutta died of a sudden heart-failure while on an official tour at Darjeeling. Then everyone got the stunning news of the sudden death of Kantibhai Munshaw of Ahmedabad on December 21. It was as if a pillar had fallen. A

few weeks earlier he had asked Sri Ma's permission to invite Swami Krishnananda Avadhutji to go with him to Ahmedabad. Thus Swamiji was with him at the time of his death. The third death also was a tragic event. Sri Ram Babu Saxena died suddenly of heart failure. His wife Rama Didi and son Vir Saxena were very close to Sri Ma. All the bereaved families looked to Sri Ma for sustenance and the ability to bear their grief with courage. Sri Ma in her own inimitable way made whole the grievous hurts. Sri Ma continued to travel around the New Year 1958. She spent sometime at Etawah at the invitation of Dada (Bajpayee and family). The entire family down to the third generation was devoted to Sri Ma. The simple old man known as Dada of Etawah was a well known figure in the Ashram.

Notwithstanding the cold of Northern India, Sri Ma continued to travel in the hilly regions. From Etawah she went to Hardwar and Anandakashi (near Rishikesh). The Rajmata of Tehri Garhwal had made arrangements for Sri Ma's visit to her cottage in its very beautiful surroundings.

Sri Ma travelled down to Varanasi in mid January (1958) to be with Didi who was ill. The people of the Ashram were happy to have her at the time of the annual celebrations of the completion of the Savitri Yajna (1974-1950) on January 14. The girls of the Kanyapeeth observed the ritual of *kirtan* from dawn to dusk while walking round the small temple housing the sacred fire.

In Varanasi Sri Ma had very distinguished visitors. Sri Shankar Bharatiji came to the Ashram on January 16 after nightfall. He spoke to Sri Ma for a long time in her own room.

The only other auditor to this dialogue was MM. Pandit Gopinath Kavirajji.

The same day had seen the tantric scholar Swami Pratyagatmanandaji in the Ashram. He had also held a long conversation with Sri Ma during the afternoon. It is a matter of regret that such conversations of great value remained unrecorded and thus have been lost to us.

The festival of Saraswati Puja in February, 1958 was celebrated specially at the residence of Gopal Swarup Pathak, future Law Minister and also Vice-President of India, in Allahabad. His daughters Shanta and Indira had become devoted to Sri Ma. Gopal Swarupji also in his own quiet way had become attached to Sri Ma. This occasion brought the whole family close to her. The Puja was performed with scrupulous care and dedication. Shanta emerged as one of the girls who would in time become one of the special ones near Sri Ma.

After the function at Allahabad Sri Ma went to spend a few days at Rajgir Ashram. Didi, who had been in Mumbai for her treatment, now joined her at Rajgir. The Ashram began to improve in facilities with the onrush of devotees to visit Sri Ma. Adhir Banerjee, a senior officer, took it upon himself to provide many necessities such as a boundary wall and also a negotiable road to the Ashram.

Sri Ma returned to Varanasi in the middle of February. Many people were travelling with her as usual. Kamalaji, her sister Ramaji and Mrs Shivdasani and a few more. Sri Ma would sometimes stand on the balcony of her first floor room while the people stood in the courtyard looking up at her.

Mrs. Shivdasani was addicted to smoking the hookkah. The whole elaborate paraphernalia of this method of smoking formed a part of her travelling kit. Since smoking was not permitted in the Ashram, she always had to stay away in a hotel or as a guest in some devotee's house. Now as she stood in the courtyard with others looking up at the balcony, Sri Ma said to her, "This *hookkah* takes you away from the Ashram, from me, from the *satsang* you would like to attend. Why don't you get rid of it. Bring it here so that I (this body) see it. Then pack it away and see if you can get rid of this addiction.

Mrs. Shivdasani was like a child in front of Sri Ma. She quite willingly ordered the whole contraption to be brought to the courtyard and set down in front of Sri Ma. After Sri Ma had glanced at it, it was packed up and put away. Mrs. Shivdasani with folded hands prayed that she might not suffer craving for it. This prayer evidently was granted because she at last was able to overcome her addiction.

Sri Ma's unending saga of travel was resumed. Sri Ma went to Vrindavan at the invitation of Haribabaji Maharaj. From there she proceeded to Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar. The Sikh devotees accorded to her the same respect and allegiance as to their Sri Guru Granth Sahab. They seated her at the same level and performed *puja* and *arti* along with that of the sacred Book.

From Punjab Sri Ma returned to Varanasi to be with the girls of the Kanyapeeth, who had prayed for her presence during the puja festival of Vasanti Devi. Vasanti Puja had become an annual feature of the Ashram.

On April 7, Jugal Kishore Birla received Sri Ma with

special ceremony at the newly constructed Temple of Vishwanath inside the campus of the Banaras Hindu University. The Temple was situated in the centre of spacious gardens and looked very grand and beautiful. Sri Ma sat for a while in front of the Image. The audience were delighted to hear her sing a few couplets of the names of Siva.

The devotees of Kolkata were now the proud owners of a spacious building on the bank of the river Ganga at Agarpara which was being reconstructed and renovated as a new Ashram. Sri Ma was appealed to again and again to visit Agarpara for various ceremonies. The main function for which the devotees were putting in their best efforts was the Birthday Celebrations in May, 1958.

Janmotsava in Kolkata 1958

The *Janmotsava* was celebrated with all the splendour and magnificence that had become the norm in these years. Many heads of monastic houses came to grace the occasion. They were received at railway stations or airports with *kirtan* parties. They were escorted to their living quarters in parade-like processions. Mahamandelashwar Maheshwarananda from Sannyasa Ashram (Mumbai) was a much appreciated speaker everywhere. Haribabaji came from Vrindavan with his *ras* party, Krishnananda Avadhoot came from Jullandher. The dias at the time of *satsang* took on its usual resplendant look. A rare assembly of ochro-robed Mahatmas belonging to every shade of the spiritual panorama. The audience sat in bemused silence listening to savants who spoke from the same platform in the evenings. The best half hour was the usual time from 9 to 9.30 pm. when Sri Ma answered

questions from the same platform in the evenings. A few questions and answers are given below.

Question : Is it possible for everyone to achieve enlightenment or does it depend on inborn predilections?

Sri Ma : Both are possible. Firstly people are influenced by their own predilections (*samskāras*) But if a Guru so wishes, he can make even an unworthy person qualify for the quest. See, not two leaves of one tree are identical. So are men different from each other. Yet all differences can become meaningless when there is a flood; everything is swept away. Similarly if you are talking of the Infinite then there can be no question of differences. If from within the finite circle of existence you feel the touch of Infinity then everything becomes possible. Otherwise one may proceed step by step in an ordinary way.

Question: There are many religious ways. How can one decide which to adopt?

Sri Ma : Pitaji, if you follow one way devotedly then all ways will become known to you. For you the beginning is from where you are. You can only start out from your own room. When you advance along the path in due course you will understand the significance of the others. A working machine has many knobs or switches. Not all are used at once. As you use the machine may be one by one you use all of them to make it fully functional. Similarly unless you understand all other ways you have not attained totality or Infinity. When you are enlightened you will find all other paths in yours and yours in all others. This is why it is said, Where is He not?"

All the rituals were performed with great circumpection.

The devotees were happy that they could host such a magnificent *utsava*.

The gathering of Mahatmas near Sri Ma on every major occasion brought about some changes. It became increasingly difficult for small towns or individuals to arrange for the *Janmotsava* or the *Samyam Saptaha*; it was left to big business houses or princes to provide the venue for these functions which they did with great enthusiasm and dedication.

After the *Janmotsava* Sri Ma resumed her unstructured method of travelling from one town to another or to different locations in the same town. Sri Ma used to receive prayerful invitations to visit somebody or other, or different towns. Swami Paramanandaji would try to understand Sri Ma's *kheyāla* regarding these undertakings. He or others would suggest an itinerary. In general Sri Ma kept to these arrangements. It was always a big upheaval especially after a major function. Sri Ma's young women companions always wanted to travel along with her. Dozens attached themselves to Sri Ma's entourage. This unwieldy throng was whittled down from time to time but again it would grow to almost a crowd. Sri Ma's travel in itself must be considered a miraculous event. What should have been a chaotic situation somehow always resolved itself into an agreeable adventure. If trains were late or missed. Sri Ma would sit in serene beauty on platforms for many hours. If plans went awry, they righted themselves again without causing major mishaps. To study Sri Ma's travelogue is to see a continuous trail of miraculous concomitance of events!

Sri Ma visited many local institutions by invitation. She

was received at the Ramakrishna Mission by Swami Sundaranandaji also. He engaged her in a dialogue so the congregation got the opportunity of listening to her simple yet profound exposition of the way of spiritual attainment.

Question : How can one attain God?

Sri Ma: He is found whenever one seeks Him with unquenchable yearning and restlessness for him.

Question : How does this restlessness for Him arise?

Sri Ma : *Satsang* (meetings where devotional activities take place), the company of *mahatmas* and the practice of *sādhana* given by one's Guru with perseverance and faith. He is manifest everywhere. It is not too difficult to find Him. On the other hand it is very difficult to attain Him. Both are true. If you know yourself you'll know God; if you know God you will know yourself. Only He is.

"In person and also Impersonal. He is all auspicious and also beyond qualities. You are not apart from Him. To discover one's true being is to know Him." The Swamiji professed himself very pleased with this answer.

Sri Ma paid a short visit to Puri and then came back to Kolkata on 5th June. At once it became a tale of large crowds, press of people making things difficult for organisers. Even the big Ashram seemed small and crowded.

One day Sri Ma strolled across the lawns to the river. As yet people were not aware that it was no longer free for public use. Two young men were talking together. As Sri Ma approached them, one of them took out a cigarette and a match box. Sri Ma walked right up to him and stretched out her hand.

The young man was taken aback; he quickly took the cigarette away and began searching his pockets for money to put in the outstretched hand. Sri Ma said. "I don't want money. I want the object you were going to light up with your matches!" The young man looked upset; he threw his cigarette away and backed into the gathering crowd and lost himself in it. Perhaps it was Sri Ma's *kheyala* that he should give up smoking!

Jogibhai had invited Sri Ma to stay in Solan during the rest of summer. He had extended his invitation to all Mahatmas also as they usually stayed in Sri Ma's Ashram after the *Janmotsava*. So Solan saw the gathering of a galaxy of ochre-robed sadhus who enhanced the splendour of *satsangs*. Although Sri Ma alone imparted to the *satsang* its popularity and dedicated attendance, the presence of the Mahatmas was no doubt an added attraction.

Sri Ma arrived in Solan via Chandigarh from Kolkata on June 13th. This year Sri Ma's sojourn was not too prolonged as she left Solan for Varanasi in the middle of July 1958.

While in Solan Sri Ma had received a prayer from Sri Hanuman Prasad Poddar (Editor of 'Kalyan') to speak a few words for his special edition of Kalyan on Humanity. When the letter was read out to her Sri Ma laughed aloud and said. "Man? O Eternal Man, be revealed unto himself by removing thine own veil by thy own suitable efforts! He of course is forever manifest!"

At this time in Varanasi the Ashram felt the loss of one of Sri Ma's most distinguished admirers Sri Shankar Bharatiji had passed away a fortnight earlier. Of course nobody was lost to Sri Ma as she had stated many times.

Somewhat to the surprise of everyone a series of religious rites were started in the Ashram at this time by Babubhai Kania, business entrepreneur from Mumbai. People came to know the story behind it by and by. Babubhai Kania or Kaniabhai, as he was better known among the devotees, had sometime previously told Sri Ma that an old Brahmin whom he respected highly had expressed his heartfelt wish for some religious rites on the bank of the Ganges. Sri Ma at that time had not found it convenient to countenance such an undertaking. The old man was taken ill. Now Sri Ma guided Kaniabhai to make all arrangements for these rituals as imagined by the old man. It was as if he was awaiting this fulfilment of his desire because he passed away very peacefully after Kaniabhai had apprised him of all the ceremonies which had been performed in Varanasi. All devotees realised that Sri Ma had come away from Solan to the sweltering heat of Varanasi in August just to see to the fulfilment of the old Brahmin's desire.

Sri Ma's random travels continued. She came to Delhi after visiting a few other places. Didi had been sent to Mumbai from Solan for a consultation with her doctors. Now she came to Delhi and was happy to be near Sri Ma again.

On 17th August 1958 the congregation in the evening *satsang* were privileged to see one of Sri Ma's rare displays of her all knowing compassion. The gathering was surprised to see Sri Ma get up suddenly from her seat and walk very fast almost running to the front of the building. Here she approached a car which had just arrived. Maharatanji, who had been ailing for sometime, was sitting in the car. Nobody had told Sri Ma about the car. Neither was it visible from

where she was sitting. Sri Ma touched and caressed her devotee of long standing. Maharatanji before her health gave way and obliged her to stay at home was to be seen sitting at the door (open or shut) of Sri Ma's room almost constantly. At times other devotees would become annoyed at what was almost an obstacle for them. One person who had stumbled over her had asked in annoyance "Have you purchased this privileged seat in front of Sri Ma's room?" Overhearing the angry remark Sri Ma herself had answered "Yes, with one lakh!" The word "*lakkha*" pronounced in Bengali sounds like one lakh. The word also means "undeviating aim", that is, total concentration. So now Sri Ma ran out to see Maharatanji when Maharatanji herself was unable to approach her.

Jhoolan was celebrated at the Ashram. The new-comer Sushil Brahmachari impressed every one with his artistic decorations. After the festival of Jhoolan Sri Ma went to Varanasi to be with the girls of the Kanyapeeth for their annual function of Janmashtami.

The time of Durga Puja was at hand. This year the devotees of Allahabad had decided to invite Sri Ma for this Puja in their town. They had organised themselves into a committee and tremendous efforts were made enthusiastically for this most prestigious function. The venue was Baleshwari Prasad's large house and grounds where a huge Pandal was erected. Sri Ma would stay at the nearby house of Niraj Nath Mukerji where a small cottage had already been built for her by his son Bindu. There was a story about this cottage. Many years earlier while Bindu was a young student Sri Ma had said to him with a show of some

mild exasperation. "I come to Allahabad so often but there is no place for me. I have to stay in boats on the river, or porticoes and verandahs or tents!"

Bindu said, "Ma, when I am older and earning money I shall construct a cottage for you." Many years passed. Bindu completed his education and entered a good service and was earning a high salary. Sri Ma on one of her visits reminded him of his promise. She said. "Bindu, how about a cottage for me?" Bindu was embarrassed and prayed for indulgence and time. He immediately undertook the construction of this cottage near the main house. It was situated under a big neem tree surrounded by open ground. Sri Ma came to this cottage on September 14, 1958.

This incident of almost demanding a place for herself is unique in Sri Ma's *lilā*. Bindu was indubitably a *lilā-parsada*. He was also the only person who drove Sri Ma to various towns or places while she sat next to him in the front passenger seat. She was seen to talk to him very easily in a friendly manner. He truly was a "friend." He had had the privilege of singing for Sri Ma and Bholanathji as a child of 8 years. Bindu's unquestioning deep commitment to Sri Ma was evident in his behaviour. Although he was a most successful man of the world, he belonged to Sri Ma. No doubt it was his father's dedication which brought about Sri Ma's *kheyāla* for a place in this house which became a Temple for them in later years. A shining example of *ahetuki kripa* (grace).

Durga Puja was performed in Allahabad with all the magnificence and circumspection usual under Sri Ma's aegis.

Samyam Saptah in Kanpur, 1958 :

The next big function for the devotees was the Samyam Saptah in November. This year the big business house of Jaipuria in Kanpur had applied for permission to host this function. Swadeshi House was the venue. The arrangements made by Sitaram Jaipuria were faultless and admirable in every way. The spacious Pandal was capable of accommodating nearly 5000 devotees. Lavish arrangements were made for out of town visitors. Mahatamas were special guests of honour. A beautiful summer-house type cottage was made ready for Sri Ma in the middle of the magnificent gardens. A platoon of workers looked after everything and everybody. The devotion of the House of Jaipuria to Sri Ma was reflected in their staff also.

After the successful conclusion of Samyam Saptah Sri Ma resumed her travels. Although the winter had set in Sri Ma went up to Hardwar and to Ananda Kashi. Ananda Kashi was a contrast to Kanpur. She was free to sit out in the sun for sometime. There were no crowds or programmes. The Rajmata of Tehri-Garhwal had truly provided a place of quiet retreat for Sri Ma.

Over the New Year 1959 Sri Ma was in Delhi where Didi had arrived from Mumbai. Didi was ailing and bed-ridden. Sri Ma came to her bed side and sat with her everyday.

One day a very high ranking official came to the Ashram. When he was sitting in the room, he said, "I always wish to have *darshana* of Sri Ma but I am put off by the thought that some people who are received and tolerated here are those who according to me should be whipped publicly for their

misdemeanours!" Sri Ma understood his reference to the person concerned. Sri Ma said to him gently, "You know that sometimes it so happens that a person commits a folly but should he be condemned out of hand and should you use such language for him? Unless he is already repentant and wishful of reform why would he come here? All are children of the same Father. This body does not say 'come' or 'go away'. All are equally acceptable. Can you say that a good man will never commit a mistake or that a bad man will not become virtuous? For this body nobody is an other or an outsider."

The gentleman reflected on Sri Ma's words and acknowledged that she was right. When he left he was calm and in good cheer.

Sri Ma had been long expected in the state of Jhalawar. Kamalaji's son, Ananda Mohanlal was posted in Jhalawar. He had been praying for her visit for quite sometime. Now Sri Ma went to Jhalawar. It became a State-visit because the princely family accorded her all due honours. All arrangements were of the highest order. Sri Ma had a quiet restful time in Jhalawar.

Sri Ma returned to Delhi on January 16, 1959. She had the *kheyāla* for Rajgir. So the next "camp" was this small Ashram in this ancient town. As soon as devotees came to know Sri Ma's whereabouts they flocked to Rajgir. After about a fortnight or so Sri Ma went on to Kolkata. Sri Ma with her entourage came to the new Ashram at Agarpara. This was now truly a beautiful and commodious residence. The local devotees celebrated the Saraswati Puja in the new Ashram on february 12th with great enthusiasm and suitable splendour.

Kolkata being a big city was full of numerous devotees who prayed for Sri Ma's presence in their places of residence. A regular feature of Sri Ma's sojourn in Kolkata was her visits to individual residences. A suite of rooms, especially for Sri Ma or a new extension to an old house for the same purpose. This created a lot of confusion. Crowds awaiting her *darshana* in the Ashram were frustrated. Since only a few lucky ones in the know could follow her to her destinations, the majority were annoyed and there was much heart-burning and angry or tearful protests. It is very interesting to study the language of Didi Gurupriya's Journals. She invariably used indirect verbs to describe Sri Ma's visits. She never wrote, "Sri Ma went there" or "Sri Ma went to the Ashram" etc. It is always "Sri Ma was taken to Mr. X's house" or "Sri Ma was driven, escorted, taken to, some specific place." It is very clear that Sri Ma's movements were hardly ever due to her own *kheyāla*. She in general went along with the demands made on her. It must also be stated that these demands were devout prayers. All people with cars and big houses were also humble devotees in Sri Ma's presence. They knew they could never take anything for granted, so the cries of "discrimination" which arose frequently in Kolkata were never justified.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Didi's Anguish

From a letter :

"(I understand) your feeling of desolation; (you are) surrounded by dark clouds of impending calamity; It is natural that your mind would be gripped by tense tears For those who are desperate, the only source of relief is God..... Have complete trust in Him..... If you have fallen to the ground use it as a spring board to raise yourself up again Under no circumstances, however, adverse, should man accept defeat"

—Sri Ma Anandamayi

Didi continued ill. All improvements were shortlived. She was in Mumbai so that her doctors could evaluate the situation. Bhaiya was ever in attendance. He knew that Didi was always yearning for Sri Ma's *darshana*. With the permission of her doctors Didi was at last allowed to come up to Dehradun in the beginning to March, 1959.

Inauguration of Shiva Temples in Dehradun Ashrams

The devotees of Dehradun were looking forward to Sri Ma's prolonged stay in their town because a number of festivals had been arranged for, chiefly the installation of seven *Sivalingas* in a new Temple constructed for the purpose. The *Sivalingas* had been assembled in Kishenpur Ashram. Ranjit Banerji and his wife Bhabani were wishful of taking charge of one Image. There were others who



Ma in Raipur, Dehradun with Muktananda
Giriji, her mother and Gurupriya Didi.

contributed toward this ceremony. The suitable white marble Temple came up at the side of the Ashram building. A spacious courtyard was laid out in front of the Temple.

On March, 7, 1959, the Images were installed in the new Temple with prescribed rites and festivities. All rituals were observed with meticulous care. The Ashram was now teeming with devout men and women and the usual complement of children of all ages.

The Images were named in accordance with the wishes of the devotees. The names were as follows :

1. Bholanath : in the memory of Bholanathji.
2. Gangeshwara : for Bhabani and Ranjit Banerji.
3. Kashishwara : In the memory of the Late Kashinath Tankha.
4. Mamuleshwara : In the memory of the son of Prof. Nalini Brahma.
5. Kalyaneshwara : In the memory of the Late Chaudhury Sher Singh and his wife.
6. Kirtishwara : In the memory of the grand son of Dr. Panna Lal and the son of Rameshar Sahai and his wife Leela.

One Sivalinga was installed also in a Temple in Kalyanvan in the memory of Sachi Babu and his sister Manorama. Kalyanvan had been the gift of Sachi Babu to the Ashram. He and his sister had lived in Dehra Dun like ascetics till their passing away. The name of the Image was Maheshwara.

The day of the installation ceremony was also the night of Mahashivaratri. As written earlier Sri Ma had initiated a

system of simultaneous worship by all participants. There were more than 200 devotees eager to take part in this all night *puja* of the Great God. Sri Ma supervised all arrangements. Each *āsana* (seat or square of carpet) was designated by name on a piece of paper attached to it. In front of the *āsana* was arranged tastefully everything required for the *puja*. The whole area was lit up with *ghee*-wick lamps. The fragrance of incense permeated the evening air. The usual motly crowd of devotees was quiet and sitting in meditative silence, listening to the strains of *kirtan* signalling the beginning of the night long vigil. Those who have had the opportunity of participating in this joint-*puja*, alone may know and remember the sheer joy and sense of fulfilment of it.

Didi was accommodated in a small cottage in Kalyanvan. It was Sri Ma's *kheyāla* that she should stay away from the milling crowds. Didi was bed-ridden and needed to rest a lot. Since she was unable to participate in the functions being conducted in the main Ashram, Sri Ma herself came to meet Didi as often as she could get away from the press of people around her. Didi was conscious of Sri Ma's constant thoughtfulness toward her; it grieved her that she was unable to join in the activity. Only a few years ago she had been the most busy and active person in Sri Ma's entourage; now she had to wait for Sri Ma's occasional *darshana*. She depended on others for news of Sri Ma. When she was travelling away from Dehra Dun. Buni, Chitra or Paramananda or anybody who was travelling with Sri Ma would take care to write long letters to Didi. Didi sustained herself on these missives.

Sri Ma visited Vrindavan, Patiala, Hoshiarpur in quick succession. She returned to Dehradun on April, 8 1959. A special Samyam Saptaha was going to be held in Rishikesh in

Atma Vijnana Bhavan from April 15th. This was at the invitation of Pandit Ganesh Dattaji who was very keen to celebrate this function. The scheduled one in November was already spoken for so Sri Ma had the *kheyala* to allow for an extra one now. He had invited all the Mahatmas who ordinarily came for the Samyam Saptaha in November of every year. He was close to the Prime Minister and had invited him also.

Before going on to Rishikesh Sri Ma spent the intervening days in Dehradun mostly in visiting Didi in Kalyanvan. She also made suggestions for improving the facilities of the newly constructed Temples. The well-known singer Chhabi Banerji was spending a few days with Sri Ma. She was astonished to see Sri Ma talk knowledgeably with engineers. She knew Sri Ma to be perfect in her rendering of any song or *kirtan* but her total grasp of engineering problems was new to Chhabi. She would accompany Sri Ma to visit Didi and express her sense of wonderment to her. Didi of course knew that Sri Ma was capable of speaking on terms of equality with any expert in any field but Chhabi being a comparative new comer was experiencing the usual sense of awe. One day while Sri Ma sat in Didi's room Chhabi Banerji sang a couple of Didi's favourite songs for her. The songs were beautiful expressions of a devotee's heartfelt surrender at the feet of God. Chhabbi's voice was enchantingly melodious. Whenever she sang the music became a prayerful surrender at the feet of the Beloved.

Didi was overwhelmed and there were tears in her eyes. Sri Ma got up to leave. She tried to lighten the atmosphere by saying; "What is this Didi! You and tears! Where is the robust

person we know?"

Didi smiled and tried to overcome her embarrassment at this unwonted display of weakness, which was very uncharacteristic. It was true that the prolonged period of illness with its ups and downs had sapped her will power. Sri Ma had programs elsewhere. Didi was very conscious of the fact that it was only due to Sri Ma's *kripā* (grace) that she was receiving the best medical aid available in our country, the best quality of nursing and care. That she was mobile and able to travel at times was also a remarkable feat of achievement. But she had begun at last to think that perhaps she would never again regain her former health. She reflected on Sri Ma's ways. She wrote in her Journal : "It does not take a moment for her to create a gigantic enterprise, give it sustenance for as long as it takes for people to congratulate themselves on what they think is their own achievements and then to nullify the whole thing by just withdrawing herself. Sometimes we think she is the nearest of the near; nobody can be more concerned, that we are indispensable to her and then the very next second we are stunned by her aloofness, her far away look of total detachment from her surroundings. Alas, even after so many years of living in close proximity none of us has understood the enigmatic personality of Ma! It is for us to pray for her unfailing grace on our unworthy selves. May her *kheyāl* be fulfilled in my life as in everything else!"

Didi had recorded similar sentiments in earlier times also. In fact who could be in a better position than she to voice the anguish which is endemic to the human condition? She had never imagined that she would be obliged to live away from the main current of events happening around Sri Ma. As years

went by she became reconciled to this widening distance. She became a little quiet and withdrawn. But this was still in the future. For the present. Didi somehow tried to be reconciled to her illness hoping it would be contained in time.

Samyam Saptah at Ātma Vignān Bhavan, Rishikesh, 1959

The Samyam Saptah at Rishikesh was well attended and pronounced a great success. The Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru also came to attend one of the sessions. He sat next to Sri Ma and was able to exchange a few words with her. Sri Ma made enquiries about Indira Gandhi who used to come to her as a young girl with her mother Kamalaji. The Prime Minister said that he hardly saw her as she was very busy with the work of the party. (Congress Party) He asked to be kept informed of Sri Ma's visits to Delhi so that he could come for her *darshana*.

The Samyam Saptah concluded amidst the usual celebrations. The last very popular item always, was the special *bhandara* (feast) for all participants. From Atma Vijnana Bhavan Sri Ma and the Mahatmas went to the Ashram of the Kali-Kamli-Wallahs, who had contributed greatly toward the Samyam Saptaha. Here Sri Ma was received with great respect and a display of deep devotion. A few of the residents sang a song which had been written to welcome her. A summary of the song is attempted here because it was really a fine expression of their sentiments :

This is a special day heralding

Someone is coming, coming!

*The scented breeze blows in welcome,
The Ganga rises in playful tides
According heartfelt greeting !
Fortunate are we of this holy place
that Sri Ma is here as Personified Grace!*

Daya Mata meets Sri Ma

Around this time the President of the International Self Realization Fellowship founded by Paramahansa Yogananda, Daya Mata came to visit Sri Ma. This was the beginning of a lifelong association. Whenever she came to India she found her way to Sri Ma and stayed with her for a few days.

At this time a tragic event saddened the hearts of all the devotees. The younger son of Bhuvan M. Chakravarty and Moina Devi died in a plane crash. He was the pilot. The death of the younger generation always affected people of the Ashram because they were indeed like a close knit family.

Sri Ma came back to Dehra Dun on April 22. Didi was awaiting her arrival with as much patience as she could muster. During the Samyam Saptaha Bhaiya had come from Mumbai. He first came to see Didi before going on to Rishikesh. He had been very upset with all the medical reports he had got about her from the surgeons and doctors. Didi had suffered an attack of meningitis on top of her other ailments. The doctors had told Bhaiya that medicines had become ineffective, the body was not responding to treatment. At that time he had not said anything to Didi but now he confessed to her his own helplessness in this matter. Didi said she was



Sri Daya Mata with Ma on the terrace of the Varanasi Ashram. Last visit.
-September, 1959



Sri Daya Mata, President, Self Realization Fellowship, successor of Paramahansa Yoganandaji Maharaj comes to Ma from U.S.A. and meets Ma for the first time. Swami Kriyananda, the then Vice-President, also with her.

aware of this assessment of the doctors. He came to know that Sri Ma before leaving for Rishikesh had said to Didi "Promise me that you will observe the following six rules about your health :

1. Open air; keep your windows and doors open as much as possible;
2. Intake of food : you must not refuse your food.
3. You must eat fruits (Didi's pet aversion)
4. You will observe *maunam*.
5. Intake of water - as much as you can.
6. Rest : your room should be clear of visitors during the afternoon and at night after 9 p.m."

Didi was helped to obey all these rules scrupulously. Gradually she took a turn for the better. Unknown to her Sri Ma had already taken a hand in this affair. When the telegram about Didi's meningitis was received, Sri Ma was told that the doctors did not hope beyond six months of life for Didi. Sri Ma had said; "Is that what their opinion is? Never mind", She said to Buni, "Take a vow of *maunam* for nine months making a strong resolve that Didi should make a recovery." Buni had become *maun* on the night of 15th April. This *maunam* had a checkered history. Many girls took turns when Buni was unable to keep *maunam* for family reasons. Didi did make a recovery. She knew she had received a new lease of life due to Sri Ma's *kheyala* for her.

Janmotsava in Kishenpur Ashram : 1959

This was the time when the country was saddened by the

expulsion of the Dalai Lama from his own country. He was staying in Mussouri. The Prime Minister was scheduled to meet him there on April 25.

A message was received in the Ashram that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru would come to see Sri Ma on his way back from Mussouri in the evening. When this message was conveyed to Sri Ma, she said, "Will he?" From this spontaneous reaction some of the senior members of the Ashram concluded that Panditji would not be able to keep his engagement. Sri Ma however asked them to make everything ready for his reception. It so happened that Panditji was delayed in Mussourie. He was free around 9 p.m. He did not wish to disturb Sri Ma so late in the evening. He stopped his car for a minute in front of the Ashram and made his *pranams* from there. Then he went down to Dehradun. All this was related much later by Upadhyayji, the Prime Minister's family friend and Private Secretary. Shakuntala Devi, the Prime Minister's hostess in Dehradun came the next morning carrying a bouquet of flowers for Sri Ma from the Prime Minister. He had been very disappointed because he had missed his visit to her and had talked about Sri Ma at length with Shakuntala Devi before leaving for Delhi.

In the Ashram, somebody raised a question regarding Sri Ma's reticence about future events. The question was : It was evident that Sri Ma was not really expecting Panditji to come, yet she had allowed full preparations to be made for his reception and was apparently awaiting his arrival. How to explain this contradiction?

Sri Ma smiled and said, "This body behaves in accordance

with the awareness at the ordinary level. Why do you expect a supra-awareness to control events when everything is proceeding on the mundane level of partial knowledge? This body does not act in the light of future events."

It was right that this should be so otherwise the imagination balks at the course of events opening out if Sri Ma had predicted the future. At another time she had responded to the question, "Ma, do you know all things at all times?" in these words, "It is like reading a book. You are not remembering the alphabet all the time but when you pick up a book you can read. Alternately, if you flash a torch in a darkened room you can see all that there is in it. When I have the *kheyāla*, there are no limits but ordinarily I go along with everybody's experience of time and space."

In May the Janmotsava was celebrated at Kishenpur Ashram. It meant the usual gathering of a very large crowd of devotees. Very special arrangements were made for the distinguished Mahatmas who came to grace the occasion. The *Utsava* was observed from May 3 to May 27th with scrupulous care and devout dedication.

An unusual feature of this Janmotsava was that Sri Ma continued in Dehradun instead of leaving immediately after the function. Kishenpur Ashram and its surroundings now could accommodate the influx of visitors. Many families had arrived because it was the time of summer vacation for schools and colleges. Children formed a large section of devotees at vacation times. Hundreds of third generation children grew up as "friends" of Sri Ma. They were the lucky ones as they had her guidance to fall back on while finding

their places in the world.

Dehradun being close to Delhi and the foothills of the mountain resort Mussourie saw many important personages as visitors to the Ashram. One gentleman from the Columbian Embassy came from Delhi to meet Sri Ma. He had the opportunity of holding a prolonged dialogue with her regarding his own spiritual aspirations. The Ambassador of Chile and his son and the son of the Ambassador of Italy also came to see Sri Ma on their way down from Mussourie.

Sri Ma's entourage was saddened by the news of the sudden demise of Goswami Ganesh Dattaji in Haridwar. Some of them realized that perhaps Sri Ma had agreed to the extra Samyam Saptah at his request because she knew he did not have time to observe it in November. He had been so keen to hold this function in Atma Vijnana Bhawan. So his wish had been fulfilled.

A rather odd and interesting incident happened at this time. An old retired gentleman and his wife, both known to Sri Ma and devoted to her, came to the Ashram one day accompanied by their young daughter-in-law. The young girl seemed very quiet and biddable. The gentleman said to Sri Ma, "She sits in meditation for hours. She goes into *samādhi* too. Sri Ma, please talk to her and tell me if she is in an advanced stage of spiritual attainment."

Sri Ma made much of the young girl, listening to her account of her experiences during meditation. Didi who was enjoying a spell of freedom from illness at this time was an auditor of these dialogues in private. She expressed her

doubts regarding the nature of the *samādhis* experienced by the young bride. Sri Ma said, "Never mind, one should not hurt the feelings of anyone. The attitude of the gentleman is of awed admiration. One cannot undermine it. Whatever is genuine will reveal itself. That is the nature of truth. There is nothing to be impatient about."

The father-in-law wanted the young girl to stay in the Ashram with Sri Ma. He and his wife were living in retirement as *Vānaprasthis* (renouncing the world) so they had no home.

Sri Ma agreed but before they departed they received two telegrams from their son; one to his father and the other to his wife. In both he had asked that the bride should come to join him in his place of work. Evidently the invitation to join her husband was agreeable to the bride. She was a simple straightforward girl, willing to obey her elders but not averse to going back to her husband.

Sri Ma said to the father-in-law, "Look Pitaji, if they had not enjoyed wordly pleasures together they would not want to be together again." The gentleman realized that he himself had read more into the states of quietude seen in the bride than was actually the case. Sri Ma's presence and *kheyāla* no doubt brought about the solution, which was satisfying to all parties.

Kishanpur Ashram enjoyed the presence of Sri Ma till the occasion of Gurupurnima on 20th July 1959. Haribabaji Maharaj was very concerned about Didi. He would come to her room and express his dissatisfaction. He would say, "I want all of us to enjoy the best of health so that all of us can follow the true path with enjoyment and good cheer. Didi, make a resolution that you will get better."

After Gurupurnima Sri Ma left for Delhi. The new Ashram was coming up gradually. A room had been constructed specially for Sri Ma. With the coming of Sri Ma the Ashram took on a festive look.

Sri Ma spent the festival of Jhoolan in Vrindavan at the invitation of Haribabaji. Vrindavan being the hallowed place of the *lila* of Sri Krishna always celebrated the festivals dedicated to his memory with great fanfare. The Ashram as usual filled up with visitors. Aparna Devi, the daughter of the renowned legal luminary and also distinguished freedom fighter of Bengal C.R. Das and her daughter came to stay with Sri Ma for a few days in Vrindavan.

Sri Ma returned to Delhi since Didi had been left here so that she could rest quietly. Sri Ma's hectic programmes were hardly suitable for any semi-invalid. Sri Ma's sojourn in Delhi was short because she had the *kheyala* to be in Varanasi for the function of Janmashtami. The girls of the Kanyapeeth had prayed for her presence. On her day of departure 24th August Sri Ma received the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in the Ashram. He sat in her room for about 45 minutes. Since they were by themselves, nobody knew what the conversation was about. He took his leave when it was almost time for Sri Ma to leave for the station.

In Varanasi the young girls of the Kanyapeeth had a rewarding time with Sri Ma. Sri Ma sang with them and danced with them for the *Nandotsava*. (The day after Janmastami). They had a most lovely time celebrating the Birthday of Sri Krishna.

At this time Daya Mata, the President of the many

establishments of Paramahansa Yogananda came to stay for a few days with Sri Ma. She was in India for organizational work. She was very attached to Sri Ma. Swami Kriyananda, Vice-President of their Ashram also came to be with Sri Ma on 12th September saying it was the day of his initiation. He wished to spend this day with her. Since his Guru was a Bengali he was learning the language of Bengal. He had acquired some proficiency also and sang in Bengali. In answer to a question he answered, "Of course I am a Bengali". Sri Ma pointed to herself and said with a smile. "American!" Both of them said to Sri Ma, "Please come to America!"

Sri Ma answered, "If you take me, I will go!"

There was a pause. Both Swamijis knew that her words were fraught with an inner meaning. Sri Ma always answered thus to invitations for her visits to various places. In case the programme did not happen she would say, "What can I do, you were not able to take me after all!"

Sri Ma, now said very gently to them, "I spoke similarly to Baba (Paramahansa Yogananda) but he thought I was expressing my willingness." Daya Mata understood that without Sri Ma's *kheyāla* nothing would happen. She said, "I will take you to America in my heart." Swami Kriyananda demurred, saying, there was nothing comparable to Sri Ma's physical presence!

When time came they took their leave with many exchanges of gifts. All disciples of Paramahansa Yogananda felt at home in Sri Ma's presence, just as other disciples of other great *Sadgurus* had found sanctuary in her vicinity Sri Ma was indeed dear to the heart of all pilgrims.

Sri Ma during her travels often referred to a period of daily silence of ten or fifteen minutes to different groups of people. She would say, "You are ceaselessly preoccupied with affairs of the world. In this ongoing process a slight halt may be called by this period of inwardisation. A thin wedge of God-remembrance is to be inserted in the ever revolving circle of worldly concerns. To break the rhythm of the mundane by engaging in thoughts of the self *ātmachintan*. Even these few minutes may prove to be of spiritual benefit to you. Who knows at what moment one may not get caught up in that universal divine rhythm which sustains us all!"

"Those who are not used to *japa* or *dhyana* may pray thus : 'God, I do not know you. Please illuminate my ignorance by your Presence so that I may begin to know you!'"

Whenever Sri Ma spoke about the *maunam* of 15 minutes, people would eagerly agree to incorporate it in their daily lives. People would promise to abide by exact timing. In order to encourage this Sri Ma asked the Ashram to make a list of the names of participants and their times, to see if all the 24 hours could be accounted for. When she was told that although the daytime was covered many times over, there were no participants for the nights. Sri Ma then said, "Give this time to the Americans!"

In this way Sri Ma's remarkable *kheyala* for an *akhanda Bhagavat-Smaran* (unbroken stream of prayerful meditation) girded the whole world not once but many times.

Sri Ma had occasion to speak of this *maunam* to Sri V.V. Giri, the then Governor of U.P. and later on the President of India, when he came to visit her at Varanasi Ashram where

Durga Puja was celebrated in October, 1959. He sat very relaxed in Sri Ma's presence talking about his own understanding of spiritual matters. His simplicity was truly admirable. Sri Ma said, "Pitaji, may this body ask for a favour, or rather for an indulgence? When this body approaches persons who have accepted her as their own this body uses the expression "indulgence". From those who are indifferent this body sometimes 'begs' the gift of a little time."

- She then explained the setting aside of 15 minutes for God - remembrance every day, to keep this commitment very strictly and not be distracted or jolted out of the routine. The period should be given over to God completely.

Sri V.V. Giri accepted this suggestion with great pleasure. He said, "I am honoured to be chosen to become one of the links in this chain of ceaseless God-remembrance."

A new type of Saptaha (week of worship) was observed in Varanasi from October 24-30th at the suggestion of Dr. Gopinath Kaviraj. It was called *Matri-Saptaha* and was observed by volunteers who followed a routine of *japa*, *dhyana*, and *path* (the reading of scriptures). At the time Sri Ma's indifferent state of health did not allow her to appear for public *darshana*. Three times a day people went up to her room and had *darshana* for a few minutes. So the people had a lot of time to devote to *sāadhanā* and pray for Sri Ma's well-being.

On 31st October. Kali Puja was performed in the Ashram. The whole night of Diwali was spent in *puja* and *kirtan*. The courtyard was full of devotees. Everyone was happy to see Sri Ma sitting in her usual place in the Temple near the Image of

Kali. She looked her usual radiant self so the night-long vigil ended in great joyousness.

Tenth Samyam Saptah at Agarpara Ashram Kolkata, 1959

After all these celebrations the devotees were ready to observe the rigourism of the Samyam Saptah in November. Kolkata was chosen as the venue. The residents of the metropolitan city proved once more that they were capable of transforming themselves into disciplined ascetics for the duration of a week.

Sri Vishnu Ashramji Maharaj, the most erudite scholar of Shuktal, was prevailed upon to grace this occasion. He was known to be a recluse but to please Sri Ma he came to Kolkata. He spoke to the vast congregation in his very pleasant voice making profound subjects sound easy and interesting. He said, "We are fortunate to be born human beings, we can strive for enlightenment and achieve fulfilment. Three things are necessary for this, one, to be born a human being, second to be filled with yearning for knowledge and third to come under the aegis of the Enlightened ones. All of you are fortunate that Sri Ma herself is guiding you on the path of fulfilment so your success is assured!"

Vishnu Ashramji became a favourite speaker in all the subsequent Samyam Saptahs; his attractive delivery was made doubly so by his sense of humour. There were other scholars who spoke on the occasion. Dr. J. B. Choudhury and his wife Dr. Rama Choudhury belonged to Kolkata and were well known. Prof. Tripurari Chakravarty. Dr. Nalini Kanta

Brahma and Dr. Gauri Nath Shastri were also known and respected as scholars of high repute.

All discourses were listened to attentively but the highlight of the evening which was looked forward to with eagerness was the *mātrisatsang*, that is a dialogue with Sri Ma. During this half hour Sri Ma answered questions from the audience, sometimes she sang a little *kirtan*. One day she said, "He who aspires to the Highest (*mahān*) is called a *Mahātmā*. To engage in *sāadhanā* means to observe *samyam*. In the beginning *samyam* has to be practised so that in time it may become a way of life. What after all is the meaning of *samyam*? It means to bind yourself down by discipline so that you may gain freedom! Look at it like this, those who are ill go to a hospital for recovery. Here you are seeking redress for the ills of life, a relentless cycle of pains and pleasures. The *Mahātmās* are the doctors. They have come from afar to shower you with the nectar of healing thoughts. The daily regimen of *japa* and *dhyana* is the dosage of medicine, the efforts you put in for self-enlightenment is the supportive diet. So you see the *Samyam Saptah* can truly encourage you to take heart and strengthen your resolution for Enlightenment!"

The *Samyam Saptah* concluded with the midnight meditation on 14th November. *Kirtan* was commenced immediately and maintained throughout the next day concluding as usual in the evening. Sri Ma distributed the light sugar puffs to everyone by throwing handfuls in every direction toward the crowds. Sometimes she made a feint at one direction but actually threw it in the opposite direction which added to the general merriment. This last joyous function as usual gratified all participants.

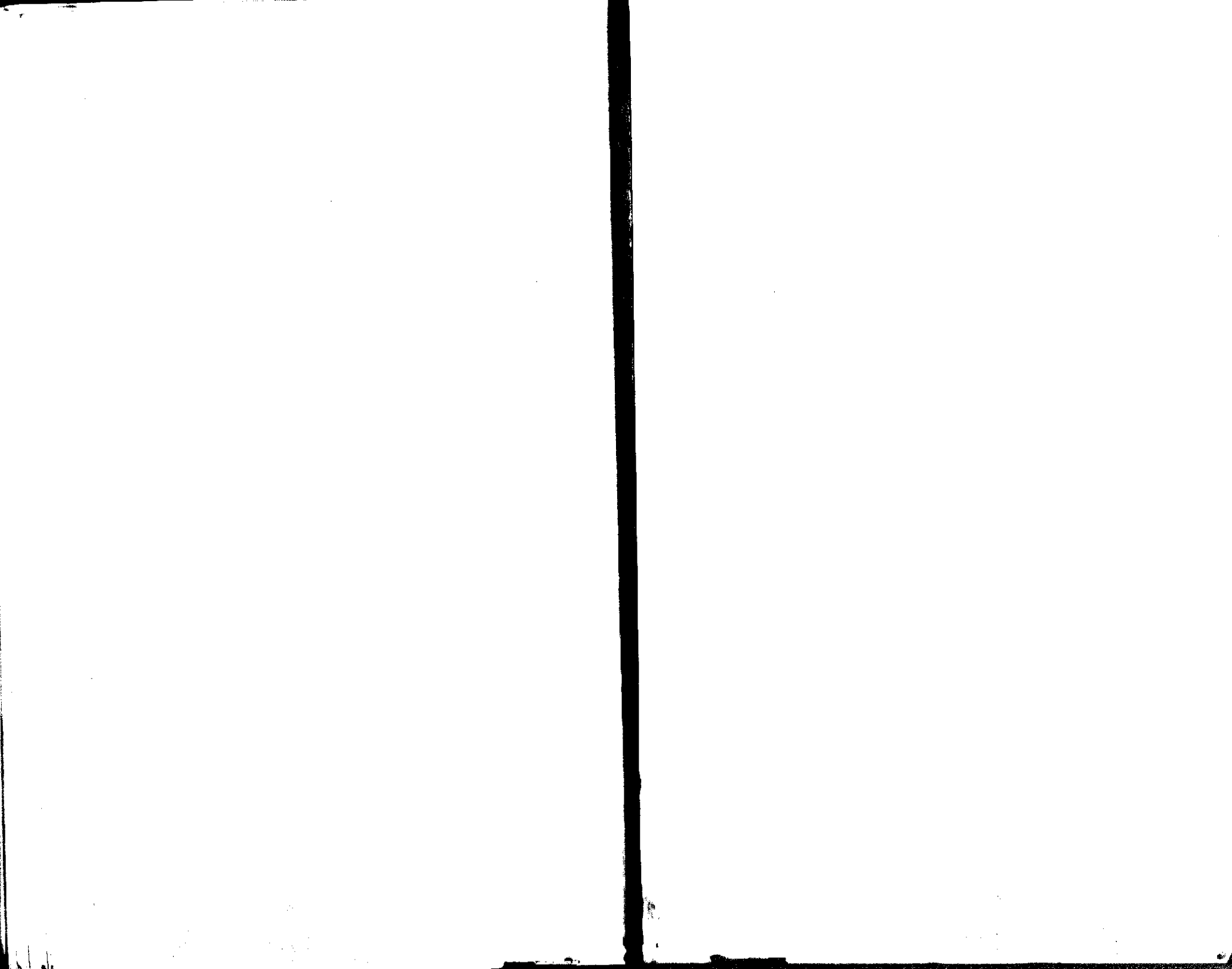
Sri Ma travelled right across India to arrive in Mumbai on December 21st.

En route she had stopped for a couple of days at Jamshedpur. In Mumbai she stayed in her own cottage built by B.K. Shah within the compound of his own house at Vile Parle. In time all devotees came to regard this house as almost another Ashram. It seemed there were no limits to this couples, capacities for rendering service not only to Sri Ma but her retinue as well. Sri Ma herself came to depend on Bhaiya and Leela Ben as competent and reliable devotees who would abide by her *kheyāla*.

Sri Ma arrived in Ammedabad on December 4 to attend the *Bhāgavata Saptah* to be celebrated in memory of Kantibhai Munshaw who had died in 1957. His mansion and gardens so many times the venue of Sri Ma's sojourns in Ahmedabad now again filled with devotees. Sri Ma's presence uplifted the hearts of the bereaved family and also the large community of devotees. Kantibhai would ever be remembered as a competent entrepreneur and a man of great integrity of character. His devotion to Sri Ma was exemplary. Now his wife Kundan Ben experienced Sri Ma's compassionate understanding which could lighten all burdens. His children Usha, Urmila and Madhukar remained close to Sri Ma as they grew up to take their places in the world.

It is true that Sri Ma Anandamayi belongs to humanity but the special ties which obtain between her and those who have taken refuge at her feet are enduring and utterly beautiful. All devotees have one prayer only :

"May Sri Ma's *kheyāla* prevail in my life for ever and ever!"





Printed by : Ratna Offsets Limited, Kamachha, Varanasi.