

ANANDAMAYI MA

To her devotees, Anandamayi Ma, was not just considered a highly spiritual woman but a true incarnation of a deity or God. Anandamayi Ma was born on April 30, 1896, to a devoted Vaishnava Brahman family, in Kheora, Bengal (present day Bangladesh). At birth she was named Nirmala Sundari, and would not be called Anandamayi Ma until much later (Hallstrom 23). According to accounts of her devotees, everything about Ma, in her early years was spiritually auspicious. One instance of her future greatness was when she was nine or ten months old, a holy man visited Ma's family. He was seated close to little Ma and she crawled up like she was intimately familiar with him. He then picked up Ma and, "placed her feet reverently on his shoulder, head and other parts of his body in an extraordinary show of devotion and veneration and then sat her on his lap." After seating her in front of him, "he began to perform *puja* or worship to her, bowing down before her." He then said to her mother,

"This whom you are seeing before you, this is Ma [the Divine Mother] and is so not [only of] men and women but also as permeating and transcending the universe. You will certainly not be able to keep her bound to family ties. She will definitely not remain here." (Hallstrom 25)

Despite receiving religious instruction only from her parents, "she displayed an uncanny knowledge of religious matters," (Hallstrom 25) and often was witnessed in *bhava*, a state of ecstasy or trancelike states, which were described as supernatural in nature. One particular form of worship, *kirtan*, devotional songs, would put her into a state of pure spiritual ecstasy. She was known to often wander off, singing devotional songs. Her states could last a short time but as she became older, these instances lengthened. Some relatives felt that when they were around Ma during these instances, they experienced a loss of body consciousness (Hallstrom 28).

At the age of twelve, her marriage was arranged to a man named Ramani Mohan Chakaravart from a distinguished Brahman Bharadwaj family. An auspicious day, February 7,

1909, was picked and they married. Ma remained with her family until she was fourteen, and then she went to live with Ramani Mohan's family, entering the household stage of her life. Ramani Mohan's parents had died, so Ma was placed in the instruction of Ramani Mohan's eldest brother's wife, Dadamahashaya. Ma excelled at housework and became a pleasant, hardworking wife in her brother-in-law's house, where she was very well liked. Ma often fell in states of *Samadhi*, but they believed the states were just bouts of extreme exhaustion or absentmindedness (Hallstrom 32). She stayed with her husband's family until she joined her husband in Ashtagrama, in East Bengal, in 1914. This was the first instance that Ma and Ramani Mohan were around each other for a substantial period of time since their marriage. Devotees point out that Ramani Mohan was unaware of Ma's extraordinary state. He assumed he had married an ordinary illiterate village woman, but he quickly became aware of her spiritual power. The first time he tried to approach her sexually, "he supposedly received such a violent electric shock that he put for the time being all thought of a physical relationship out of his mind" (Lipski 6). He thought that it was because Ma was so young and that she would become "normal" in time, but their marriage was never consummated; sexual desire never arose again in their marriage (Lipski 6). Despite the lack of sexual relationship, Ramani Mohan cared for Ma, loved her very dearly, and accepted their unconventional marriage.

It was also in Ashtagrama, where Ma was first recognized as a "spiritually exalted woman" and received the name Ma given to her by a man named Harkumar. He became the one to bring attention to the "ecstatic states or *bhavavastha* of Anandamayi Man"(Hallstrom 34). He arranged a *kirtan*, where Ma was first publicly observed in a state of *bhava*. For those around her, her state of *bhava* was a frightening experience, as she either fell to the floor in convulsions

or sat motionless, “her face and eyes bathed in a radiant glow” (Hallstrom 34). At subsequent *kirtans*, Ma experienced similar state of *bhava*.

Between 1918 and 1924, Ma began experiencing her most spiritual activities. It was also at this time that Ma became more centered on her spiritual life and moved away from her household duties. In 1922, Ramani Mohan was advised to get Ma initiated by the family *guru* as soon as possible. On August 3, 1922, Ma experienced self-initiation, a feat not experienced before, especially as a woman. At this time, Ma began to display *siddhis*, or spiritual powers (Hallstrom 38-40). Five months later, on January 3, 1923, Ma initiated her husband and she changed his name to Bholanath, a name for Shiva. Later that month, Ma entered into a three-year silence or *mauna*. (Hallstrom 41) Their initiations marked the transition of their marriage into a complex relationship. Ma remained an obedient wife, always asking Bholanath’s permission before any undertaking, but she was not bound by his decisions, and always found ways to persuade him for approval. On the other hand, Bholanath was spiritually inferior to Ma, who also became his *guru* (Lipski 7).

By 1924, Ma began to gather devotees while living at Shasbagh Gardens. Many people were invited by Bholanath to see the extraordinary spiritual powers of his wife. She warned him not to invite so many people, stating, “You must think twice before opening the doors to the world in this manner. Remember that you will not be able to stem the tide when it becomes overwhelming” (Hallstrom 43). Many devotees believed Ma, was an incarnation of Kali and called her Manusha Kali, or “Kali in human form,” others believed she was “a self-realized being of extraordinary spiritual power” (Hallstrom 43). In 1926, devotees witnessed Ma’s inability to feed her self, as her hands would no longer work as they used to, leaving the task to Bholanath and her closest devotees, who fed her until her death (Hallstrom 46). On her thirty-first birthday,

a special *kirtan* and *puja* was performed in her honor and again on her thirty-second. 1928 also marked the year Ma began her years of travels and transition to the Renouncer stage.

Throughout the next ten years, Ma traveled extensively throughout Bengal and India. Bholanath followed her transition and entered into a period of silence and pilgrimage under Ma's instruction. Many times he asked her not to travel without him, but she warned that she would leave her body if he refused her. In the years after 1933, Ma, Bholanath, and many of her devotees made many spontaneous pilgrimages, full of religious festivals, *kirtans* and *satsangas*. On April 23, 1938, Ma predicted that Bholanath would become seriously ill. True to her word, Bholanath died fifteen days later on Mar 7, 1938 of smallpox (Hallstrom 51).

After the death of her husband, Ma's life experienced little change. She continued her constant traveling, until the number of devotees swelled to huge numbers, which reduced her spontaneous travel. Ashrams were built throughout the country and a central administrative organization was created, the Shree Shree Anandamayee Sangha, in February 1950. The Sangha was able to establish two Sanskrit schools, a hospital and a periodical called *Ananda Varta* (Hallstrom 52). By 1973, there were twenty seven ashrams around India. Ma had no involvement in the Sangha or subsequent administrative organizations; however she founded the annual *Samyam Varta*, a week-long retreat, held in a different place every year. During the week, Ma and her close devotees would instruct devotees in spiritual practices (Hallstrom 52).

On July 11, 1982, Ma gave her last public *darshan*. Her health had begun to deteriorate seriously; she asked to be moved to her Kishenpur ashram where Bholanath had died in 1938. It was on August 27, 1982, Ma died, in the room directly above where her husband had died. According to her wishes, Anandamayi Ma was buried and a shrine was erected, which has become a place of worship and pilgrimage, known for its spiritual power (Hallstrom 52).

Anandamayī Ma's greatest influence on Hinduism was the creation of a way women could become important figures of worship. According to female devotees, they believed Ma was incarnated in the form of a woman to give them spiritual equality to men. They were able to experience an intimate closeness with Ma which her male devotees could not experience. According to her male devotees, they longed for an intimate relationship, but cultural norms prevented this. Ma, being a woman, benefited and inspired all women. This gave Ma's female devotees the chance to be close to God, which they had little chance, because of the male domination of the Hindu religion. Ma also provided a motherly loving relationship to women which they might not have had after their marriage, living with their husband's family. The feeling of loss of a biological mother was lessened for Ma's devotees, because she became their spiritual mother (Hallstrom 204). Ma's female devotees ranged from her closest followers who willingly devoted their whole lives to Ma, to women and men in their householder stage. Ma's most devout follower, other than Bholanath was, Gurupriya Devi, or Didi, as she was affectionately called. Didi was one of Ma's *brahmacharini* devotees who chose to live a celibate life and was able to have a lifelong relationship with both her biological and spiritual mothers. Devotees claimed Ma provided a safe and prideful life for unmarried daughters, who would have been an embarrassment to her family (Hallstrom 204). Ma's followers, who were in the householder stage, could also have a close relationship with her. Despite Ma's unorthodox position in her marriage to Bholanath, she held many orthodox views on how women should live their lives as wives (Hallstrom 210). She believed women should fulfill their duties, but could still participate in spiritual activities, such as *kirtans*. Ma often held these for her women devotees in Decca, a radical idea at the time, but made sure the *kirtans* were held at night, as not to disrupt their daily duties (Hallstrom 211).

Ma was said to have been very beautiful women that had a radiating presence that attracted people to her. She was always kind, with a contagious laugh and emanation of God's divine power. The intimate relationship she had with her female devotees allowed greater access to Ma, therefore, greater access to God (Hallstrom 203). She will always be remembered as a true women guru and saint.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

Hallstrom, Lisa Lassell (1999) *Mother of Bliss: Anandamayi Ma 1896-1982*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lipski, Alexander (1988) *Life and Teaching of Sri Anandamayi Ma*. Delhi: Morilal Banarsidass.

Murkerji, Bithika (1980) *From the Life of Sri Anandamayi Ma, Volume One*. Calcutta: Shree Shree Anandamayee Charitable Society.

Murkerji, Bithika (1981) *From the Life of Sri Anandamayi Ma, Volume Two*. Calcutta: Shree Shree Anandamayee Charitable Society.

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Ananda Varta

Darshan

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Gurupriya Devi

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Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://www.anandamayi.org>

<http://www.om-guru.com/html/saints/anandamayi.html>

<http://www.wie.org/j10/anandamayi.asp>

http://www.poetseers.org/spiritual_and_devotional_poets/ind/srianand/sriag

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