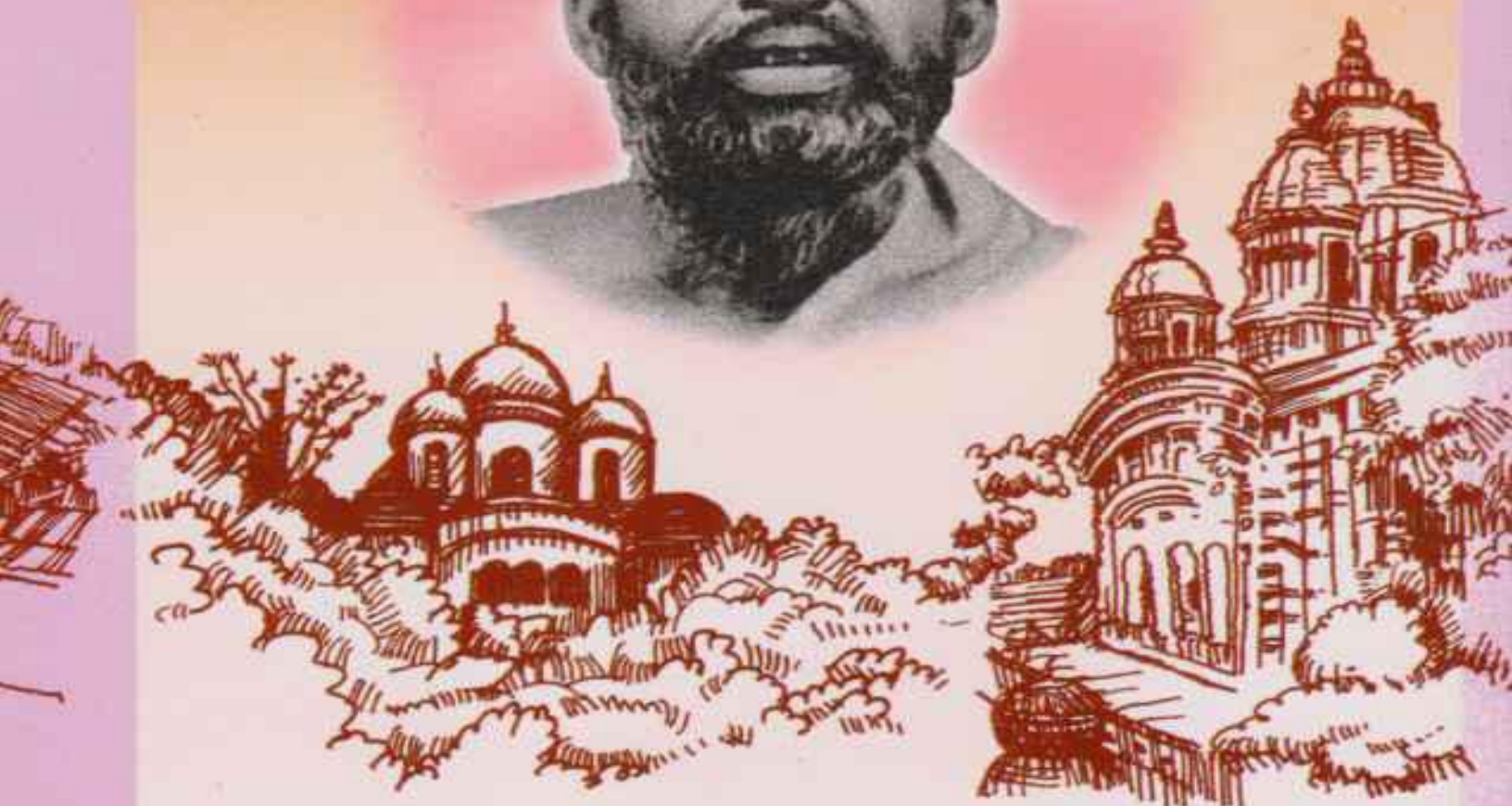
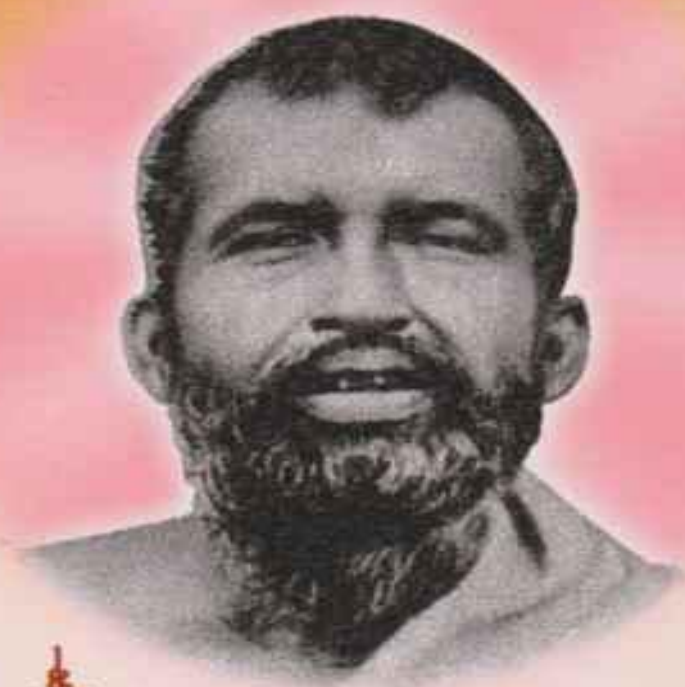


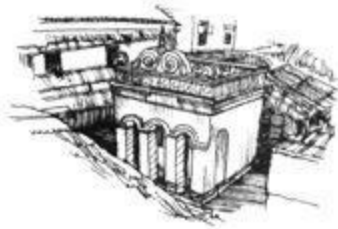
Journeys *with* **Ramakrishna**



Swami Prabhavananda



Journeys
with
Ramakrishna





Sri Ramakrishna
(1836–1866)

Journeys with Ramakrishna



Swami Prabhananda



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Mylapore, Chennai 600004, India

Published by
The President
Sri Ramakrishna Math
Mylapore, Chennai-4

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II-1M 2C-11-2005
ISBN 978-81-7823-563-9

Printed in India at
Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing Press
Mylapore, Chennai-4

Publisher's Note

One problem in spiritual life is to get a man of God who can be followed implicitly, with absolute faith. Even in the case of Divine Incarnations the aspirant has doubts and difficulties because of the gaps in our knowledge about various aspects of their lives and teachings. Biographies of Buddha or Jesus were compiled only long after the Great Ones had passed away and so there is scope to doubt some statements in the scriptures relating to them. We of today are, however, fortunate that about Sri Ramakrishna, the Avatara Varishtha, the Supreme Incarnation, our knowledge is flawless. Both 'M', who has recorded the Great Master's sayings verbatim in the Kathamrita, and Swami Saradananda, who has given us the fully verified narrative of the Lilaprasanga, have rendered yeoman service by reproducing with great fidelity the words and deeds of the Prophet of the Age. Sri Ramakrishna walked this earth of ours only the other day and we have no reason to doubt what he is reported to have said and done.

It is against this background that we welcome Swami Prabhananda's Journeys with Ramakrishna. A Jnani has no need to go from place to place, because he finds fulfilment in 'being still'. But Sri Ramakrishna was not just a Jnani; he was a Vijnani. After climbing to the terrace and finding that the terrace is made of the same materials as the steps leading to it, he realized that he had a duty to come down the steps so that he could share with other earnest souls the riches he had discovered. That is one explanation of the pilgrimages he undertook to various places like Varanasi and Vrindavan. Pilgrimage forms one of the 'musts' in a devotee's life and Sri Ramakrishna's activities were all meant to be role models for aspirants to emulate. It was not to secure merit for himself that he undertook arduous journeys but to demonstrate to Bhaktas how a pilgrimage should be accomplished. Also it is said that holy places derive their holiness from the visits made to them by holy persons. As we go through Swami Prabhananda's narrations we can see how the traditional holy spots shine all the brighter by Sri Ramakrishna's paying homage to them.

Swami Prabhananda's untiring research work gives us wonderful radiant images to contemplate and enables us to feel blessed.

—Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai
March 2001

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Introduction

A carefree child of the Divine Mother, Sri Ramakrishna had a child's curiosity. As soon as he became curious about something, he could not rest till his curiosity was satisfied. And when he had attained the object of his curiosity, he would abandon himself wholly in it till he had got to the bottom of it. Curiosity prompted him to visit places of interest as well as persons endowed with extraordinary qualities. In Calcutta he seems to have climbed the Ochterloney Monument, visited the Asiatic Society Museum, ridden on the steep gradient inside Fort Williams, and gone to the zoo, the Kalighat temple, and Bengal Bank.¹ Once he went to the Maidan to see a balloon go up and there noticed a young English boy leaning against a tree with his body bent in three places. It at once brought before him the vision of Krishna.²

He also went to see Wilson's Circus and was impressed to see an English woman standing on one foot on a horse, which was running like lightning.³ Once he was taken to a photographer's studio in Radhabazar to see the art of photography and observed how a piece of glass covered with silver nitrate takes an image. Another day he saw the microscope of Dr. Bepin Behari Ghosh. His inquisitiveness led him to other areas of interest also, though he never had the kind of curiosity to look into others' affairs.

Among the well-known people he met were Padmalocan, the chief pundit at the court of the Maharaja of Burdwan; Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj; Keshab Chandra Sen; Iswarchandra Vidyasagar; Devendranath Tagore, and so on. The reason for his curiosity to meet such people, he said, could be found in the Gita. As he put it, 'It is said in the Gita that if a man is respected and honoured by many, whether it be for his scholarship or his music or his oratory or anything else, then you may know for certain that he is endowed with a special divine power.'⁴

Curiosity apart, Sri Ramakrishna visited places for several other reasons. The religious urge to visit places of pilgrimage—both nearby and far away—took him to Tarakeswar, the holy place of Shiva; Varanasi, the luminous city of Shiva; Vrindavan, the playground of Krishna, and so on. The accounts of his visits to these places are accounts of profound and extraordinary spiritual experiences and revelations.

It can well be said that India is the land of tirthas, or holy places, and also the land of pilgrimage. Throughout the ages people in India have whole-heartedly carried on the tradition of visiting pilgrimage centres. Regardless of whether they are rich or poor, people come to a holy place carrying the same inner yearning in the heart. Even the hazards and difficulties of the journey cannot deter them.

At holy places people open their hearts to God, and as they offer their sincere prayers for a happy, peaceful life, they get courage and inspiration. This is why pilgrimages draw people closer to God. In fact, a pilgrimage itself is evidence of an eternal craving to make our lives more blessed, more perfect than before. The attraction for these pilgrimage places is so great that all-renouncing ascetics trod the same paths with lay pilgrims. And all of them have the same purpose—to have the vision of the deities and to obtain their

blessings.

But one feels tempted to ask why a person of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual stature, to whom God was like a fruit in the palm of the hand, took the trouble of visiting sacred places. Ordinary people may be compared to the musk deer in Dadu's example:

Ghati kasturi mirigake bharamata phirai udas;
Antaragati janai nehim tatai surye ghas.

'Though kasturi [musk] lies hidden in the body of a deer, it wanders all over in search of it. The deer does not perceive its own wealth and roams about here and there sniffing at the grass.' But this was not the case with Sri Ramakrishna. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna clearly stated that people could find everything in spiritual life within himself.

Once, in a spirit of renunciation, Narendra (Swami Vivekananda), Tarak (Swami Shivananda), and Kali (Swami Abhedananda) left Cossipore, where they were attending on the Master. At this, some of the other disciples of the Master wanted to go in search of them. But Sri Ramakrishna reassured them, saying: 'Although you take journeys even to all the four corners of the world, you will find nothing (no true spirituality) anywhere. Whatever is there, is also here (showing his own body).'

⁵ The great spiritual leader Vijay Krishna Goswami, on his return from a pilgrimage, confirmed this. Once at Shyampukur he told the devotees in Sri Ramakrishna's presence: 'I realize that everything is here where we are sitting now. This roaming about is useless. At other places I have seen two, five, ten, or twenty-five per cent of him [meaning the Master], at the most. Here alone I find the full one hundred per cent manifestation of God.'

⁶

Sri Ramakrishna himself had pointed out that religious rites, such as pilgrimage, are for beginners in spiritual life.

⁷ Sri Ramakrishna once said that kutichakas—that is, those who feel serene and peaceful in one place—'don't feel the need of going to any sacred place. If one of them ever visits a place of pilgrimage, it is only for the purpose of new inspiration.'

⁸

But one can seriously ask, why did a kutichaka and realized soul like Sri Ramakrishna take the trouble of making a pilgrimage? One reason might be that he wanted to help fulfil the desire of devotees such as Jagadamba and Mathurmohan. Besides this, however, Swami Saradananda could discern two other reasons behind this decision of the Master: (1) It was necessary for a great spiritual teacher like Sri Ramakrishna to learn about the spiritual position and material conditions of the people; and (2) since visits by great spiritual teachers enhance the spirituality of a holy place, and renew, as it were, the spiritual power of such a place, Sri Ramakrishna agreed to undertake these pilgrimages.

In spite of his exalted state, Sri Ramakrishna, as an Avatar, had to do many things, including pilgrimage, to fulfil his commitments, as it were. According to Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna, like his predecessors, carefully studied the spiritual ideas that had already been introduced from the time of the rishis onwards, and then, after assessing the needs of the people of his time, set forth a new movement—'the turning of this mighty wheel of new dispensation,' as Swami Vivekananda said.

⁹

Sri Ramakrishna was the exemplar of his own saying, 'So long as I live, so long do I

learn,' and he took advantage of his travels to get acquainted with the spiritual condition of people in the country. Having an uncommonly sharp eye, he would study the appearance, mannerisms, and behaviour of people and see how they lived and earned their living. No doubt, this demanded a high degree of mental alertness, which he had. This is how he could assess the mental state of people even from a few casual words of theirs, and he could understand the realities of contemporary life by observing just a few incidents. Finally, the truth about other facts he could ascertain through his extraordinary yogic powers.¹⁰

The Sanskrit word tirtha has several other meanings besides the commonly understood one of 'holy place'. Of them, the following are worth considering in the context of our discussion. In Malavikagnimitram of Kalidasa we find Ganadasha saying, 'Maya tirthad abhinayavidya siksita'— that is, 'I learned the art of acting from a competent teacher.'¹¹ Here, tirtha means a preceptor, a competent teacher. Tirtha can also mean a holy person. For example, Rama said, 'Kva punastadrsasya tirthasya sadhoh sambhavah— However, what else could be possible for a holy man like you?' In either of these senses, Sri Ramakrishna could be said to be the greatest of tirthas.

The word tirtha, however, is most frequently used to indicate a holy place, and scriptures abound in examples in which a holy person's visit to a tirtha is extolled. For example, in the Srimad Bhagavata King Yudhisthira tells Vidura, on his return from a pilgrimage:

Bhavadvidha bhagavatastirthibhutih svayam
vibho;
Tirthikurvanti tirthani svantahsthena
gadabhrta. (S.B. 1.13.10)

'O Great One! Lovers of God such as you, who have yourselves risen to the height of holiness, sanctify the holy places you visit by bringing with you the presence of Narayana, who resides within you.'

Swami Saradananda explains that when Godmen visit a holy place 'they leave behind them either new manifestations of special aspects of God or enhance and illumine the previous manifestations already in existence there.'¹²

Tirthas may be of three kinds: (a) sthavara, which means static—for example, Varanasi, Kurukshetra, Pushkara, the Ganga, the Godavari, and so forth; (b) jangama, which means mobile—for example, a pure-hearted holy person; and (c) manasa, which refers to moral qualities such as kindness, truthfulness, forgiveness, contentment, and so forth. When a holy person such as Sri Ramakrishna, endowed with the qualities of truthfulness, compassion, simplicity, and so forth, visits a tirtha such as Varanasi, then the glory of the tirtha is truly manifest in all its splendour.

We, however, feel that Sri Ramakrishna also went on pilgrimage in childlike obedience to the promptings of the Divine Mother. About this we get a few hints from the words of Sri Ramakrishna himself. Once he said: 'There are two persons in this. One, the Divine Mother And the other is Her devotee.'¹³ Thus, Sri Ramakrishna manifested himself

at two levels and at each level differently. At least it appeared so. At one level he was a devotee of God, a child of the Divine Mother; at the other—deeper—level he appeared as God, or the Divine Mother. As a child of the Divine Mother he lived entirely dependent on her will. He was an instrument in her hands. He visited different places in response to her prompting, or at least with her approval. And the Mother, for her part, never failed him.

So self-effacing was Sri Ramakrishna in his role as a child of God that he would say what he felt, and speak with transparent sincerity, sometimes to the embarrassment of his patrons. His disappointment at the gulf of difference between the mundane Varanasi and the celestial abode he had cherished disturbed him deeply. One day Sri Ramakrishna found himself in the drawing-room of his wealthy host at Varanasi when the persons there began talking about real estate and profit and loss. Annoyed at this, he cried out in tears: 'Mother, where have You brought me? I was much better off in the temple garden at Dakshineswar.'¹⁴ Later he observed, 'In Allahabad I noticed the same things that I saw elsewhere—the same ponds, the same grass, the same trees, the same tamarind-leaves.'¹⁵

Despite some unpleasant experiences, however, Sri Ramakrishna advised people to visit holy places. He felt that when a large number of spiritual seekers and holy persons practise austerities for a long time in a place, an atmosphere is created there which helps devotees concentrate their minds easily on God. One can also meet advanced souls in holy places. Sri Ramakrishna himself met Trailanga Swami, Gangamayi, Bhagavandas Babaji, a monk belonging to the Order of Nanak, and others at different pilgrimage places.

But even while commending pilgrimage, Sri Ramakrishna would emphasize two important points: First, one cannot derive much benefit from visiting sacred places without devoutly cherishing holy thoughts beforehand. And second, after visiting temples and holy places one should 'chew the cud'—that is, one should keep one's mind engaged in holy thoughts associated with the place one has visited.¹⁶

Sri Ramakrishna said again and again that a person's pilgrimage may be considered successful only if it has helped him to attain love of God.¹⁷ During his own pilgrimages his companions were amazed to see how he lost all external consciousness at the slightest inspiration and became totally absorbed in God.

Just as the post-Caitanya Vaishnava scholars made a thorough study of the role and significance of the Avatar, so also the life and activities of Sri Ramakrishna, as a Godman or Avatar, need to be studied in depth. Before Caitanya the seeds of Vaishnavism had already sprouted, but Caitanya's life and message nourished the tiny sapling of Vaishnavism and helped it grow into a majestic tree laden with fragrant flowers. Part of these flowers were the writings of the Vaishnava scholars, who made some original contributions towards a better understanding of an Incarnation of God. The appeal of their teachings created a resurgence of interest in the path of devotion to attain God.

To explain why God, an aptakama (one who has no desires of his own), would incarnate as a human being, the Vaishnava scholars argued that as the Lord is the embodiment of infinite knowledge and bliss, His Incarnation as a human being is nothing but a divine play and there is no change in His essence. Commenting on the prayer of

Brahma and other gods in the Srimad Bhagavata (10.2.39), 'Vina vinodam bata tarkayamahe' (We do not consider your birth as a human being as anything other than divine sport), the Vaishnava scholars said that God, being engrossed in His svasvarupananda (the bliss of His own real nature), spontaneously sports in various ways without having any particular desire that He wants to be fulfilled. An exuberance of bliss prompts Him to act, though He has no motive—almost like a child who talks, sings, and plays out of sheer joy. Similarly, Sri Ramakrishna also said: 'God is born as man for the purpose of sporting as man. Rama, Krishna, and Chaitanya are examples.'¹⁸

The descent of the divine as a human being is but God's play. He wants to enjoy the bliss which is His very nature. Looking at Sri Ramakrishna's pilgrimages and other journeys from this standpoint, we can find new light thrown on his life.

Even though Sri Ramakrishna had exalted spiritual experiences at Varanasi, it was at Vrindavan that he was especially immersed in a sea of divine bliss. At the Akrura ghat the thought of Sri Krishna's divine play threw him into deep ecstasy. Another day, while travelling in a palanquin in Vrindavan, he was so overwhelmed with divine emotion thinking of Sri Krishna that he almost jumped out of the palanquin. Hriday, who was walking alongside, restrained him with difficulty. At Govardhan he ran straight to the top of the hillock like a madman. And after meeting Gangamayī he wanted to remain at Vrindavan. It was only his concern for his own mother, who was then living at Dakshineswar, that made him change his mind.

Again, as he was stepping into the boat at Navadvip, Sri Ramakrishna was so overwhelmed by a vision of the radiant forms of Gaur and Nitai running towards him and merging into him that he almost fell into the river. Timely intervention by Hriday saved him. But it was at the villages of Sihore and Fului-Shyambazar where we get the most striking glimpses of his divine play. At Fului-Shyambazar he created a mart of joy for seven days and nights while the local people lived in a heavenly realm and for the time being forgot completely the mundane world.

Though spiritually-enlightened devotees had an opportunity to glimpse Sri Ramakrishna's divine play and also get a taste of the divine bliss emanating from him, still, the Vaishnava scholars maintain that the primary purpose of God's descent is to enjoy His own blissful nature. The idea of the devotees getting a taste of true devotion and love of God, or the Incarnation's intention of teaching people true love and devotion, are at best by-products.

Aware of the modern attitude towards miracles, which are often presented in biographies of religious leaders, we have scrutinized every episode that hints of a miracle in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. But at the same time, we would like to share with the readers an observation by a twentieth-century rationalist, George Bernard Shaw. This remark itself seems to be nothing less than a miracle. He said: 'There is nothing that people will not believe nowadays if only it be presented to them as Science, and nothing they will not disbelieve if it be presented to them as religion. I myself began like that; and I am ending by receiving every scientific statement with dour suspicion whilst giving very respectful consideration to the inspirations and revelations of the prophets and poets.'¹⁹ Therefore, readers would do well to study the extraordinary or miraculous

incidents in Sri Ramakrishna's life with an open mind.

Sri Ramakrishna's travels and pilgrimages can thus be studied from different points of view. Whatever his reasons for visiting different places, the Master's experiences at each place were extraordinary and unforgettable. Naturally then these visits merit closer study than what has been presented so far in Sri Ramakrishna's biographies and other writings, and for this reason we have made a thorough investigation of them. To the perceptive reader, many new facets of the glorious life of the Master will be revealed in these pages.

Most of these chapters were originally published as separate articles in journals of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, particularly in the Vedanta Kesari. The chapter entitled 'Sri Ramakrishna's Visit to East Bengal', however, was previously published in the book More About Ramakrishna. It has been included here with the permission of Advaita Ashrama, its publisher. I would like to express my thanks to Mr. Dharitri DasGupta for translating from Bengali into English two of the chapters included in this book, to the artists and photographers who provided the illustrations, and to others who worked on this book. I am grateful to all of them. If a person is able to get a glimpse of the joyous and blissful personality of Sri Ramakrishna by reading this volume, the author will consider himself blessed.

Swami Prabhananda



Notes and References

1. Sri Ramakrishna once said, 'First of all you must go to Calcutta; then only will you know where the Maidan, the Asiatic Society, and the Bengal Bank are located.' (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981], 354.)
2. Ibid., 546-47.
3. Ibid., 154.
4. Ibid., 625.
5. Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master, trans. by Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2nd rev. ed., 1956), 561.
6. Gospel, 880-81.
7. Ibid., 305.
8. Ibid., 128.
9. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama), VI:186.
10. Great Master, 557-58.
11. Act I.
12. Great Master, 558.
13. Gospel, 943.
14. Ibid., 119.
15. Ibid., 129.
16. Great Master, 558-59.
17. Gospel, 469.
18. Ibid., 405.
19. Shaw, G. Bernard, Prefaces (London: Odhams Press Ltd., 1938), 636.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S PILGRIMAGE TO VARANASI

'Let's go on a pilgrimage,' pleaded Jagadamba to her husband Mathurmohan Biswas. The proud and disdainful zemindar that he was, Mathurmohan tried hard to dissuade her. He said: 'Why visit a holy place? Isn't Baba's holy company enough? I don't like the idea of a pilgrimage. It entails a huge expenditure, and it will be a tremendous physical strain as well. Baba is with us. The very sight of him gives us the merit of all the pilgrimages put together. Where should we go leaving Baba here? No, I won't go anywhere. If you so wish you may go.'

The resourceful Jagadamba immediately replied: 'Why should we leave Baba here? We shall take him with us.'

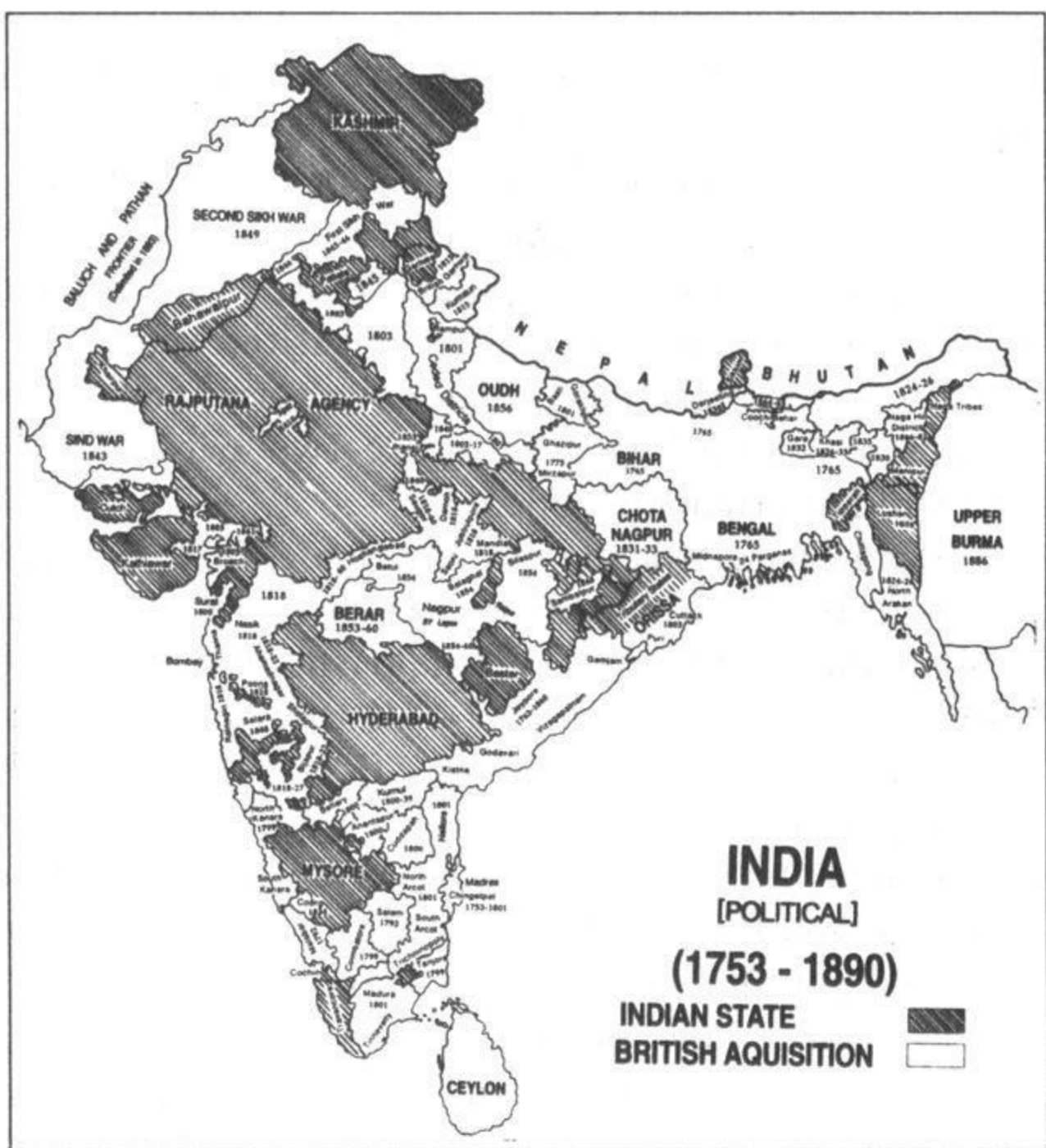
At this, Mathurmohan agreed: 'All right. If Baba blesses the proposal, I shall go. Otherwise not.'

It was a bright autumn morning, a few days after the Pujas. The azure sky above, occasionally striped with trails of white cranes, and below, with patches of catkin blossoms amidst vast green fields, and lighted by the mellow colour of the morning sun, all reflected the mood of the season. Reflecting on the recent joy of the Pujas, Jagadamba naturally longed for more religious festivity. Thus, with great hope and anticipation she approached Baba.

Who was this Baba? He was no other than Sri Ramakrishna, who was then staying with them at their Janbazar house.¹ Jagadamba presented her proposal to Baba, and he readily agreed to go.² Baba's consent dispelled Mathurmohan's hesitation and initial reservations. Resolving to undertake a pilgrimage to the principal sacred places in northwestern India, he instructed his men to make preparations.

To appreciate this pilgrimage undertaken by Sri Ramakrishna, it would be pertinent to take a quick look at the region Sri Ramakrishna intended to cover, and of Bengal, the then centre of British culture in India. The greater part of the country having been for several centuries subject to Mohammedan rule, the civil and religious rights of Hindus had been continually trampled upon. Moreover, poisoned by the viruses of casteism and other social evils such as socio-political feuds, the society had become very weak, moral sensibilities were almost paralyzed, and there was an utter lack of human feeling. Women and the labouring classes were the worst victims of various kinds of exploitation.

The historian R.C. Majumdar wrote: 'In those days there was no conception of India as a country. There were Bengalees, Hindusthanis, Sikhs, Rajputs, and Marathis, but no Indians.'³ He quotes Bishop Heber, who toured northern India in 1824 and observed that the people of Hindusthan, i.e., Upper India, regarded the Bengali as much a foreigner as they did the English. The Bengalis reciprocated the feeling.⁴ Mathurmohan was surely such a Bengali, but Sri Ramakrishna represented the rustic Indians. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna looked more like the odd man out in Mathurmohan's entourage.



Nevertheless, Sri Ramakrishna did join the elaborate pilgrimage to some principal holy cities in northwestern India, the most prominent of which was, of course, Kashi, or Varanasi.⁵ This holy city—resting on the trident of Shiva, as legend has it—has great attraction for pilgrims. There are contradictory claims made by the biographers of Sri Ramakrishna about his pilgrimage. Some say he visited the prominent places of pilgrimage of northwestern India once, while others assert that he made two trips, one in 1863 and the other in 1868.

Swami Saradananda, author of Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master, subscribed to the first view. Swami Vivekananda,⁶ Swami Ramakrishnananda,⁷ and Swami Shivananda⁸ endorsed this view. It has also been upheld by Ramchandra Datta,⁹ one of Sri Ramakrishna's earliest biographers, and by another biographer, Gurudas Burman.¹⁰ Western biographers such as Romain Rolland, Christopher Isherwood, and Richard Schiffman support this view.

The other view, put forward by M., the recorder of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, was strongly supported by Sashi Bushan Ghosh.^{[11](#)} Among others who followed suit were Akshay Kumar Sen^{[12](#)} and Durgapada Mitra.^{[13](#)} M. wrote a short biography of Sri Ramakrishna in September 1903 (1310 B.S.) in which he observed: 'Sri Ramakrishna made pilgrimage two times. On the first occasion he had with him his mother, Ram Chattopadhyay,^{[14](#)} and Mathurmohan's sons. This happened when the railroad to Varanasi had just opened,^{[15](#)} and five to six years following some radical change in his mental constitution. He remained most of the time either merged in samadhi or in divine intoxication. On this trip he visited Kashi (Varanasi) and Prayag (Allahabad) before he returned to Calcutta. The year was 1863.

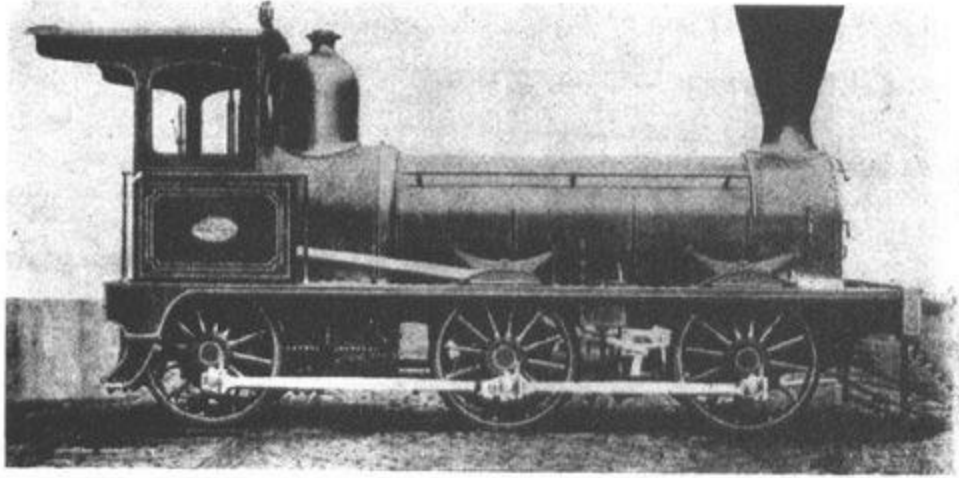
'Five years later, in January 1868, he undertook the second pilgrimage. Mathurmohan, his wife Jagadamba, and Sri Ramakrishna's nephew Hriday accompanied him. On this occasion he visited Kashi, Prayag, and Vrindavan.' M. further mentioned that on this trip Sri Ramakrishna had a vision at the Manikarnika Ghat, and he met Trailanga Swami. He also had a vision of Sri Krishna at the Dhruva Ghat at Mathura, and of Krishna the cowherd boy at Vrindavan, where he met also Gangamayi.

The facts and figures, anecdotes and legends, associated with Sri Ramakrishna's pilgrimage as well as circumstantial evidence support the second view. Swami Saradananda was not sure if Chandramani had accompanied Sri Ramakrishna. He observed: 'Some say that the Master's mother did not go on pilgrimage with him. But Hriday told us otherwise.'^{[16](#)} Gurudas Burman's claim, in Sri Ramakrishna Charit, that Chandramani Devi accompanied Sri Ramakrishna in the only trip he made is not tenable, for Sri Ramakrishna himself said: 'I didn't want to leave her [Gangamayi] and return to Calcutta. . . . As Hriday dragged me by one hand and she by the other, I remembered my mother, who was then living alone here in the nahabat of the temple garden. I found it impossible to stay away from her, and said to Gangamayi, "No, I must go."^{[17](#)} It would be presumptuous to conjecture that Sri Ramakrishna had proceeded to Vrindavan, leaving Chandramani Devi at Varanasi. Evidently, Chandramani Devi did not accompany her son to Vrindavan, but she did visit Varanasi earlier. It must have been soon after her arrival at Dakshineswar.^{[18](#)} Naturally we have to conclude that Sri Ramakrishna made two pilgrimages, not one.

One common argument advanced in favour of a single pilgrimage is that Sri Ramakrishna never mentioned two trips to his monastic disciples. Nor did he specifically narrate his experiences of the first trip—and even if he did, he probably did it infrequently. We should not fail to notice that neither Mathurmohan nor Hriday joined in the first trip. It was Ram Chattopadhyay who used to take care of Sri Ramakrishna at that time. Gurudas Burman's claim that the sons of Mathur's guru had gone on that trip seems to be reliable.

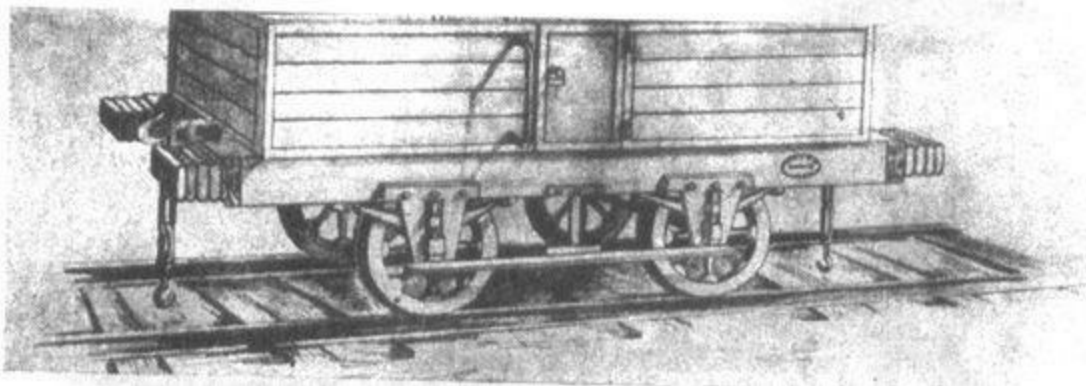
Some of Sri Ramakrishna's reminiscences—such as his vision of Varanasi as gold—do perhaps refer to his first pilgrimage. Indeed, he reminisced little about his first pilgrimage. In those days the general tendency of his mind was to fly to the supersensuous realm. It refused to descend to the ordinary state of consciousness, and

outwardly he was most of the time in ecstasy. This was the period when he was about to switch from Tantra sadhana to Advaita sadhana. In the state of ecstasy he could hardly see anything in the holy places he visited or on the way, and he had few interactions, if any, with other people. He could move from place to place only with the help of Ram Chattopadhyay, who devotedly attended on him. There was perhaps no worthwhile episode for him to remember or to recount.



A railway-engine used in 1868–69

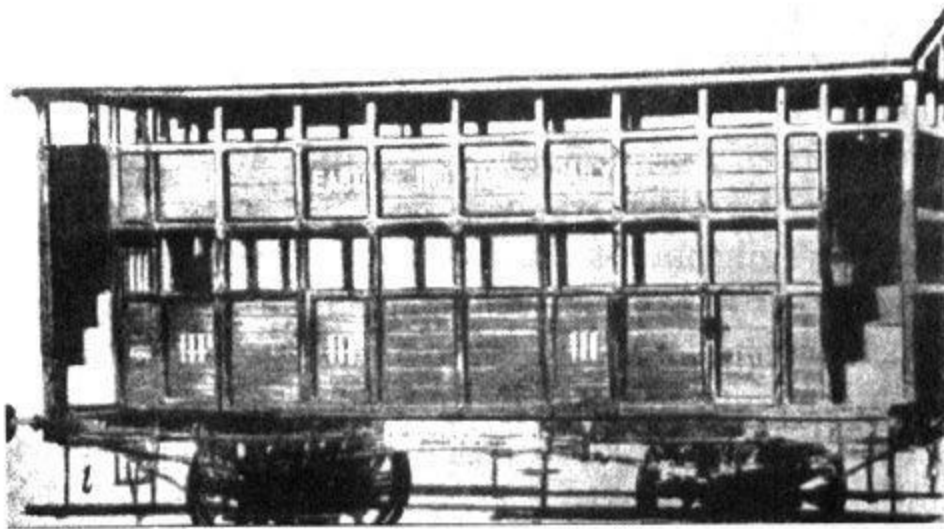
Therefore, the elaborate arrangements mentioned earlier referred to Sri Ramakrishna's second pilgrimage under the princely patronage of Mathurmohan. It was a pilgrimage full of pomp and grandeur, worthy of a king. It cost Mathurmohan about one lakh of rupees—and in those days when the value of a rupee was far greater than it is today. Three railway coaches—one second class, and two third class—were reserved for the party, and these could be detached at any point of halt along the line. A part of the second class coach was occupied by Sri Ramakrishna, Mathurmohan, and Hriday, and the other portion by Jagadamba, her daughters-in-law, and other ladies; and the third class coaches were meant for cooks, servants, priests, musicians, etc.—well over one hundred people altogether. They also carried palanquins, beds, utensils, equipment, etc. The party left Howrah station on Monday, 27 January 1868.^{[19](#)}



A typical coach used in those days. Possibly Sri Ramakrishna travelled in a similar coach.

Leaving Calcutta, the pilgrims moved west to a chillier climate. Barring a few towns at long intervals, the train moved through flat countryside, which, nevertheless, constantly varied. With childlike curiosity, Sri Ramakrishna watched the roadside trees and houses going by. He saw small villages with mud huts in between broad stretches of yellow millet and barley fields. Patches of grey-green sugarcane and yellow mustard added to the grandeur of the mosaic. Born and brought up in rural Kamarpukur, Ramakrishna was deeply moved by the village scenes. Sometimes he would sing with great emotion; he sang of Mother Kali as also of Gauranga. His charming talks, interspersed with parables drawn from everyday events and scenes of life, were a feast for Mathurmohan and others.

The railway coaches were put on a side track every morning when Sri Ramakrishna and others would take their bath and have their breakfast. Then another train would pick them up and carry them on.²⁰



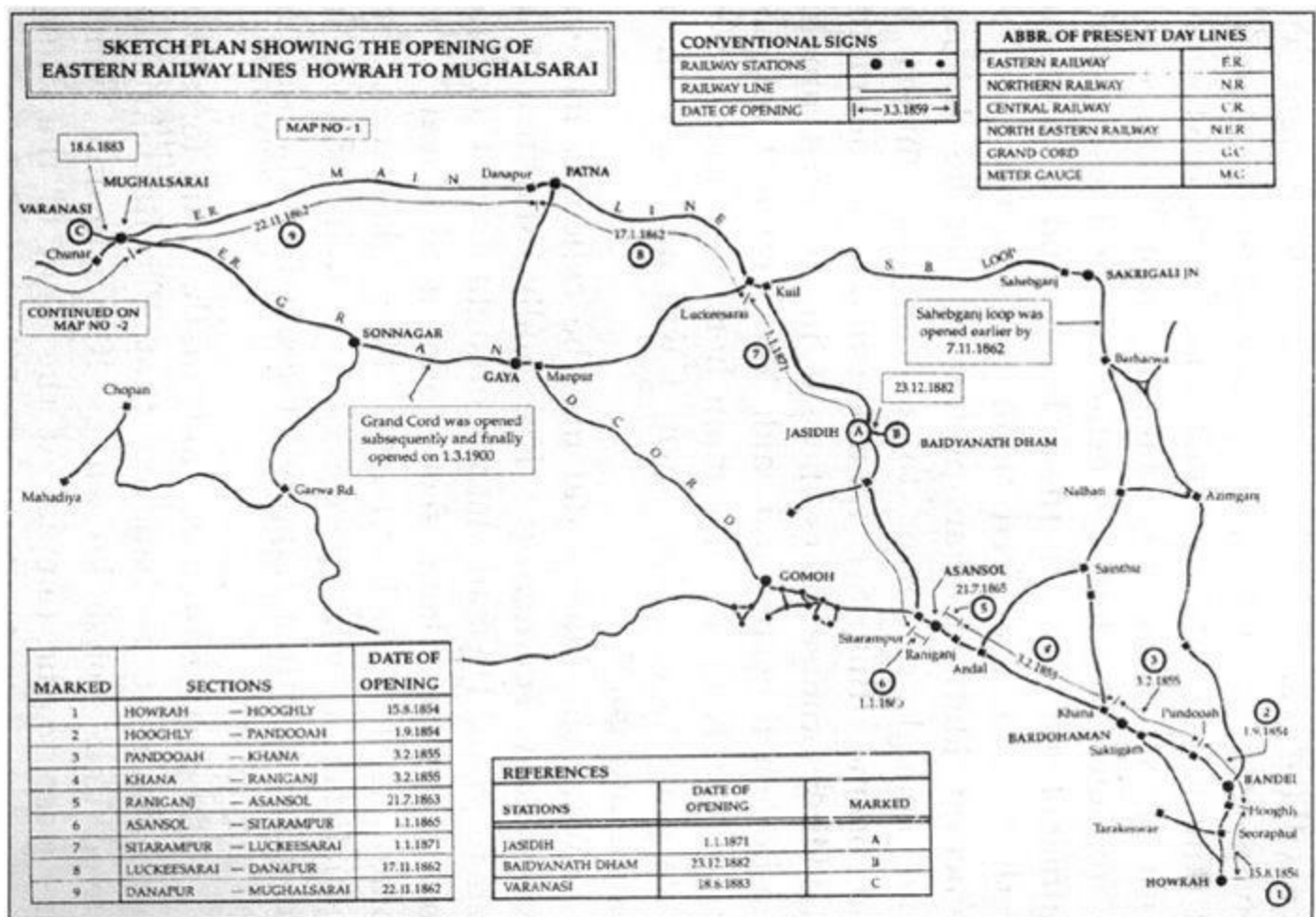
A double-decker railway coach built in Howrah for East Indian Railway, 1864. Mathurmohan's party of attendants and others possibly travelled in a similar coach.

Sri Ramakrishna traversed a vast landscape of the spirit, whereas in the vast land that was India in the 1860s he travelled to only a few holy places. Dotted with hundreds of such holy places, India itself is often called a holy land, a land of gods. Evidently Mathurmohan had to select a few places of pilgrimage with the approval of Baba. The first holy place²¹ the party visited was Vaidyanath Dham.²² The popular view that the party detrained at Jasidih station or a flag station called Rohini is incorrect. The railway records show that Jasidih and Vaidyanath Dham stations were opened on 1 January 1871 and 23 December 1882 respectively; whereas Rohini flag station was introduced in 1871—all subsequent to Sri Ramakrishna's last pilgrimage in 1868.

In those days pilgrims from Calcutta had to get down at Sitarampur Junction in order to travel to Vaidyanath Dham. Vaidyanath Dham is 102 kms. from either Sitarampur or Kiul. At Sitarampur Junction the three railway coaches were detached, and the pilgrims travelled from there mostly by bullock cart or ekka (a two-wheeled horse-drawn light vehicle). Presumably one or two ekkas were arranged for Mathurmohan, Sri Ramakrishna,

and Mathur's relations. It is not known where they halted for their lunch or night rest.

The journey to the Vaidyanath temple was uneventful except for one episode, which was extraordinary and of great significance. It was extraordinary because such an event was rather rare in the Master's life,²³ and it was of great significance because he, according to Romain Rolland, discovered therein 'the face of human suffering'.²⁴ It happened in the village of Churulia, four miles northwest of the Vaidyanath temple. (According to another version the village was Chanajori.)²⁵ A terrible drought was ravaging the land. Struck by the plight of a gathering of famished tribals, the Master became overwhelmed with sorrow. He said to Mathurmohan: 'You are but a manager of Mother's estate. Give these people sufficient oil to cool their heads and a piece of cloth to each and feed them to their fill once.' A reluctant Mathurmohan protested that he did not have enough resources to alleviate the misery of the people. But Sri Ramakrishna was adamant. Shedding profuse tears, he sat in the dust among the famished people and said: 'You wretch. I will not go to your Kasi. I will remain here with them; they have none to call their own; I will not leave them behind and go.'²⁶



What the Master did may be called in modern terminology satyagraha. Eventually Mathurmohan had to yield. He had clothes brought from Calcutta, and he gave them food, one good meal, and some oil for their heads. This gladdened Sri Ramakrishna, who perceived the living Shiva in the poor. He then happily proceeded to the temple of Vaidyanath.

The party halted at Vaidyanath Dham for about three days. It is believed that Sri

Ramakrishna stayed in a house known as Kunjashrama, which was close to the temple. At the sight of the Shiva linga in the temple—Vaidyanath is one of the twelve jyotirlingas—Sri Ramakrishna went into deep samadhi. Mathurmohan later distributed coins among the brahmins and the poor people around the temple at the behest of the Master.



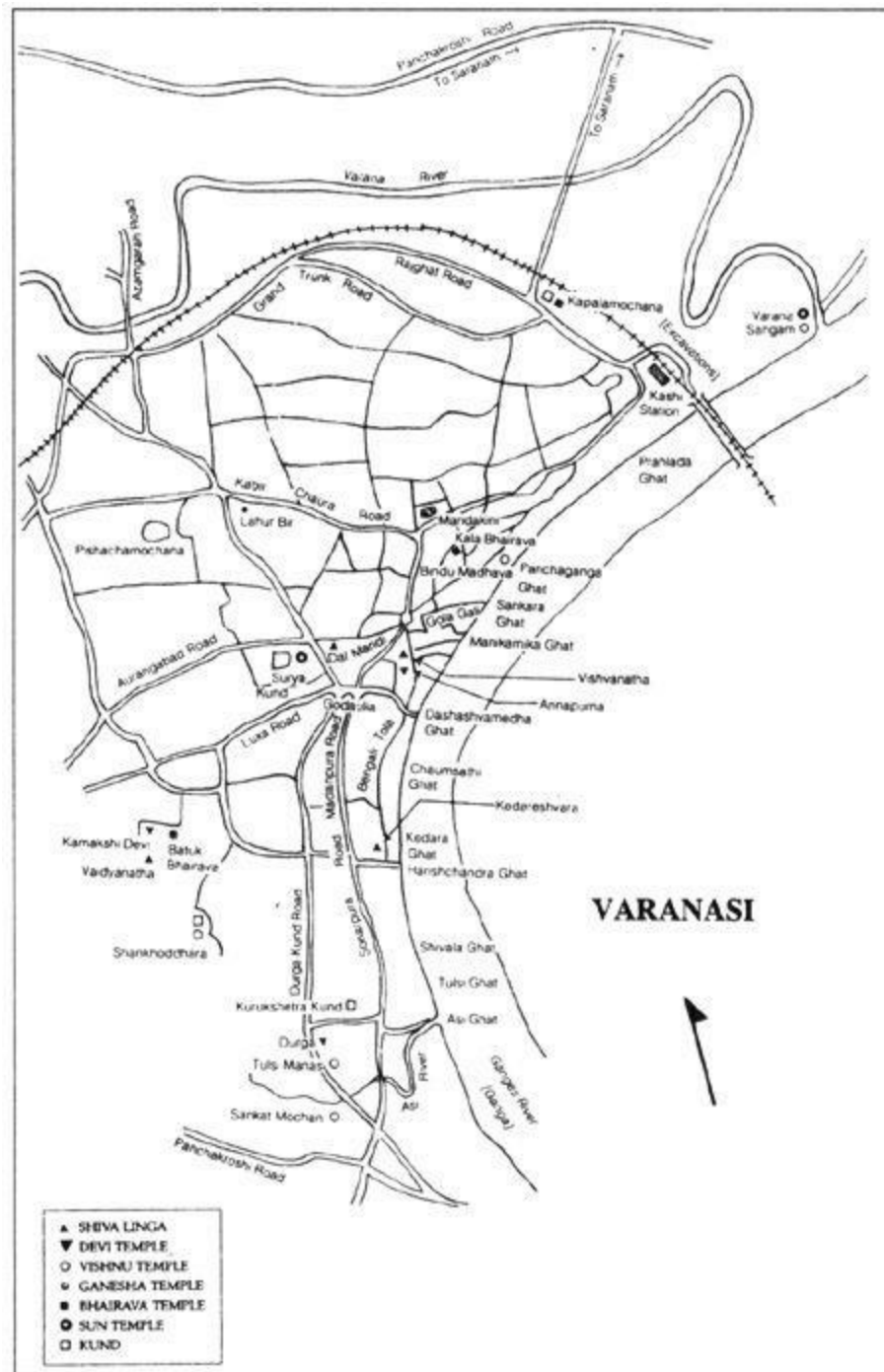
Palanquin used in Deoghar during Ramakrishna's time

Thereafter the caravan of pilgrims returned to Sitarampur Junction, where the detached railway coaches were waiting for them. The party's next destination was Mughalsarai. Railway service to Mughalsarai had been opened on 22 November 1862. The journey was pleasant and the village scenery was enchanting. But before the party reached Mughalsarai, there was a minor incident. Sri Ramakrishna alighted from the train at a wayside station, and Hriday took him to a corner where he could relieve himself. Before they could return to their coach, however, the train steamed out of the station. An anxious Mathurmohan wired from the next railway station requesting the station master to send the two stranded passengers by the next train. But they did not have to wait so long. Shortly thereafter Rajendralal Bandyopadhyay,²⁷ a high official of the railway company, arrived there. Seeing the plight of Sri Ramakrishna and his companion, Rajendra took them with him in his special rail car and they joined the anxious Mathurmohan at Mughalsarai.

The pilgrims' next destination was Varanasi, also called Benaras or Kashi. One of the oldest cities in the world, Varanasi had been a seat of Aryan culture by the second millennium BC. During the sixth century BC it was the capital of the kingdom of Kashi. Buddha gave his first sermon at Sarnath, a few miles north of Varanasi. The Chinese traveller Hsuan-tsang, who visited Kashi in AD 635, praised it as a great seat of learning. However, after 1194, Varanasi declined for the next three centuries, when its famous temples and shrines were repeatedly destroyed or desecrated. After a brief respite during Emperor Akbar's rule, the worst setback came during the reign of the Moghal emperor

Aurangzeb in the late 17th century. There then came a rejuvenation through the initiatives of the Marathas. In 1910, the British made Varanasi a part of the Indian state with Ramnagar as its headquarters, but with no jurisdiction over the city of Varanasi.

A number of Bengalis had settled in Varanasi by the time Sri Ramakrishna visited there. Joynarayan Tarkapanchanan passed away there in 1867, and Premchandra Tarkavagish and several other distinguished Bengalis residing in Varanasi were held in high esteem. Thakurdas Bandyopadhyaya, father of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, went to live there in 1869.



From Mughalsarai the pilgrims took boats for Varanasi.²⁸ After some hours the boats approached the city. The three-mile-long stretch of river front, lying like the tusk of an elephant, presented a majestic sight. With the large number of ghats, or flights of stone steps, descending into the waters of the Ganga, and the still larger number of temples

with their tall spires rising above the ghats, as well as the dharmashalas and other buildings—all this gave the impression of a solid mass of carved stone. Bathing in the glow of the morning sun, the crescent city cast its deep reflection in the waters of the Ganga. It appeared to be a golden city, an unearthly kingdom of Shiva on the surface of the earth. Here Sri Ramakrishna had a glorious vision. He could see the subtle form of the city: it was 'made of gold'²⁹—a mass of spirituality solidified, as it were.

After this vision, the guileless Sri Ramakrishna was seized with such a strong sense of the sacredness of Varanasi that he was careful not to relieve himself within its boundary.³⁰ Sri Ramakrishna himself said later that Mathurmohan had arranged a palanquin to carry him across the stream Asi so that he could relieve himself there. After some days, however, this mood of his disappeared and he gave up this bothersome practice.³¹

Nevertheless, after a short stay at Varanasi he felt somewhat disappointed. He said later: 'I thought, I would find every one in Kasi merged in Samadhi, in the meditation of Siva all the twenty-four hours; . . . but when I was there I found everything quite the reverse.'³² His disappointment was all the more intensified as he himself could perceive the glory of Shiva permeating the atmosphere of Varanasi. Seeing the glory of Shiva all around, he would be seized with ecstasy, and he felt sorry that most of the other people did not see it.



Raja Babu's house, where Sri Ramakrishna stayed for a few days.

At Varanasi, the pilgrims first stayed with the well-known zemindar Raja Babu.³³ Sri Ramakrishna was far from comfortable there. Narrating his experience later, he said: 'When I accompanied Mathur Babu on a pilgrimage, we spent a few days in Benaras at Raja Babu's house. One day I was seated in the drawing-room with Mathur Babu, Raja Babu, and others. Hearing them talk about various worldly things, such as their business losses and so forth, I wept bitterly and said to the Divine Mother: "Mother, where have You brought me? I was much better off in the temple garden at Dakshineswar. Here I am in a place where I must hear about 'woman and gold.' But at Dakshineswar I could avoid it."'³⁴ At this turn of events, Raja Babu and his friends presumably looked askance, while Mathurmohan felt embarrassed. However, Mathurmohan's manager soon searched out two adjoining houses in the Sonapura area, not far from Kedar ghat. Mathurmohan rented them and the pilgrims moved there. The house³⁵ shared by Sri Ramakrishna was a two-storied building with its entrance on the west. He lived on the first floor in a hall which stretched north-south, with eight doors. (The room was later partitioned into two rooms.) Sri Ramakrishna stayed there happily.

No one should fail to notice the relationship between Mathurmohan and Sri Ramakrishna. It was rather strange. At times Mathurmohan would, like a child, surrender entirely to his Baba and depend on him. And at other times Mathur would, like a father, take care of him. But here too there was a difference. Mathurmohan was indebted to Sri Ramakrishna for his love, kindness, and blessings. He strongly believed that Baba had the power to direct his destiny. It was therefore no wonder that Mathurmohan made extravagant arrangements for the Master's visits to different temples and other places. Whenever the Master went out someone would hold an umbrella, ornamented with silver, over his head; and servants would carry silver maces and other paraphernalia.³⁶ Almost every day he used to go in a palanquin to the Viswanath temple.³⁷ At times the Master went into ecstasy in the palanquin. Whenever he went into a temple he would invariably lose himself in ecstasy, but his ecstasy was deepest whenever he stood before the deity Kedarnath.³⁸ Everyone present looked at Sri Ramakrishna with adoring eyes, and his attendant Hriday took good care of him.

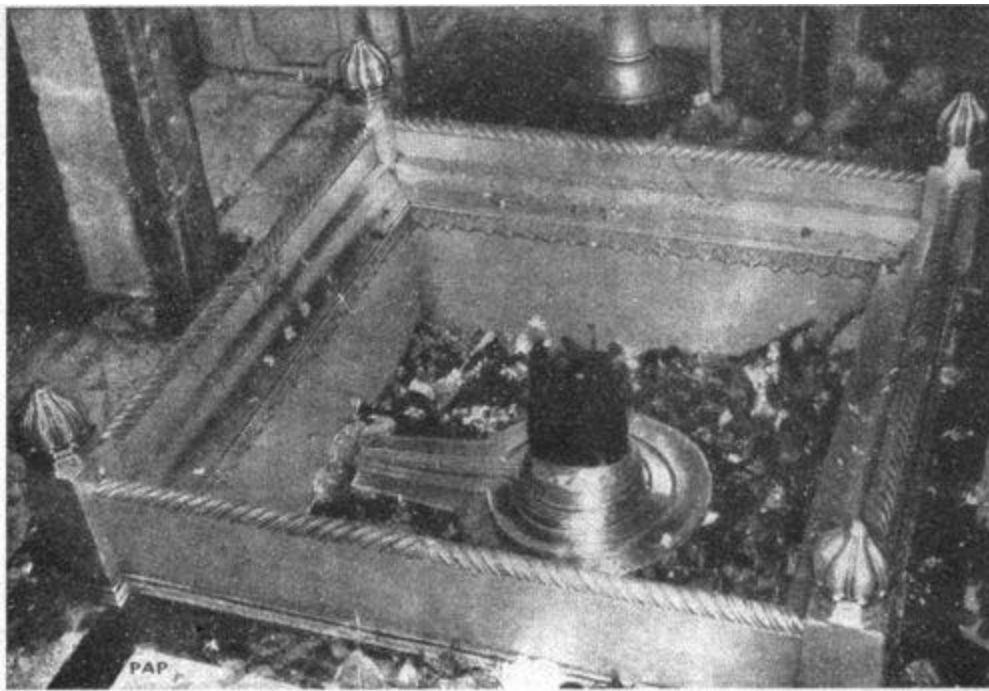


Raja Babu (Annada Prasad Bapuli - No.1 in photo) and his family

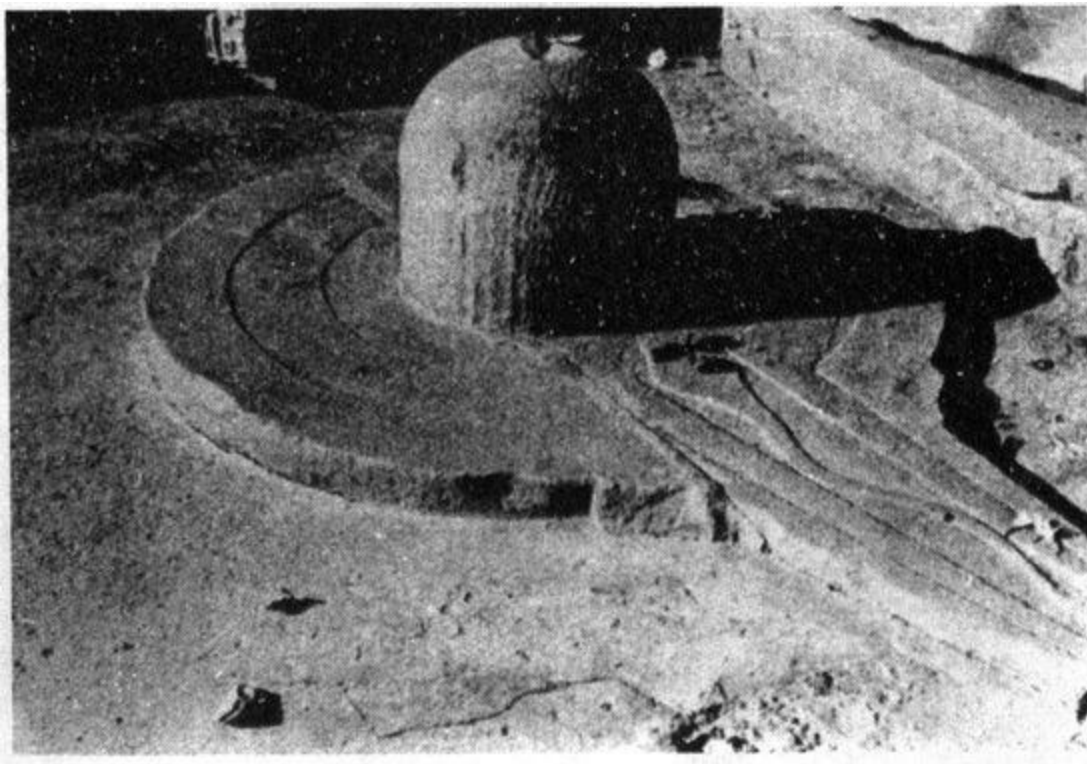


The house where Sri Ramakrishna stayed in Varanasi, near the Kedarnath temple, Kedar Ghat

One day Mathurmohan took Sri Ramakrishna on a boat ride on the Ganga to see some of the five holy places of the city.³⁹ Of them, Manikarnika is of great importance to the devotees. As the boat approached the burning ghat of Manikarnika,⁴⁰ the air was full of smoke from several funeral pyres. Just then Sri Ramakrishna was blessed with a strange and grand vision. In his own words: 'Our boat was passing the Manikarnika Ghat on the Ganges, when suddenly I had a vision of Siva. I stood near the edge of the boat and went into samadhi. The boatmen, fearing that I might fall into the water, cried to Hriday, "Catch hold of him! Catch hold of him!" I saw Siva standing on that ghat, embodying in Himself all the seriousness of the world. At first I saw Him standing at a distance; then I saw Him approaching me. At last He merged in me.'⁴¹



Viswanath, Lord of Kashi



Kedarnath in the temple at Kedar Ghat

The Master's description recorded by Swami Saradananda gives further details. He said: 'I saw a tall, white person with tawny matted hair walking with solemn steps to each pyre in the burning-ghat, raising carefully every Jiva and imparting into his ear the Mantra of supreme Brahman. On the other side of the pyre, the all-powerful Mahakali was untying all the knots of bondage, gross, subtle and causal, of the Jiva produced by past impressions and sending him to the indivisible Sphere by opening with Her own hands the door to liberation. Thus did Visvanatha, the divine Lord of the universe, endow him in an

instant with the infinite Bliss of experiencing non-duality, which ordinarily results from the practice of Yoga and austerity for many cycles. Thus did He fulfil the perfection of the Jiva's life.'⁴²



When the boat approached Manikarnika Ghat, Sri Ramakrishna had a vision.

Likewise, the Master had a vision of Mother Annapurna also. Annapurna is known in the Kashi-khanda as Bhavani. She is the governing Goddess of Varanasi. Sri Ramakrishna himself recounted later: 'Another time, in an ecstatic mood, I saw that a sannyasi was leading me by the hand. We entered a temple and I had a vision of Annapurna made of gold.'⁴³ Annapurna provides us with nourishment—material and spiritual. Sri Ramakrishna's statement, 'It is true that no one starves at the temple of Annapurna in Benaras, but some must wait for food till evening,'⁴⁴ refers to both material and spiritual food given bountifully by the Divine Mother Annapurna.

Devout Hindus have a firm faith that whoever dies at Kashi (Varanasi) gets released from the bondage of worldly life. The popular scripture Kashi-khanda proclaims, 'One who dies at Varanasi gets liberated without any special effort.'⁴⁵ Sri Ramakrishna himself endorsed this view, as is evident from one incident. As he himself narrated it: 'My sister, Hriday's mother, used to worship my feet with flowers and sandal-paste [at Sihore]. One day I placed my foot on her head and said to her, "You will die in Benaras."' ⁴⁶ It is said that the Master's blessing came true.⁴⁷

In those days the saint Trailanga Swami was a great attraction for the pilgrims to Varanasi. Sri Ramakrishna too visited the saint. On the very first visit the Swami cordially received Sri Ramakrishna by placing his snuff box before him. The latter used a pinch of it to reciprocate the saint's gesture. The Master saw him several times. Sri Ramakrishna later said: 'I saw that the universal Lord Himself was using his body as a vehicle for His manifestation. Kasi was illumined by his stay there.'⁴⁸ Once he remarked about the saint's spiritual attainment: 'How long does a man reason and discriminate? As long as he is conscious of the manifold, as long as he is aware of the universe, of embodied beings, of "I" and "you". He becomes silent when he is truly aware of Unity. This was the case with Trailanga Swami.'⁴⁹

Observing mauna (silence), Trailanga Swami used to live near the Manikarnika Ghat, and people could see him lying on a boulder in the hot sun. His was the true state of a

Paramahansa. Deeply impressed by his spiritual attainments, Sri Ramakrishna once invited the Swami to Mathurmohan's residence, cooked payasam (rice porridge), and fed him with his own hand.⁵⁰ One day Sri Ramakrishna asked him by a sign whether God was one or many. He replied through some gesture that when we are in samadhi, we know Him as one; otherwise, as long as we are conscious of the manifold, He is many.

Nevertheless, Trailanga Swami fell short of Sri Ramakrishna's high expectations. Once the Master expressed his view: 'Paramahansas like him [Trailanga Swami] care for their own good alone; they feel satisfied if they themselves attain the goal.'⁵¹

Learning that Trailanga Swami had resolved to have a ghat built near Manikarnika, Hriday participated in the work at the behest of the Master.⁵² The Swami seemed to be happy.

His superconscious experiences apart, Sri Ramakrishna also saw other facets of Varanasi life. He visited several monasteries, and he noticed that the abbots were treated with great respect. 'Many wealthy up-country people stood before them with folded hands, ready to obey their commands.'⁵³

One such monastery Sri Ramakrishna visited belonged to the Udasi sect. Later, narrating his experiences to M., the Master said: 'In Benares I saw a young sannyasi who belonged to the sect of Nanak. He was the same age as you. He used to refer to me as the "loving monk". His sect has a monastery in Benares. I was invited there one day. I found that the mohant was like a housewife. I asked him, "What is the way?" "For the Kaliyuga," he said, "the path of devotion as enjoined by Narada." He was reading a book. When the reading was over, he recited: "Vishnu is in water, Vishnu is on land, Vishnu is on the mountain top; the whole world is pervaded by Vishnu." At the end he said, "Peace! Peace! Abiding Peace!"

'One day he was reading the Gita. He was so strict about his monastic rules that he would not read a holy book looking at a worldly man. So he turned his face toward me and his back on Mathur, who was also present.'⁵⁴

But Sri Ramakrishna also had a glimpse of some abominable practices that go on in the name of religion. This was something he never expected in a sacred place like Varanasi. Describing his experience, he said: "While in Benares I was taken to one of their [the bhairavas' and bhairavis'] mystic circles. Each bhairava had a bhairavi with him. I was asked to drink the consecrated wine, but I said I couldn't touch wine. They drank it. I thought perhaps they would then practise meditation and japa. But nothing of the sort. They began to dance. I was afraid they might fall in the Ganges: the circle had been made on its bank. It is very honourable for husband and wife to assume the roles of bhairava and bhairavi.'⁵⁵

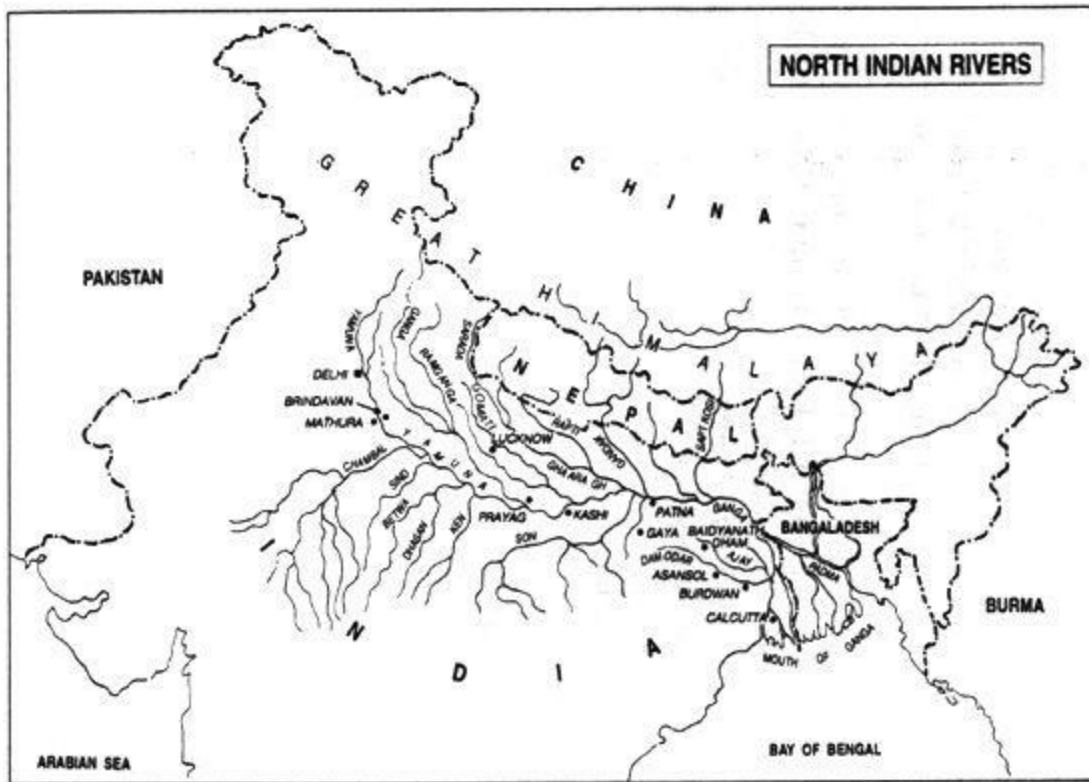
Among other disagreeable experiences Sri Ramakrishna had soon after he moved to the Kedar Ghat was seeing the squabbles and fisticuffs among the brahmin pundits when Mathurmohan distributed some presents among them. The sight pained the Master. A few days later Mathurmohan invited a group of brahmin pundits with their families and fed them sumptuously. He also gave each person a cloth and one rupee. This made Sri Ramakrishna happy.

One interesting event of this period was Sri Ramakrishna's meeting with the Bhairavi

Brahmani, Yogeswari, who was living in a room on Chausatti Yogini Lane. At her earnest request, he went to her room and met an old lady named Mokshada. Noticing the high spiritual state of the lady, he went into deep ecstasy. When his mind descended to the sense plane, he entertained them with a few songs. Yogeswari—Sri Ramakrishna used to call her Brahmani—accompanied him to Vrindavan, and she died there shortly after Sri Ramakrishna's return to Dakshineswar.

After about a week's stay at Varanasi, the pilgrims journeyed to Allahabad by train.⁵⁶ Allahabad is about fifty miles from Varanasi as the crow flies. It was the middle of February. The winter sky was clear, and the wind was chilly. They halted at Prayag-kshetra (Allahabad) for three days. The exact place of their stay is not known. The main attraction for the pilgrims was the holy dip at Triveni, the confluence of three rivers—Ganga, Yamuna, and the mysterious underground river Saraswati.⁵⁷ Whereas Mathurmohan and others shaved their heads according to the scriptural injunction and bathed at the confluence, Sri Ramakrishna simply bathed.⁵⁸ He did not shave his head, saying, 'It is not necessary for me to do it.'

Although Prayag is held in high esteem,⁵⁹ it did not impress Sri Ramakrishna. Here too his encounter with reality fell short of his dream. He was heard to lament: 'In Prayag I noticed the same things that I saw elsewhere—the same ponds, the same grass, the same trees, the same tamarind-leaves. The only difference was that the excreta of people of that region looked like chaff refuse.'⁶⁰ The only incident that has been told about his stay there is one described by Akshay Kumar Sen in his Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi. The sum and substance of the episode is this: One day a disciple of the well-known saint Dayananda Saraswati came to the Master while he was at Prayag and challenged the existence of the gods and goddesses, which, according to his view, were but tricks of maya. He did not care to pay any heed to the arguments and scriptural statements presented by the Master. On the other hand, he vehemently asserted his own stand. This annoyed Sri Ramakrishna, and he at last made use of his psychic powers to quell the opponent, who in turn surrendered at the Master's feet.⁶¹



On returning from Prayag, the pilgrims halted at Varanasi for about fifteen days. After that they visited Vrindavan, where they stayed for more than three weeks. Sri Ramakrishna palpably felt that Vrindavan, the stage for Sri Krishna's early divine play, was still vibrant with his invisible presence. Naturally he adored Vrindavan.

Cherishing the memories of their joyous experiences in Vrindavan, the pilgrims returned to Varanasi. This time their stay at Varanasi was for more than a fortnight.⁶² Here, on the occasion of Vasanti Ashtami, on Tuesday, 31 March 1868 (19 Caitra 1274),⁶³ Sri Ramakrishna visited the temple of the Divine Mother Annapurna. He was overwhelmed by the Mother's majestic appearance in a special image made of gold which is shown on that day. It is the popular belief that Mother Annapurna provides food and affluence in life and Father Shiva bestows liberation at the time of death.

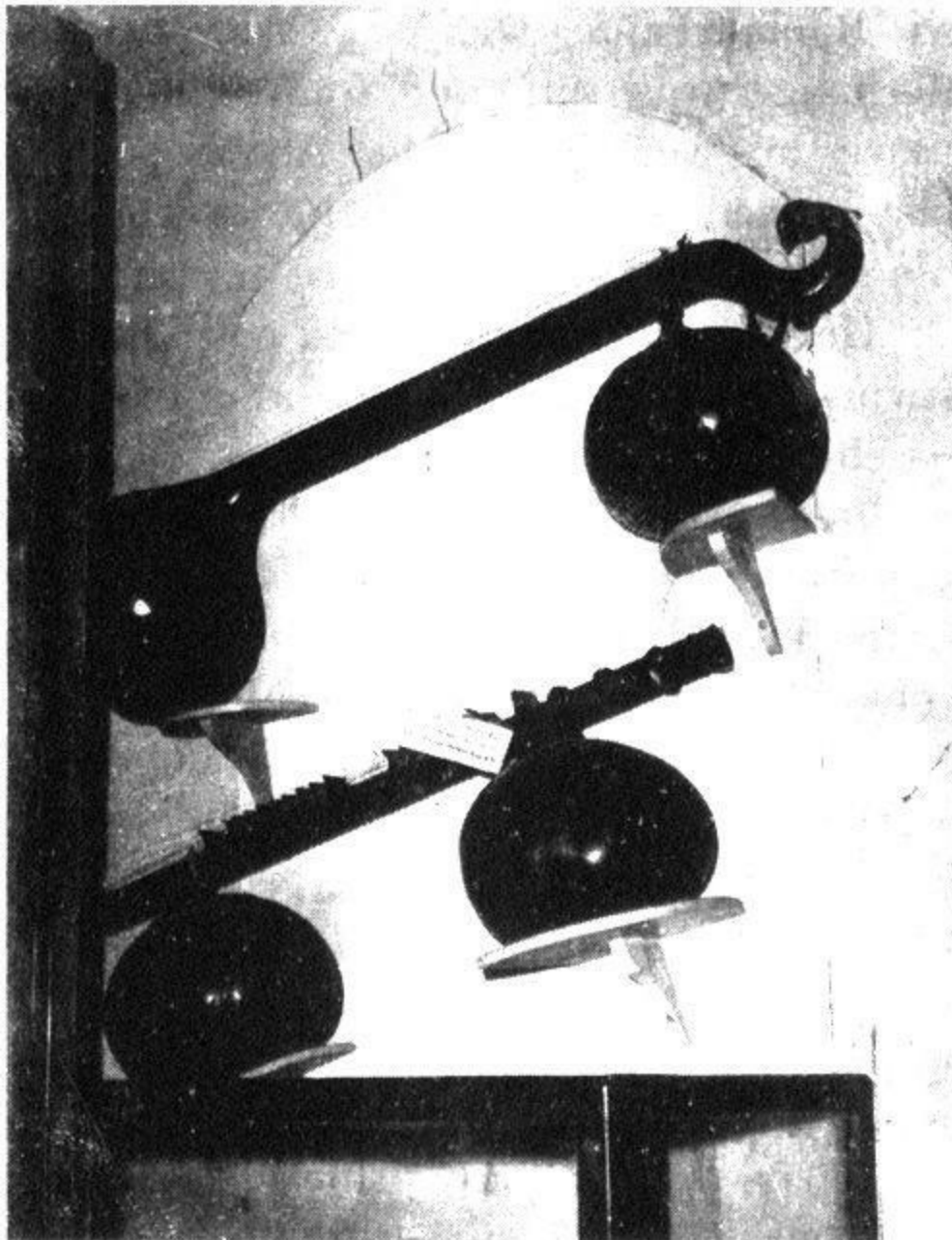
On some days Sri Ramakrishna attended the evening arati of Lord Shiva at the Viswanath temple. The deity is specially decorated at this time with flowers, leaves, sandal paste, etc. This decoration is called *sringara*.

In Vrindavan Sri Ramakrishna had expressed a desire to listen to the music of the *vina*, a stringed instrument, but no expert *vina* player could be found there. That desire again arose when he came back to Varanasi. On enquiry a virtuoso player on the *vina*, Mahesh Chandra Sarkar,⁶⁴ was found. Sri Ramakrishna went straight to his house at D-31/9 Madanpura, Varanasi. At the request of Sri Ramakrishna, Mahesh played on the instrument, and its sweet melody sent the Master into deep ecstasy. As he partially regained external consciousness, he prayed, 'Mother, please let me listen to the *vina*.' After that he was able to remain in the external plane of consciousness. So delighted was he that at times he sang to the accompaniment of the *vina*. Mahesh felt his three hours' play had been amply rewarded. At his request, Sri Ramakrishna took some refreshments and then left. Thereafter Mahesh used to visit the saint of Dakshineswar frequently at the latter's residence. The Master later paid tribute to maestro Mahesh, saying, 'He

completely lost himself while playing on the Vina.⁶⁵

One day, at the insistence of the Master, Mathurmohan had to become a Kalpataru (a mythical wish-fulfilling tree). He spent money lavishly in giving articles—kamandalus (waterpots), clothes, blankets, shoes, etc.—to meet the requests of the recipients. Mathurmohan implored his Baba to accept a gift also, and at last Baba chose a kamandalu. Charmed with his spirit of renunciation, Mathurmohan's eyes were filled with tears. But Sri Ramakrishna was disturbed by the fighting among the recipients of the gifts. He said: 'Why have you brought me here, Mother? I was happier at Dakshineswar.'⁶⁶

This was, perhaps, Sri Ramakrishna's fifth⁶⁷ and last visit to Varanasi. Preparations were then made for the return journey. Sri Ramakrishna did not accede to Mathurmohan's request for a visit to Gaya,⁶⁸ for the Master believed that if he were to go to Gaya he would become merged in Lord Vishnu, the presiding deity there. The party finally returned to Calcutta by the middle of 1868.⁶⁹



Sri Ramakrishna was a world teacher and his pilgrimage was different from that of others, particularly of worldly people. About such people the Master used to say: 'When he [a worldly man] goes to a holy place he doesn't have any time to think of God. He almost kills himself carrying bundles for his wife. Entering the temple, he is very eager to give his child the holy water to drink or make him roll on the floor; but he has no time for his own devotions.'⁷⁰ To derive benefit from a pilgrimage, one must devoutly and consciously cherish holy thoughts when one is at a holy place. This practice gets strengthened by the power present in holy places.

Sri Ramakrishna said, 'What is the use of going to Benaras if one does not feel restless for God?'⁷¹ Without such restlessness, a pilgrimage will simply become a pleasure trip or a sightseeing holiday. To emphasize this Sri Ramakrishna once said, 'A monk's kamandalu [a waterpot made of the dried shell of a gourd] goes to the four principal holy places⁷² with him, but it still tastes bitter.'⁷³ There will be no change in the kamandalu; likewise a pilgrim will earn no merit simply by visiting holy places. Sri Ramakrishna advised devotees that just as cows 'chew the cud,' one should, after making a pilgrimage, sit in some secluded place and merge oneself in those holy thoughts that arose there.⁷⁴

But Sri Ramakrishna's visits to holy places were entirely different. He himself said: 'The sight of the temple recalls to my mind God alone. . . . Places of worship recall God alone to my mind.'⁷⁵ In fact, at the sight of holy places his mind would be transported to a high level of consciousness. He would journey through the realm of spirituality and have vision after vision. At times his mind was immersed in divine bliss with no external consciousness. He not only enjoyed bliss himself, but he also radiated bliss and joy to those around him.

Sri Ramakrishna was a connoisseur of things spiritual and could correctly assess the spiritual status of a holy place. The idea that Varanasi is unique was so deeply ingrained in his psyche that we find his later conversations replete with the mention of Varanasi and its different facets. Varanasi—which, according to Mark Twain, was 'older than history, older than tradition, older than even legend'—was to Sri Ramakrishna the holiest of the holy. He used to say, 'Anyone who dies in Benaras, whether a brahmin or a prostitute, will become Siva.'⁷⁶ As far as he himself was concerned, his love of Varanasi was next to that of the Dakshineswar Kali temple. People were not surprised to hear him say, 'Once, when Hriday tormented me, I thought of leaving this place and going to Benaras.'⁷⁷



Notes and References

- ¹. Its present municipal address is 70/71 Free School Street, Calcutta.
- ². Ramchandra Datta, one of the earliest biographers of Sri Ramakrishna, claimed that Sri Ramakrishna was present when Mathurmohan and his wife discussed the subject.
- ³. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, *The Glimpses of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta, 1960), 16.
- ⁴. *Ibid.*, 18.

5. One of the seven sacred cities which are said to grant liberation to all who die within their boundaries, Varanasi or Kashi is held in the highest esteem. It is believed that those who die in the other six cities are liberated indirectly; such souls are reborn in Kashi for their final journey to the highest goal.
 6. Sri Ramakrishna's short biography written by Swami Saradananda for Max Müller was approved by Swami Vivekananda.
 7. In his book *Sri Ramakrishna and His Mission* (1910), 40-41.
 8. Romain Rolland's correspondence with Swami Shivananda.
 9. In his book *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadeva Jivanbrittanta* (Calcutta: Sri Ramakrishna Yogodyan, 7th ed.), 58.
 10. In his book *Sri Ramakrishna Charit* (Bengali).
 11. His book *Sri Ramakrishnadeva* (Bengali) was read and prefaced by Swami Saradananda, p. 158.
 12. In his book *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi* (in Bengali verse), first published between 1894 and 1901.
 13. Sri Ramakrishna's biography serialized in *Basumati*, a Bengali monthly.
 14. A priest of the Kali temple at Dakshineswar. He had deep regard for Sri Ramakrishna.
 15. The Varanasi railway station was opened on 18 June 1883, but the railway line up to Mughalsarai was opened in the last part of 1862.
 16. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. by Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2nd rev. ed., 1956), 270.
 17. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981), 129-30.
 18. Chandradevi came to Dakshineswar some time in 1863-64. She passed away there on 27 February 1876 at the age of 85.
 19. It is worth noting that the Howrah-Hooghly railway line was opened on 15 August 1854. The compartments had oil lamps, and there were no toilet facilities.
 20. On the strength of Swami Ramakrishnananda's reminiscences, Devamata wrote this in her book *Sri Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 54.
 21. According to M., Sri Ramakrishna visited Vaidyanath in the company of Mathurmohan's sons during his first trip. This is not acceptable, as Sri Ramakrishna did not visit Vaidyanath twice, and Mathurmohan certainly accompanied Sri Ramakrishna to Vaidyanath.
 22. According to *The Great Master* (p. 462), the party travelled from Vaidyanath Dham to Varanasi. But the same book also says, 'All returned to Calcutta via Vaidyanath' (p. 573), which suggests the party visited Vaidyanath Dham on the return journey. Evidently there is some inner contradiction. Remembering Mathurmohan's concern that he would not have enough funds to continue the pilgrimage, we can safely conclude that the visit was during the forward journey.
 23. On another occasion, in 1870, Sri Ramakrishna accompanied Mathurmohan to the latter's estates near Ranaghat. Encountering a crowd of poverty-stricken people, Sri Ramakrishna persuaded Mathur to remit their dues, and to distribute food and clothes among them for seven days.
 24. Romain Rolland wrote: 'Up to that time, he [Sri Ramakrishna] had lived in a state of ecstatic hypnosis within the gilded shell of his sanctuary, and the hair of Kali had hidden it from him. When he arrived at Deoghar . . . he saw its almost naked inhabitants, the Santals, emaciated and dying of hunger.' (*The Life of Ramakrishna*, 95)
 25. Near this village a new community, known as Dabar, came up around 1940, and it is often pointed to wrongly. As one travels from Sitampur Junction to Vaidyanath Dham at Deoghar, one comes across Dabor village, which was under the Rohini estate. Chanajori is an old village nearby. Revered Swami Omkaranandaji, Vice President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, told the Swamis at Deoghar that Sri Ramakrishna served the poor people in a village near Daborgram.
 26. *Great Master*, 462.
 27. A resident of Baghbazar, Calcutta.
 28. It was only on 18 June 1883 that Varanasi was included on the railway map. Governor Lord Elgin inaugurated the extension of the railway line from Mughalsarai to Rajghat on 5 January 1863. (See Radharaman Mitra, *Kalikata Darpan* [Bengali, 3rd ed.], 209.) Rajghat and Varanasi are on the opposite banks of the Ganga. At Rajghat there were no facilities for detaching railway cars.
 29. To explain this vision, *The Great Master* says: 'It was indeed the manifestation, in the present, of the invaluable golden mass of spiritual emotions of the hearts of holy devotees, deposited stratum after stratum and solidified through ages, so to speak, into this city. That effulgent form, the embodiment of spiritual emotions, is its essential nature.' (p. 563)
- Some scholars feel that the word 'Kashi' is derived from the Sanskrit root *kash*, 'to shine, to look brilliant, or beautiful.' The *Kashi-khanda* (26.27) says, 'Because that light, which is the ineffable Shiva, shines here, let its other name be called Kashi.'
30. Varanasi is situated between the Varana River, which flows into the Ganga on the northern side, and the Asi River, which joins the Ganga on the southern side.
 31. *Great Master*, 564.

[32.](#) Ibid., 561.

[33.](#) Evidently Mathurmohan was known to Raja Babu, and therefore Mathurmohan and his relations and Sri Ramakrishna were his guests.

[34.](#) Gospel, 119.

[35.](#) Its municipal address is B/6/94 Kedarghat, Varanasi-221 001. The premises at B/6/96 Kedarghat also was hired. The old building has been replaced by a new one.

[36.](#) See Gurudas Burman, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Charit (1316 B.S.), I:126—'Every morning Mathurnath arranged for the Master a palanquin to visit the temples of gods and goddesses, he himself and Hriday walking on either side of the palanquin, and a number of porters carrying umbrellas decorated with silver. As soon as he would get in the palanquin, the Master would go into ecstasy, and in front of each temple his ecstasy would deepen so much that Hriday had to drag him down [from the palanquin] and after visiting the temple he would put him back in the carrier. However, his ecstasy would be the deepest in the Kedarnath temple.'

[37.](#) Viswanath is the most prominent Shiva linga in Varanasi. The present temple was built in the eighteenth century under the patronage of Queen Ahalyabai Holkar. The history of the previous temples of Viswanath is a story of repeated destruction and desecration.

[38.](#) The most popular and venerable temple in the southern part of the city is Kedarkhanda. It is believed that the root of this Shiva linga runs from Kedar in the Himalayas to Varanasi.

[39.](#) According to the Matsya Purana the five tirthas are: Dasasvamedha, Lolarka, Keshara, Bindu Madhava, and Manikarnika.

[40.](#) Samsara-sarapadavi yatra syadaviyasi;
Karnajapanmahesanat karunavarunalayat.
Aneka bhavasambhuta-prabhutasukrtainarah;
Karne japam bhavam yatra labhante te bhavapaham.
Svikrtya ksetrasannyasam yadbaleha mahadhiyah;
Trnam krtantam manyante seyam srimanikarnika.

'Manikarnika is the place where Maheswara, the ocean of kindness, whispers the mantra into the ears of the dead; where it is very easy to attain the bliss of life; where people, by merits earned in many previous lives, obtain Bhava [Shiva], the destroyer of worldliness, as the bestower of the mantra; and where holy people take to asceticism and thereby fool the god of death.'—Kashi-khanda

[41.](#) Gospel, 803.

[42.](#) Great Master, 565.

[43.](#) Gospel, 803.

[44.](#) Ibid., 397.

[45.](#) Anayasena vai muktiḥ kasyam dehavasanataḥ.

[46.](#) Gospel, 359.

[47.](#) Sri Ramakrishna said, 'If a person dies in Benaras he attains liberation; he is not born again.' (Gospel, 940) On another day, when a devotee asked him why a person dying in Benaras becomes liberated, the Master replied: 'A person dying in Benaras sees the vision of Siva. Siva says to him: "This is My aspect with form, My embodiment in maya. I assume this form for the sake of the devotees. Now look. I am merging in the indivisible Satchidananda!" Uttering these words, Siva withdraws His form and enables the dying person to see Brahman.' (Gospel, 584)

[48.](#) Great Master, 565.

[49.](#) Gospel, 177.

[50.](#) Great Master, 271.

[51.](#) Gospel, 500.

[52.](#) Great Master, 271.

[53.](#) Gospel, 521.

[54.](#) Ibid., 296-97.

[55.](#) Ibid., 571-72.

[56.](#) Mirzapur was connected with Mughalsarai on 1.1.1864 and the railway line was extended to Allahabad on 15.8.1865. The reserved railway coaches were detached at Allahabad.

[57.](#) During the month of Magha, thousands of people throng here to have a holy dip. Every twelve years they come in lakhs to the Kumbha Mela held here.

[58.](#) There are four days earmarked for the ceremonial bathing; they are Makara Samkranti, Vasanta Panchami, Maghi Purnima, and Mauni Amavasya. Of these, the last one is considered the most auspicious. In 1868 it fell on Sunday, 23 February (12 Phalgun 1274).

[59.](#) Yathantaram dvijasreṣiṇa bhupetvitarasevake; Drsāntamatram kathitam prayagetaratirthayoh.

'O great Vipra, the difference between Prayag and other holy places is as much as that between a King and one very ordinary servant.'—Kashi-khanda 22.75.

The Mahabharata (Vana Parva 85.35) says that people bathing at the Sangama obtain as much merit as from the performance of ten horse sacrifices.

[60.](#) Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita (Bengali), 3.3.2.

[61.](#) Akshay Kumar Sen, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi (Bengali), (Calcutta: Udbodhan Karyalaya), 147-48. This happened, in all probability, when the Master was at Prayag.

[62.](#) Great Master, 272.

[63.](#) During this season, it is only on this day that she presents herself before the devotees in this form.

[64.](#) His father, Balaram Sarkar, had settled in Madanpura and had established the 'Rameswar Linga'. Mahesh studied the sitar and vina under the noted artist Ganesh Chandra Bajpeyi. (Visvabani, vol. 45, no. 1)

[65.](#) Great Master, 273.

[66.](#) Ibid., 563.

[67.](#) On the first trip Sri Ramakrishna visited Varanasi twice. But during the second pilgrimage he visited Varanasi three times for about seven weeks altogether.

[68.](#) Gaya was on the Grand Chord line, which was finally opened for passenger traffic on 1 March 1900. Therefore it would not have been possible for Sri Ramakrishna to visit Gaya by train.

[69.](#) Great Master, 273. This is perhaps not correct. The Master left Dakshineswar on 27 January 1868 and returned after seeing the golden image of Annapurna. Devi Annapurna grants darshan in her golden image on only a few auspicious days. The nearest auspicious day was Vasanti Ashtami, on 31 March 1868. Besides, Hriday said that the trip took them four months. In all probability Sri Ramakrishna returned to Dakshineswar by the first half of May 1868.

[70.](#) Gospel, 631.

[71.](#) Ibid., 306.

[72.](#) Kedarnath, Dwaraka, Rameswaram, and Puri.

[73.](#) Gospel, 156.

[74.](#) Great Master, 558-59.

[75.](#) Gospel, 219.

[76.](#) Ibid., 251.

[77.](#) Ibid., 647.

The author wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Sri K.C. Bose for his help in providing most of the material regarding the Indian railways.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S PILGRIMAGE TO VRINDAVAN

India is proud of her tirthas—places of great spiritual significance—which are spread out all over the country. Hindus, particularly those who make pilgrimages a part of their religious practice, take delight in the glorious traditions, legends, myths, and recorded experiences of the saints—especially those related to the verification and the validation of the tirthas. Hindus believe that, just as it is easy to take a boat across a river, so also, at a tirtha it is easy to cross the river of samsara, the cycle of birth and death.

But how can one place be holier than another? The Mahabharata answers this question: 'Just as certain parts of the body are considered pure, so also, certain parts of the earth and certain bodies of water are considered holy.'¹ Devout pilgrims believe that such holy places become charged with spirituality by the visits of saints and by the austerities of spiritual seekers. A Hindu pilgrim visits holy places not for sightseeing, but for darshan—that is, to behold the divine image enshrined in a temple or the divine play enacted by God in a human form. Spiritually sensitive souls feel the living presence of God in such holy places.

Pilgrimage is a very popular form of religious activity among Hindus. Contrary to imputations that project a purely utilitarian motive on the part of pilgrims, recent studies have proved that for many Hindus, a pilgrimage is a religiously desirable and psychologically satisfying experience, even without any allusion to the expectance of a specific reward.² Some such urge might have prompted the God-fearing Jagadamba and her husband to make their pilgrimage in 1868.

The pilgrims had opted for Varanasi, the oldest centre of religious India, and two other places on the way—Vaidyanath Dham and Prayag. With regard to the choice of other places, opinions differed. Mathurmohan intended to include Gaya in the itinerary, but Sri Ramakrishna rejected it on the plea that at Gaya he would likely be merged into Lord Vishnu, the presiding deity there. Sri Ramakrishna insisted on visiting Vrindavan, which is not surprising, as he was born and brought up in Kamarpukur, a village pervaded by the beliefs, legends, and folk tales about Sri Krishna. But Mathurmohan was not at all enthusiastic about going to Vrindavan. A staunch follower of the Shakta sect,³ Mathurmohan shared the popular view that moral depravation was transparent among the Vaishnavas there. Nevertheless, Sri Ramakrishna finally prevailed upon him; Jagadamba presumably also played a role in this. Be that as it may, Mathurmohan made arrangements to extend the pilgrimage to Vrindavan.

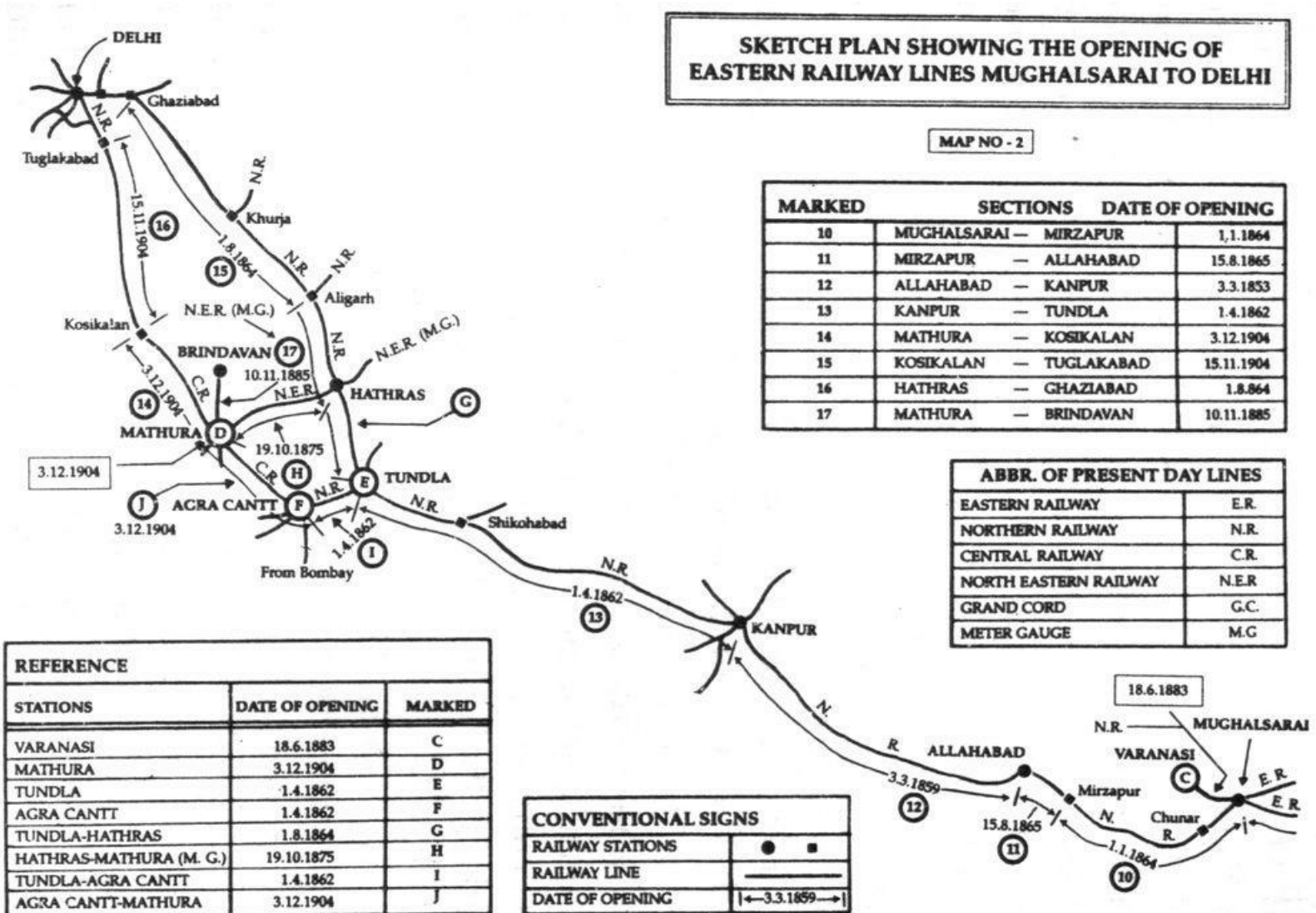


Vrindavan and Surrounding villages

The city of Mathura as well as the western half of the district known as Brajamandal, which is of great antiquity, are sanctified almost exclusively by the legends and worship of Krishna. At one time, however, the locality was as sacred to Jains and Buddhists as it was to Hindus. Located in what was in those days known as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Mathura stands on the right bank of the Yamuna River.⁴ Brajamandal, a contiguous area with a perimeter of 84 kos. (250 kms.),⁵ encompasses sacred places associated with Sri Krishna's birth, childhood, and youth. The Yamuna River winds its way through Brajamandal, and at one time it touched the town of Vrindavan on three sides. It was the main means of travel and transport, as the journey on land to this town, which was 15 kms. north of Mathura, was through thick forests.

How did Sri Ramakrishna and his companions reach Mathura and Vrindavan? Was it by river transport or by train or by road? The old records reveal that the railway line was extended from Tundla to Agra Cantonment on 1 April 1862, and Hathras was connected to Tundla only on 1 August 1864. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that Mathura and Vrindavan, then in the State of Oudh, were on the railway map on 19 October 1875 via Hathras, and on 3 December 1904 via Agra Cantonment, respectively. In all probability, the three railway cars which the pilgrims took from Howrah station were detached at Agra Cantonment, and the pilgrims travelled from there by boat to Mathura.

It has been said that myths and beliefs cherished by millions of devout Indians for thousands of years are strong enough to blur the distinction between myth, legend, and history. But myths and legends were obviously generated and developed within a historical framework. Scholars, however, are sharply divided. Some say that there has been a condensation of several traditions regarding Sri Krishna. They think it is possible there were several Krishnas who were knit together in later texts, and who gradually became divinized. Another group of scholars has vehemently claimed with sufficient proof that the apparently different Krishnas were but facets of one unique personality. They say they have unearthed the historical Krishna and that the immaculate, unique character of Krishna, which has been worshipped for ages, has emerged.⁶ He is that Krishna who sported in the groves, forests, and pastures of Braja; he is the same Krishna who expounded the philosophy of the Gita; he is the same Krishna again who ruled over Dwaraka. There was only one Krishna, according to these scholars, and he was regarded as Purushottama.



Neither Sri Ramakrishna nor his illustrious predecessor, Sri Caitanya, seemed to have bothered about the historical evidence of Sri Krishna's life. To them, Vrindavan was the holiest of the holy. It was sanctified by the memories of hundreds of interactions between God-incarnate in the form of Sri Krishna and the human soul embodied as Sri Radhika,

who exemplified the true nature of divine love. Pious Hindus believe that the divine sports of the ever-youthful Sri Krishna and his beloved Sri Radhika are a continuing phenomenon, being enacted on the subtle plane in Vrindavan even today, and they can be perceived by pure souls. Sri Caitanya and Sri Ramakrishna both bore witness to that phenomenon. So vivid and illuminating were their experiences that their own hearts were turned into groves of Vrindavan, as it were.

Evidently their focus was on the ecstatic love manifest in the lives of the devotees of Brajamandal. And their mission was to help people cultivate genuine love of God, as taught in the Srimad Bhagavatam.⁷ Both Sri Caitanya and Sri Ramakrishna exemplified in their lives the spirit of true devotion. Once such love arises in the heart, lust and other passions disappear. Sri Ramakrishna used to inspire the devotees to attain this love, saying, 'The one goal of life is to cultivate love for God, the love that the milkmaids, the milkmen, and the cowherd boys of Vrindavan felt for Krishna.'⁸ To the Brahmo devotees, who boasted of their rationalism, Sri Ramakrishna's advice was: 'Whether you accept Radha and Krishna, or not, please do accept their attraction for each other. Try to create that same yearning in your heart for God. Yearning is all you need in order to realize Him.'⁹ During Sri Ramakrishna's visit to Vrindavan and Mathura it was clearly seen that he himself was floating on the waves of longing and yearning. And his emphasis was on the gopis' intoxication with ecstatic love for God.¹⁰

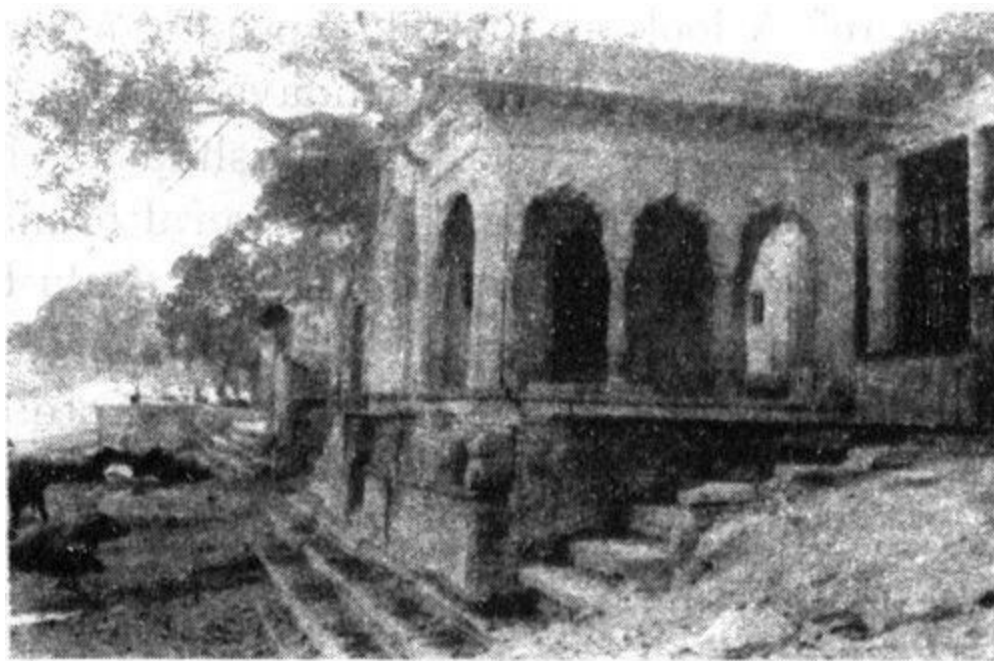
One can find parallels between Sri Ramakrishna's pilgrimage to Vrindavan and that of Sri Caitanya.¹¹ But both of these visits also had their own characteristics as well as different historical consequences. Sri Caitanya's pilgrimage resulted in the resurrection of the dead pilgrimage centres of Vrindavan and Mathura. Through his supernatural power, Sri Caitanya discovered some of the lost sites associated with Sri Krishna, and authenticated some of the episodes recorded in the scriptures. He also inspired a band of dedicated scholars, such as Rupa and Sanatana, and thus rejuvenated the worship of Krishna.

Strange as it may seem, Brajamandal was geographically outside the field of activity of Sri Krishna, the director of the dharmayuddha (righteous war), as described in the Mahabharata, though the place is eulogized in religious literature, including Valmiki's Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Bhagavata mentions that before the Pandava's mahaprasthana (great march to death), Yudhishthira placed their own capital of Hastinapura in charge of Parikshit, and Brajamandal in charge of Vajranabha, the grandson of Sri Krishna. But after this glorious era, Brajamandal practically sank into oblivion, except in the writings of some foreign travellers. In the sixth century B.C., Mathura, situated about eighty miles southeast of Delhi on the right bank of the Yamuna, was the capital of the Saurasenas. Fa-hsien (AD 400), the Chinese traveller, referred to it as a Buddhist centre, but Hsuan Tsang (AD 650) found on his visit there a brahminical revival. However, the area was deserted after it was plundered by Mahmud of Ghazni in AD 1018-19. Most of the temples fell into decay, and the region remained mostly uninhabited jungle till Sri Caitanya discovered some of the sacred spots in 1514. But again it was plundered in 1757 by Ahmad Shah Durrani.

Explaining how Caitanya could discover the sacred places of Sri Krishna's divine play,

Sri Ramakrishna's biographer Swami Saradananda wrote: 'When he [Sri Caitanya] travelled in those places, his mind ascended to higher planes of consciousness and he experienced the particular divine manifestation of Sri Krishna in particular places, where, long ago, Bhagavan Sri Krishna had actually sported. . . . We could not have at all understood the aforesaid manner of Sri Chaitanya's discovery of Vrindavan and would not have at all entertained the idea of its possibility, had we not seen the power of the Master's mind, of rightly detecting and understanding things and persons from higher planes of consciousness.'¹² Applying this same methodology, Sri Ramakrishna verified Sri Caitanya's discoveries and the restorations made by the Goswamis. In this way, Sri Ramakrishna's pilgrimage turned into an exploration that resulted in a renewed interest in the declining spirit of holy Vrindavan. Sparks of supreme love of God, which were almost always manifest in Sri Ramakrishna, recharged the devotees' beliefs in the glories of Vrindavan.

As was his wont, Sri Ramakrishna assessed the spiritual power that had accumulated in a particular place from the sensory as well as the supersensuous planes. He could also focus his mind at will to see objectively and gauge the subtle thoughts that were present. In this way, 'he experienced a special manifestation of divine presence at Vrindavan.'¹³ Praising the spiritual atmosphere there, he once told a devotee: 'Did you observe the single-minded love of the gopis for Krishna? The ideal of Vrindavan is unique.'¹⁴ One such ideal is the traditional belief, popularized by Saint Mira, that in Vrindavan Sri Krishna is the only male and everyone else there is his handmaid. Sri Ramakrishna himself endorsed this view.¹⁵ None again should miss the humour of the Master when he remarked: 'I loved the atmosphere of Vrindavan. Boys of Braja greet fresh pilgrims with the words, "Chant Hari's name, and open your purse."¹⁶

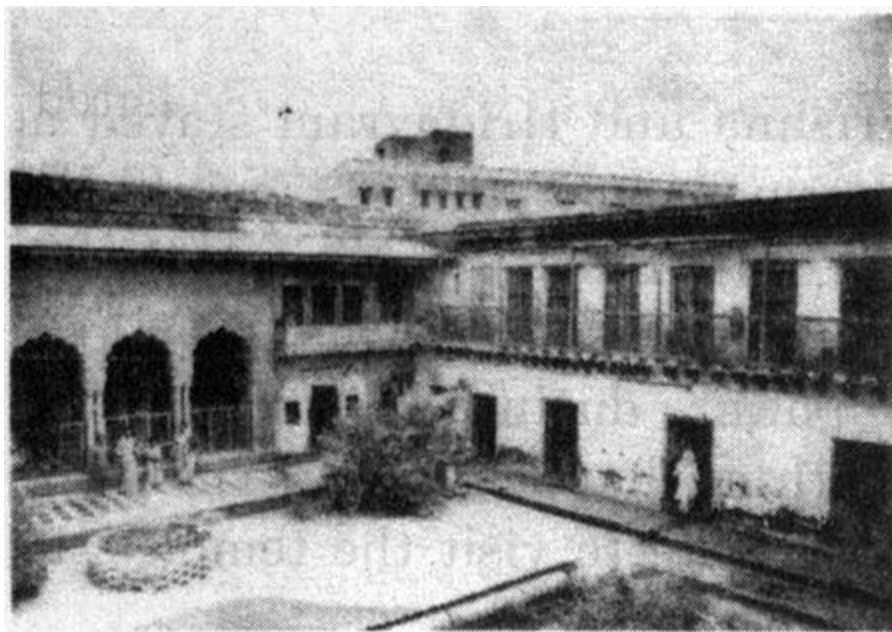


Dhruva Ghat in Mathura, where Sri Ramakrishna had a vision of Vasudeva crossing the Yamuna with Krishna in his arms

Like Sri Caitanya, Sri Ramakrishna visited Mathura on his way to Vrindavan. According to Sri Ramakrishna's biographer Akshay Kumar Sen, the Master had a vivid vision at

Mathura of Vasudeva, Krishna's father, crossing the Yamuna River through a storm at night, carrying the newborn child. Later Sri Ramakrishna reminisced, 'The moment I came to the Dhruva Ghat [a place for bathing in the Yamuna where Vasudeva had crossed the river] at Mathura, in a flash I saw Vasudeva crossing the Jamuna with Krishna in his arms.'¹⁷ So deep was his ecstasy then that Sri Ramakrishna had to be carried in a palanquin to Vrindavan, and it was a few hours before he came down to the normal plane of consciousness.¹⁸

But what was Vrindavan like in those days? And where did Mathurmohan and Sri Ramakrishna stay at Vrindavan? A look at the demographic as well as the socio-economic picture of Vrindavan at that time shows that Bengali, or Gaudiya Vaishnavas, had a marked influence on the locality.¹⁹ Several prominent Bengalis, such as Krishnachandra Sinha (Lala Babu) and Radha-kanta Dev, had settled there. In his memoirs, Jadunath Sarvadhikari wrote: 'In Vrindavan, rajas, rich and middle class families, had established Dharmashalas, free water distributing centres, and alms-houses; there were arrangements for feeding monkeys, tortoises, peacocks, etc., at different places. Worship of Radha-Krishna was popular. Likewise, worship and showing reverence to the six Goswamis and sixty-four Mohants and twelve Gopals, and festivals in connection with them made Vrindavan a festival centre.'²⁰

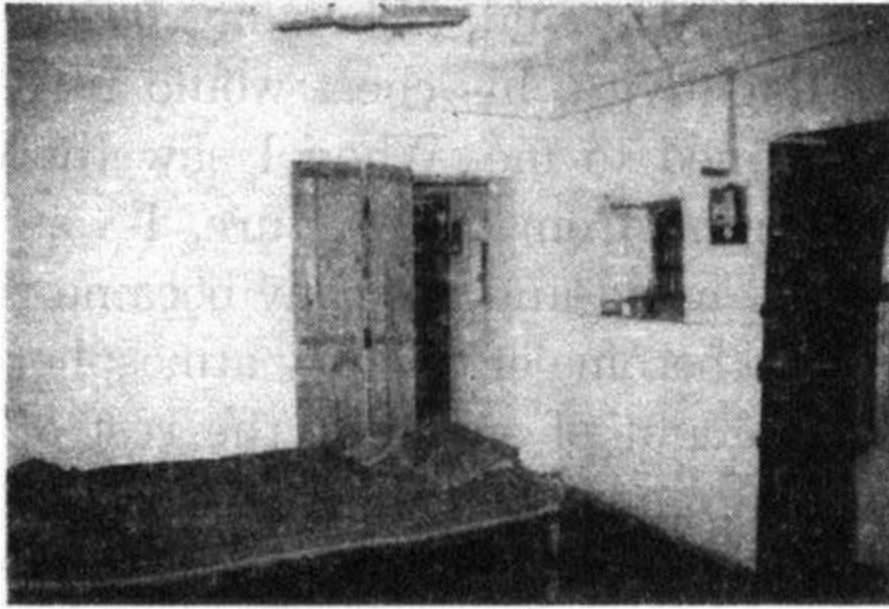


Inner courtyard of Caitanya Fouzdar Kunja. Sri Ramakrishna stayed in a room on the upper floor, directly above the door on the right through which a man is seen going out.

It is certain that Sri Ramakrishna lived in a house popularly known as Caitanya Fouzdar Kunja²¹ at Betiabazar, close to the Nidhuvan. He occupied the room on the first floor, just above the main entrance to the Kunja. Ishan, then a young sevait (caretaker), took pride in recounting that Sri Ramakrishna had told him, 'Ishan, you please show me round the holy places.' Ishan did it gladly.

Mathurmohan and his family probably lived in some other quarters²² that provided

better facilities, whereas Sri Ramakrishna and Hridayam stayed at Fouzdar Kunj. Mathurmohan, of course, maintained his loving watch on his Baba. A typical dandy, Mathurmohan continually displayed his grandeur, social status, and power during his sojourn in Varanasi. The same thing happened in Vrindavan. When he went with his wife to visit the temples, he would offer a few gold coins.



The inside of Sri Ramakrishna's room at Fouzdar Kunja

Sri Ramakrishna was in an elevated state of consciousness during the entire period of his stay in Vrindavan, as was the case with Sri Caitanya. Referring to Caitanya's spiritual state, Sri Ramakrishna once observed: 'So intense is one's love of God that one becomes unconscious of outer things. Chaitanya had this ecstatic love; he "took a wood for the sacred grove of Vrindavan²³ and the ocean for the dark waters of the Jamuna."²⁴ Sri Ramakrishna lovingly cherished the memory of Sri Caitanya's ecstatic love all through.

Sri Ramakrishna also experienced similar ecstatic moods at Vrindavan. By way of illustration we can recall an episode recounted by Sri Ramakrishna himself. He said: 'When my father chanted the name of Raghuvera, his chest would turn crimson. This also happened to me. When I saw the cows at Vrindavan returning from the pasture, I was transported into a divine mood and my body became red.'²⁵ So enamoured did he become of the holy atmosphere of Vrindavan that he thought of spending the rest of his life there.²⁶ He visited many sacred places there to get a feeling of the spirit pervading the area. Later he said, 'At Vrindavan one sees many places associated with Krishna's life.'²⁷ We can assume that he participated in some of the festivals connected with the episodes of Sri Krishna's life, a common feature of Vrindavan's cultural life.

It may appear that Sri Ramakrishna's pilgrimage to Vrindavan did not make as big an impact as Sri Caitanya's, but it did rekindle the flame of divine love lighted by Sri Caitanya 353 years earlier. Its import becomes quite significant when we recall Sri Ramakrishna's startling statement recorded by Hariprasanna Chattopadhyaya (later, Swami Vijnanananda). One day Sri Ramakrishna said to him, 'As Sri Krishna, I enacted the divine drama of love with the milkmaids and shepherds.'²⁸ The flame of that divine

drama is still shining brightly.

To give an idea of what actually happened when Sri Ramakrishna spent those joyous days at Vrindavan, we shall quote from some authentic sources describing a few incidents, and add some explanatory notes whenever necessary.

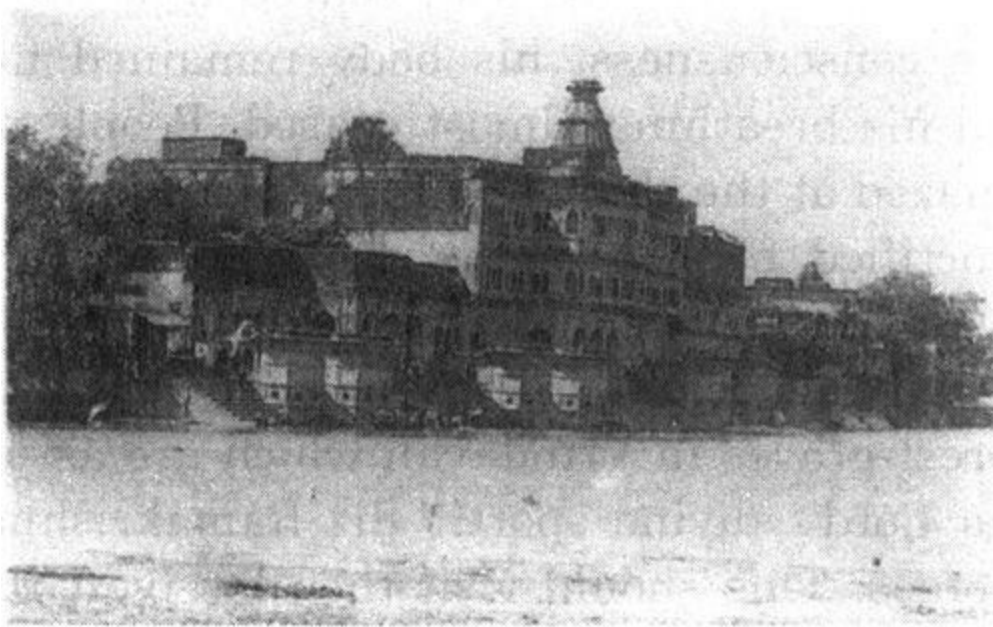


Kaliyadaman Ghat

M. heard Sri Ramakrishna say: 'But one undoubtedly finds inspiration in a holy place. I accompanied Mathur Babu to Vrindavan. Hriday and the ladies of Mathur's family were in our party. No sooner did I see the Kaliyadaman Ghat²⁹ than a divine emotion surged up within me. I was completely overwhelmed. Hriday used to bathe me there as if I were a small child.'³⁰

A portion of a letter dated 26 December 1895 written by Swami Premananda, who collected material from Hridayram as well as from old residents of Vrindavan, throws some new light on the Master's pilgrimage. He wrote: 'Arriving at Mathura the Master first visited Dhruva Ghat and a few other places. Later, when he came to Vrindavan and lived in a house not far from Sri Govindaji's temple, Mathur, Hriday, and others lived with him. While at Vrindavan he passed his days almost in a constant state of ecstasy, and he could hardly walk. He had to be carried in a palanquin with the doors open on both sides so that he could see everything. At times holy thoughts would overwhelm him so much that he would try to jump out, and Hriday would hold him back with difficulty. Hriday usually walked along with the palanquin bearers.'

On 16 October 1882, Sri Ramakrishna reminisced: 'In the dusk I would walk on the bank of the Jamuna when the cattle returned along the sandy banks from their pastures. At the very sight of those cows the thought of Krishna would flash in my mind. I would run along like a madman, crying: "Oh, where is Krishna? Where is my Krishna?"'³¹



Keshi Ghat

And on another occasion he gave further details: 'One evening I was taking a stroll on the bank of the river. There were small thatched huts on the bank and big plum-trees. It was the "cow-dust" hour. The cows were returning from the pasture, raising dust with their hoofs. I saw them fording the river. Then came some cowherd boys crossing the river with their cows. No sooner did I behold this scene than I cried out, "O Krishna, where are You?" and became unconscious.'³²

His biographer Swami Saradananda, who had an eye for detail, wrote: 'When he [Sri Ramakrishna] saw cowherd boys returning from pastures and crossing the Yamuna with herds of cattle at sunset, he became filled with spiritual emotion, inasmuch as, among them, he had the vision of the cowherd Krishna, dark-blue like a newly formed cloud and bedecked with the feathers of a peacock's tail on his head.'³³ At such times his soul soared into the realm of divine consciousness, his body remained motionless, and his breathing almost ceased. People nearby were amazed at the change in his appearance.

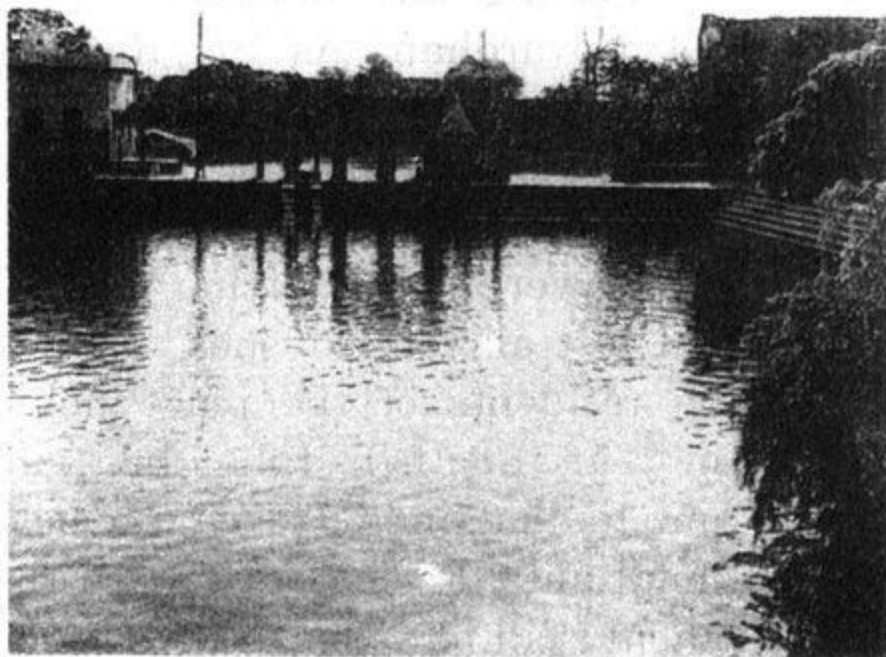
Sanctified by the divine sport of Sri Krishna, Vrindavan to the Vaishnavas is as sacred as Goloka, the heavenly abode of Lord Krishna. There are twelve main forest-groves in Vrindavan which are associated with the Lord's divine sport.³⁴ Sri Ramakrishna told the devotees, 'One should visit the "Twelve Grove".'³⁵ He presumably intended to visit these holy places himself, but Mathurmohan dissuaded him. Finally Sri Ramakrishna decided to visit Shyamakunda, Radhakunda, and Giri Govardhan.



A section of Govardhan Hill

The famous Govardhan hill is about 13 miles to the west of Mathura. It is a 'narrow range of hills, which rises abruptly from the alluvial plain, and stretches in a south-easterly direction for a distance of some four or five miles, with an average elevation of about 100 ft.'³⁶ According to legend, Sri Krishna held this hill aloft on the tip of one of his fingers for seven days and nights to shelter the people of Braja from the storm and rain hurled by Indra. One day Sri Ramakrishna left for Govardhan in a palanquin. Hriday too wanted to go by palanquin, but Sri Ramakrishna, explaining his own physical inability to walk, persuaded Hriday to go on foot, befitting a devout pilgrim. Hridayram obeyed. There were several incidents that happened along the way, but one particularly moving one happened when the party arrived at Govardhan. As Sri Ramakrishna described it: 'I went to Syamakunda and Radhakunda³⁷ in a palanquin and got out to visit the holy Mount Govardhan. At the very sight of the mount I was overpowered with divine emotion and ran to the top.³⁸ I lost all consciousness of the world around me. The residents of the place helped me to come down.'³⁹ At another time he said: 'At Syamakunda and Radhakunda I saw the holy men living in small mud huts. Facing away from the road lest their eyes should fall on men, they were engaged in spiritual discipline.'⁴⁰

While roaming through the groves, Sri Ramakrishna's mind automatically rose to the superconscious realm. But when it descended to the ordinary plane of consciousness, he enjoyed immensely the pastoral scenes all around. Describing his feelings when he set out across the meadows en route to Shyamakunda and Radhakunda, he said: 'On my way to the sacred pools of Syamakunda and Radhakunda, when I saw the meadows, the trees, the shrubs, the birds, and the deer, I was overcome with ecstasy. My clothes became wet with tears. I said: "O Krishna! Everything here is as it was in the olden days. You alone are absent." Seated inside the palanquin I lost all power of speech. Hriday followed the palanquin. He had warned the bearers to be careful about me.'⁴¹



Shyamkunda and Radhakunda

In the village next to Govardhan lies Radhakunda, which is a fairly big pond with well-built hammams on all four sides (put up when the pond was renovated in the 19th century). Excess water from this tank drains into an adjoining pond called Shyamakunda. Its banks have no retaining wall. An overview of these two gives the impression of a big tank divided into two parts.

About this trip we have other details provided by Swami Saradananda, who wrote: 'The Master visited . . . Govardhan and a few other places of Vraja. He liked these places more than Vrindavan. Having various visions of Sri Krishna and Sri Radha, the supreme lady of Vraja, he felt intense divine love in those places. Mathur, it is said, sent him by a palanquin to go and see places such as Govardhan. . . . In those places of Vraja, the Master saw many a world-renouncing Sadhaka sitting within Kupas⁴² with their backs to the doors and immersed in Japa and meditation, withdrawing their eyes from outward things. The Master's mind was much attracted by the natural and other beauties of Vraja—trees adorned with fruits and flowers, the small hillock Govardhan, deer and peacocks roaming everywhere in the forests free from fear, the holy men engaged in austerity who spent their days in incessant thought of God, and the inhabitants of Vraja, whose behaviour was simple, sincere and respectful.'⁴³

Some more details have been added by Swami Ramakrishnananda. He wrote: 'Sri Ramakrishna went to see Radhakunda, Shyamakunda in the company of Hriday. Mathurmohan did not join the party. On the way Sri Ramakrishna saw a troop of white peacocks. He drew Hriday's attention to it, and being greatly excited he was about to jump from the palanquin.' From the same source it is gathered that Sri Ramakrishna also saw to his amazement a herd of fleeting deer, probably on his way back to Vrindavan.

Swami Saradananda also wrote: 'On one side of the palanquin he [Mathurmohan] spread a piece of cloth on which he piled⁴⁴ in stacks—rupees, half-rupees, quarter-rupees, two-anna-pieces, etc., so that the Master might give them away to the poor and

to the places of worship. But the Master became so much filled with spiritual love and affection while he was going to those places, that he could not take them in his hand to give them away. Having no alternative left, he pulled one end of the piece of cloth and scattered them amongst the poor of those places.'⁴⁵

There was, however, a unique feature in Sri Ramakrishna's pilgrimage, the like of which cannot be found in the life of any other saint—even of his predecessor Sri Caitanya. As a true hermeneutician in his practice of religious disciplines, Sri Ramakrishna not only accepted and took up the Vaishnava disciplines but he also remained absorbed in the spiritual mood characteristic of Vrindavan. Here he practised the Vaishnava path heart and soul, upholding the value and sanctity of its tradition. Explaining his viewpoint, Sri Ramakrishna once said: 'Once I thought, "Why should I be one-sided?" Therefore I was initiated into Vaishnavism in Vrindavan and took the garb of a Vaishnava monk. I spent three days practising the Vaishnava discipline.'⁴⁶ In another place, however, he said, 'At Vrindavan I myself put on the garb of the Vaishnavas and wore it for fifteen days.'⁴⁷ Further research and circumstantial evidence corroborate the second view. Swami Ramakrishnananda, in his letter of 14 Pous,⁴⁸ also referred to this incident. According to him, Sri Ramakrishna was initiated into Vaishnavism by a priest named Catura at a place near Radhakunda. Does this as well as a few other particulars suggest that Sri Ramakrishna lived in that locality for some days? In all probability he did.

Swami Ramakrishnananda's second letter also mentions an amusing incident. During his entire sojourn in that area of three weeks or so Sri Ramakrishna constantly carried in his hand a green twig of bamboo. Sometimes Hriday would snatch it away, and he would then get upset. He could not have peace of mind until it was returned to him. Sri Ramakrishna could hardly walk during this period, and he often had to be carried in a palanquin even for bathing in the river Yamuna. For a glimpse at his state of mind at this time, we might recall what he once said: 'When one gets into such a state of mind, one doesn't enjoy any conversation but that about God. I used to weep when I heard people talk about worldly matters.'⁴⁹

Sri Krishna's divine love for the gopis of Vrindavan was a theme that always appealed to him and would throw him into ecstatic moods. As Sri Caitanya assumed the role of Radha and manifested her deep longing to be united with Krishna, Sri Ramakrishna too worshipped his beloved Krishna, looking on himself as one of the gopis or as God's handmaid.⁵⁰ His interpretation of the Radha-Krishna phenomenon was: 'Krishna had been enshrined in Radha's heart; but Radha wanted to sport with Him in human form. Hence all the episodes of Vrindavan.'⁵¹ Like the sun and its rays, there are the absolute and the relative aspects of Radha-Krishna. Sri Ramakrishna sometimes dwelt in the absolute and sometimes in the relative aspect of the phenomenon.⁵²

As we look back after more than one hundred years and see the incidents of Sri Ramakrishna's pilgrimage in their historical perspective, we can safely say that this slender, bearded man of medium height—Sri Ramakrishna, who was completely immersed in divine consciousness—did not move about Mathura and Vrindavan unnoticed. His longing and ardour were rewarded by vision after vision, and people could

not help but notice him as he stood in front of deities with his face beaming, his eyes closed, his consciousness soaring to heights of rapture, and his body as still as stone. At times he would burst into a melodious song, profusely shedding tears of joy, and at other times he would dance in ecstasy. As in the case of Caitanya, a reawakening through his visions and an infusion of new spiritual power were Sri Ramakrishna's contribution to the Vrindavan revival. He wakened in the hearts of the devotees the glowing memories of Sri Krishna, and he recharged, as it were, the spiritual battery of the religious community there.

Vrindavan, however, was not all that it was supposed to be. In fact, it was far from the celestial abode Sri Ramakrishna had cherished in his visions. He did not fail to notice there the same pettiness, worldliness, and so forth as everywhere else—at times even virulent. At Vrindavan some of the Vaishnava Babajis spent their time in the company of women under the pretext of practising sadhana. Many other such facts came to his attention. All this helped him understand the real state of affairs in society.⁵³ No wonder devotees heard him later remark, 'While visiting the holy places, I would sometimes suffer great agony.'⁵⁴



A section of the Nidhuvan

The most touching episode of Sri Ramakrishna's sojourn in Vrindavan was his meeting with Gangamayī, a woman devotee in her sixties. The Great Master mentions that at Vrindavan, like other places, Sri Ramakrishna 'heard the names of eminent holy men of the place and paid visits to them.'⁵⁵ It was on such an excursion that he came to have a fascinating encounter with Gangamata, or Gangamayī, who lived in a house close to the Nidhuvan,⁵⁶ where the present Kanpur Dharmashala stands.⁵⁷ As soon as Gangamayī saw the Master, she intuitively recognized him to be the embodiment of Sri Radha. And Sri Ramakrishna saw in her one of the finest blossoms of the groves of Vrindavan, still saturated with the spirit of Sri Krishna.

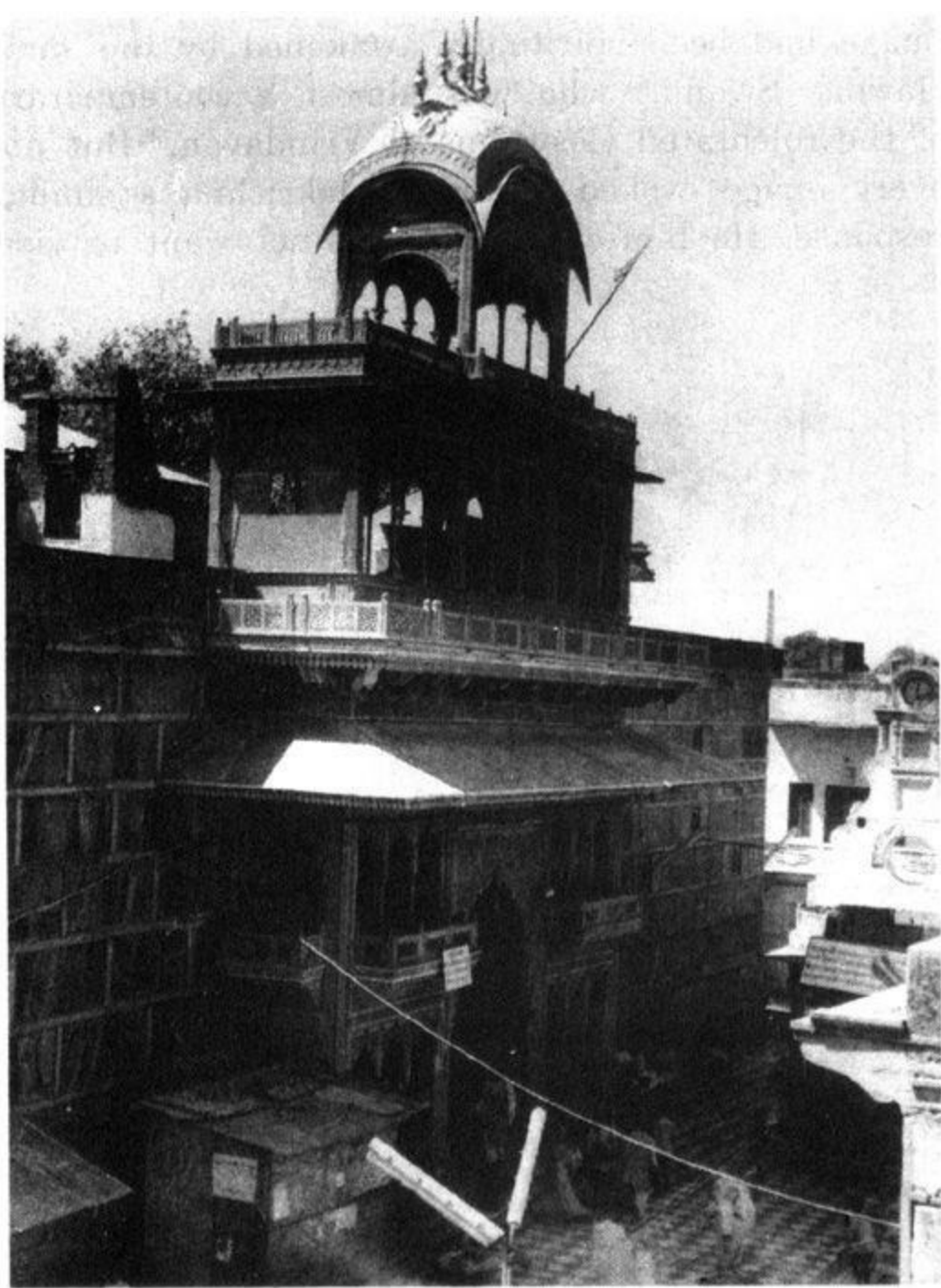
A member of the sect called Sakhi Sampradaya, founded by Haridas Swami, Gangamayī

had fervently dedicated her life to having direct communion with the King of ecstatic love, Sri Krishna. She lived near the Nidhuvan.⁵⁸ The people of Vrindavan held her in high esteem and believed her to be an incarnation of Lalita, Radha's principal companion. She would very often go into ecstasy, and people used to come to watch her spiritual transformation. One day, overwhelmed with divine emotion, she climbed on the shoulders of Hridayram, who was sitting nearby. Advanced in spiritual life, she easily recognized the signs of mahabhava manifest in Ramakrishna's body. She regarded him as the incarnation of Radhika and affectionately called him Dulali. They were deeply attached to each other. As Swami Saradananda observed: 'The Master also forgot everything else when he met her and, as one long familiar with her, lived in her hermitage for sometime. They were so much charmed with each other's affection that Mathur and others, we were told, were afraid lest he should refuse to return to Dakshineswar with them.'



We give the last part of the drama in the words of the Master. One day at Dakshineswar he said: 'When I went to Vrindavan I felt no desire to return to Calcutta. It was arranged that I should live with Gangama.⁵⁹ Everything was settled. My bed was to be on one side and Gangama's on the other. I resolved not to go back to Calcutta. I said to myself, "How long must I eat a kaivarta's⁶⁰ food?" "No," said Hriday to me, "let us go to Calcutta." He pulled me by one hand and Gangama pulled me by the other. I felt an intense desire to live at Vrindavan. But just then I remembered my mother. That completely changed everything. She was old. I said to myself: "My devotion to God will take to its wings if I have to worry about my mother. I would rather live with her. Then I shall have peace of mind and be able to meditate on God."'⁶¹ According to Swami Ramakrishnananda, when all her pleadings failed to detain Sri Ramakrishna, Gangamayi cried out bitterly in a loud voice. After Sri Ramakrishna left, she went to live in the village Varshana (where Radha was brought up)⁶² and passed away at an advanced age.⁶³

Despite the destruction of the temples and the desecration of the sacred places over the centuries, Vrindavan eventually became dotted with many temples and shrines. Sri Ramakrishna visited quite a few of them. Some of them impressed him deeply; many others did not. Once he said: 'I went into samadhi at the sight of the image of Banke Bihari.⁶⁴ In that state I wanted to touch it.' The stone image of Banke Bihari was to him a living presence. This image had been spiritually awakened by the saint Haridas Swami,⁶⁵ who was almost a contemporary of the celebrated Goswamis of Vrindavan.⁶⁶ But not every image evoked in Sri Ramakrishna a similar response. He himself said: 'I did not want to visit Govindaji twice.⁶⁷ At Mathura I dreamt of Krishna as the cowherd boy. Hriday and Mathur each had a similar dream.'⁶⁸



Banke Bihari temple, Vrindavan



Banke Bihari Seeing this image, Sri Ramakrishna went into samadhi

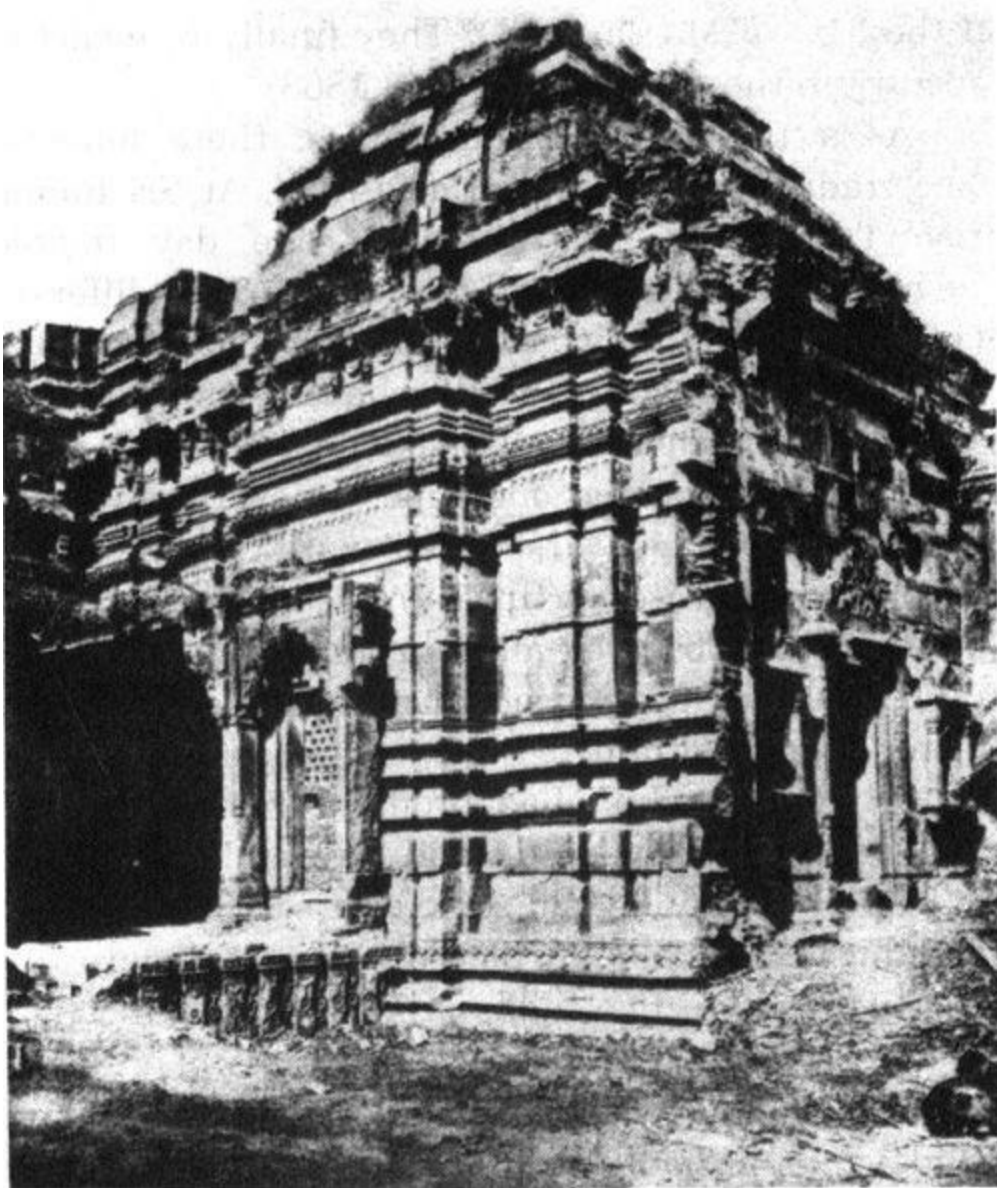
From Vrindavan the pilgrims began their return to Calcutta via Varanasi. At Varanasi they halted to have darshan of the golden image of Devi Annapurna on the 31st of March 1868.⁶⁹ They finally returned to Calcutta in the early part of May 1868.

As a finale to the pilgrimage, there followed some traditional rituals and a festival. At Sri Ramakrishna's request, Mathurmohan one day invited Vaishnava teachers and devotees from different places, and in their company Sri Ramakrishna celebrated a festival in the Panchavati. As a token of respect, Mathurmohan gave sixteen rupees to every Vaishnava teacher and one rupee to every devotee.⁷⁰ Such a pilgrimage, associated with pomp, social recognition, and so forth, is rajasic sadhana, but Mathurmohan observed all the customs meticulously. Fully aware of Mathurmohan's rajasic nature, the Master supported him.

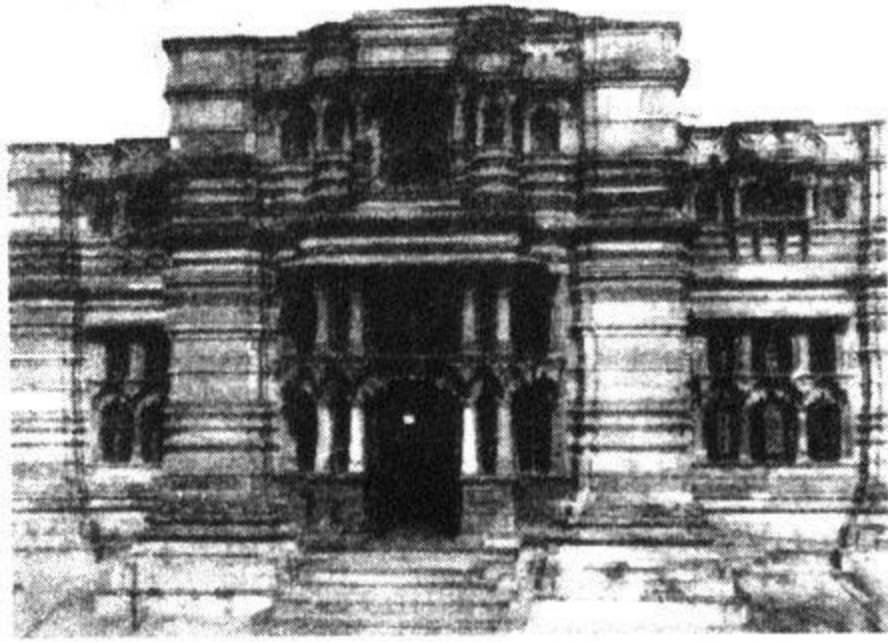
Sri Ramakrishna had brought from Vrindavan some earth of Radhakunda and

Shyamakunda. With the help of Hriday he had some of it scattered around the Panchavati, and he placed the remainder with his own hands in his 'sadhana kutir' (the hut where he had practised spiritual disciplines of Advaita Vedanta), saying, 'Now this place is as sacred as Vrindavan.' He had also brought a madhavi creeper from Vrindavan, and he had it planted in the Panchavati. By the time M. first came to Dakshineswar, the creeper had grown big and strong. Children used to jump and swing from it.

That the pilgrimage to Vrindavan left its mark on the saint's life is evident from some later incidents. One or two may be mentioned by way of illustration. One of them happened in 1879, when he was a guest of a Vaishnava priest, Natavar Goswami. Recalling it later, Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Once, at Syambazar [Fulvi-Shyambazar], they arranged a kirtan at Natavar Goswami's house. There I had a vision of Krishna and the gopis of Vrindavan. I felt that my subtle body was walking at Krishna's heels.'⁷¹ Concerning another incident, Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Once, at Sihore, I fed the cowherd boys. I put sweetmeats into their hands. I saw that these boys were actually the cowherd boys of Vrindavan, and I partook of the sweetmeats from their hands.'⁷² These charming incidents show how much the glory of Vrindavan had filled the saint's mind.



Gopinathji temple



Govindaji temple (old)

But more importantly, his mind had become saturated, as it were, with ecstatic love for Radha and Krishna. This love used to well up occasionally from his heart, reminding the devotees of the spiritual zeal of the gopis. One day Sri Ramakrishna's nephew Ramlal sang a song describing 'the pangs of the gopis on being separated from their beloved Krishna:

Hold not, hold not the chariot's wheels!
Is it the wheels that make it move?
The Mover of its wheels is Krishna,
By whose will the worlds are moved

'The Master went into deep samadhi. His body was motionless; he sat with folded hands as in his photograph. Tears of joy flowed from the corners of his eyes. After a long time his mind came down to the ordinary plane of consciousness. He mumbled something, of which only a word now and then could be heard by the devotees in the room. He was saying: "Thou art I, and I am Thou—Thou eatest—Thou—I eat! . . ." Continuing, the Master said: "I see everything like a man with jaundiced eyes! I see Thee alone everywhere. O Krishna, Friend of the lowly! O Eternal Consort of my soul! O Govinda!" Again he went into samadhi, and the eyes of all the devotees were riveted on his beaming face. They saw Krishna, the King of Vrindavan, before them.⁷³

Sri Ramakrishna's remarkable pilgrimage has an object-lesson for all of us. As Sri Ramakrishna himself explained: 'What is the use of making pilgrimages if you can attain love of God remaining where you are? . . . Pilgrimage becomes futile if it does not enable you to attain love of God.'⁷⁴ Another day he said: 'They make so many pilgrimages and repeat the name of God so much, but why do they not realize anything? It is because

they have no longing for God. God reveals Himself to the devotee if only he calls upon Him with a longing heart.'⁷⁵



Ramlal, Ramakrishna's nephew

It may seem that there was nothing unique about Sri Ramakrishna's pilgrimage, as far as his life his concerned. It was in conformity with his nature and spiritual genius, and, as would be expected, it made the holy places he visited even holier. But at every step of his pilgrimage his own unique character was revealed, and on his return he himself became a living pilgrimage. His words and his actions inspired every pilgrim on the long journey to the temple of the Divine.



1. Mahabharata 13.3.16. Swami Saradananda argued: 'So, there is a special manifestation of God in these places, though He is uniformly present everywhere, like water which is easily accessible in wells, pools, ponds or lakes, though it can be had in other places also, if one digs for it there.' (Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master, trans. by Swami Jagadananda [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2nd rev. ed., 1956], 558.)
2. Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj, Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India (Delhi, 1973), 153.
3. At Sri Ramakrishna's request Mathurmohan one day invited Vaishnavcharan to his house. Mathur welcomed him with great courtesy. In the course of their conversation Vaishnavcharan said: 'Kesava is the only saviour. You will achieve nothing whatsoever in spiritual life unless you accept Krishna as your Ideal.' No sooner did Mathur hear this than his face became red with anger and he blurted out, 'You rascal!' Sri Ramakrishna gave Vaishnavcharan a nudge. (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981], 423, 489.)
4. Originating from Yamunotri glacier, the stream traverses 1,376 kms. to reach its confluence with the Ganga at Allahabad. As the ghats along the river front at Vrindavan previously served as entry points into the town, the gradual recession of the Yamuna River away from the ghats has radically changed the area.
5. The Mathura Mahatmya (in the Varaha Purana) states that the Mathura Mandal is 20 yojanas. (Taking a yojana as 7 miles, and a kos as 1¾ miles, 20 yojanas would be about 80 kos.)
6. Ramchandra Gupta, Sri Krishna's socio-political and Philosophical Study (Delhi: B.R. Publ. Corp., 1984), 1-17.
7. Kapila said (in the Srimad Bhagavatam, 3.25.32-33):

Devanam gunaliṅganamanusravikakarmanam;
 Sattva evaikamanaso vrttiḥ svabhaviki tu ya.
 Animitta bhagavati bhaktiḥ siddhergariyasi;
 Jarayatyasu ya kosam nigirnamanalo yatha.

'When all the energies of man's senses, which are ordinarily engaged with external things, become concentrated through purification, as a spontaneous mental attitude directed to the Supreme Being, devoid of any extraneous motive, the resulting state of mind is called bhakti (devotion). Such devotion is superior even to mukti (liberation). Like fire, it burns up the coverings of ignorance in a person.' Bhakti has been described as the fifth purushartha, or objective of life, and the highest objective, transcending even mukti.

8. Gospel, 94.
9. Ibid., 140.
10. About this Swami Vivekananda once said: '... none ought to attempt to understand, until he has become perfectly chaste and pure, that most marvellous expansion of love, allegorized and expressed in that beautiful play at Vrindavan, which none can understand but he who has become mad with love, drunk deep of the cup of love!' (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, [Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama], III:257)
11. Accompanied by Balabhadra Bhattacharya, Sri Caitanya went to Vrindavan, and on his way he went into ecstasy several times. During this visit he discovered Radhakunda and went to Mount Govardhan, though he did not climb it. One day, when he was contemplating Krishna's meeting with Akrura at Akrura Ghat, and also thinking of how the people of Braja had gotten a glimpse of Goloka, he went into ecstasy and was about to be swept away by the river. Balabhadra just managed to drag him out in time. Then he persuaded Sri Caitanya to leave Vrindavan for Prayag for a holy dip in the confluence there on the auspicious day of Makara Samkranti.
12. The Great Master, 591.
13. Ibid., 590.
14. Gospel, 229.
15. Ibid., 377.
16. Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita. (Calcutta: Udbodhan Office), 88.
17. Gospel, 361.
18. Akshay Kumar Sen, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi (Calcutta: Udbodhan Office).
19. F.S. Growse, Mathura: A District Memoir (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1882 [reprint 1993]), 197.
20. Jnanendra Mohan Das, Banger Bahirey Bangali (Calcutta: Kali Kinkar Mitra Publ., 1931), I:199.
21. Caitanyadasji of Birbhum (West Bengal) established this kunja some time around 1810. He had installed the deity Gopala here. Because he was serving as a fouzdar (caretaker) of the temple of Govindaji, the place came to be known as Caitanya Fouzdar Kunja. His disciple Iswarji passed away at the age of 90, and the latter's disciple Krishnadas Mohanta died in 1961 at the age of 88. The present caretaker is Gopalji Maharaj.
22. Swami Saradananda mentioned that Mathurmohan stayed near the Nidhuvan at Vrindavan.
23. Vrindavan, a conglomerate of 12 vanas (forest groves) and 24 upavanas, grew into a regular settlement in the wake of the Vaishnava revival in the 15th and 16th centuries.
24. Gospel, 202. Here we may recall an episode: One day at Dakshineswar Manohar Goswami, a well-known singer of

kirtan, sang about the ecstatic love of Caitanya and the divine episodes of Vrindavan. Sri Ramakrishna soon got absorbed in a deep spiritual mood. He tore off his shirt and sang, assuming the mood of Radha: 'O Krishna, my Beloved! O friends, bring Krishna to me. Then you will be real friends. Or take me to Him, and I will be your slave for ever.' Gospel, 224.

[25.](#) Ibid., 408.

[26.](#) Great Master, 604.

[27.](#) Gospel, 361.

[28.](#) Swami Apurvananda, Swami Vijnanananda (1984), 119-20.

[29.](#) Kaliyadaman Ghat, the place where the serpent Kaliya was subdued, lies on the western side of the Aditya temple. (For details of the incident see the 16th chapter of the 10th section of the Srimad Bhagavata.) Sri Ramakrishna's statement that Hriday used to bathe him at Kaliyadaman Ghat raises the question whether the Master was living somewhere nearby, at least for some days.

[30.](#) Gospel, 129.

[31.](#) Ibid.

[32.](#) Ibid., 361-62

[33.](#) Great Master, 566.

[34.](#) Padma Purana, 'Patala Khanda,' Chapter 38.

Pradhanam dvadasaranyam mahatmyam kathitam kramat;
Bhadrasrilauhabhanairamahatalakhadirakah.
Vakulam kumudam kamyam madhu vrndavanam tatha;
Dvadasauta vanasamkhyah kalindyah sapta pascime.

[35.](#) Gospel, 362.

[36.](#) Mathura: A District Memoir, 300. People believe that since the water of the Yamuna is gradually receding, the hill too is diminishing in height.

[37.](#) All authentic biographies of Sri Caitanya admit that his most important act in Vrindavan was his discovery of Radhakunda, the bathing place of Sri Radha. Legends claim that Radhakunda and Shyamakunda were two reservoirs made by water from all the sacred streams. Sri Krishna did his expiatory ablution here after he had slain the demon-bull Arishta.

[38.](#) Sri Caitanya did not want to climb the hillock because to him it was an object of worship. Sri Ramakrishna, however, went right to the top. According to Swami Ramakrishnananda, by the time the emotionally-charged Sri Ramakrishna reached the top of the hill he was completely naked.

[39.](#) Gospel, 129.

[40.](#) Ibid., 362.

[41.](#) Ibid., 129. Yet another description of the visit is available. The Master himself once said: 'I wanted to visit Syamakunda and Radhakunda; so Mathur Babu sent me there in a palanquin. We had a long way to go. Enough luchi, jilabi, etc., were put in the palanquin. While going over the meadow I was overpowered with emotion and wept: "O Krishna, I find everything the same; only You are not here. This is the very meadow where You tended the cows." Hriday closely followed us. I was bathed in tears, but I could not ask the bearers to stop the palanquin.' (Gospel, 362; the translation has been slightly modified for greater accuracy after consulting the original Bengali text of the Kathamrita.)

[42.](#) Small indigenous cottages made of bamboo and straw, conic in shape.

[43.](#) Great Master, 566.

[44.](#) However, Swami Ramakrishnananda's letter of 26.12.1895 mentioned that Mathurmohan had given Hridayam coins worth Rs. 150 to distribute liberally among the monks and Vaishnavas, and Hriday distributed them at the behest of the Master.

[45.](#) Great Master, 566.

[46.](#) Gospel, 305.

[47.](#) Ibid., 538.

[48.](#) This was his second letter addressed to Swami Premananda. It seems Sri Ramakrishna begged alms, etc., like a typical Vaishnava for three days. However, he retained Vaishnava garments for another twelve days or so even after returning to Vrindavan from Radhakunda.

[49.](#) Gospel, 119.

[50.](#) Ibid., 742-43.

[51.](#) Ibid., 506.

[52.](#) Ibid., 919-20.

[53.](#) Great Master, 601.

[54.](#) Gospel, 129.

[55.](#) Great Master, 272.

- [56.](#) The Nidhuvan had a special appeal for Sri Ramakrishna. When Balaram Bose reported to the Master after his return from Vrindavan, the Master observed: 'I have been to Vrindavan. The Nidhu Grove is very nice indeed.' (Gospel, 131.)
- [57.](#) This is based on the findings of Swami Saradeshananda.
- [58.](#) Gospel, 129. Once a forest of tamal, kadamba, and other trees sheltering peacocks, birds, and monkeys, the Nidhuvan is now a limited area surrounded by a high wall. 'Nidhu' refers to the nine nidhis, or treasures, of Kubera, the god of wealth. It is the local name of the Vrinda grove, to which the town owes its origin.
- [59.](#) According to Ramchandra Datta, Gangamayi cooked for the Master and fed him. See Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadever Jivanbittanta (Calcutta: Sri Ramakrishna Yogodyan), 61.
- [60.](#) This refers to the proprietors of the Dakshineswar temple, who belonged to the fisherman caste, considered low in Hindu society.
- [61.](#) Gospel, 573-74.
- [62.](#) Some scholars say that Raval was Radha's place of birth; others say Varshana, to the south of Nandagram. It is now, for the most part, agreed upon that Radha was born in her mother's home at Raval and was raised at Varshana, in King Vrisabhanu's palace.
- [63.](#) When M. visited Vrindavan in October 1887 he could not find Gangamayi at the Nidhuvan. (Swami Nityatmananda, Sri Ma Darshan (Chandigarh: Ramakrishna Shri Ma Prakashan Trust), VII:185.) Swami Brahmananda and Swami Turiyananda practised austerities in Varshana for quite some time. The latter met Gangamayi, then more than 87; two old women were taking care of her. Hearing that the swami was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, she assured him, saying that his spiritual growth was guaranteed. (Mahendranath Dutta, Brajadham Darshan (Calcutta: Mahendra Publ. Committee), 25.)
- [64.](#) Sri Sarada Devi too held Banke Bihari in high esteem. During her stay at Vrindavan she used to pray, 'Your form is bent, but Your mind is straight—kindly straighten the windings of my mind.'
- [65.](#) Swami Haridas most likely flourished round about the end of the 16th century to the beginning of the 17th century, according to F.S. Growse (Mathura: A District Memoir). He was the son of Gyandhir of Haridaspur near Kol and led a celibate life. At the age of 25 he went to live in a hermitage on the left bank of the Yamuna and later he went to the Nidhuvan. Initiated into Vaishnavism, he began his spiritual practices in the Nidhuvan, then a deep forest. By his loving services and the devotional songs composed by himself, Haridas entertained his beloved Lord. He was finally blessed with a beatific vision of the divine pair, Radhika and Krishna. At Haridas's request the two merged into the form of Banke Bihari. Haridas's musical compositions, compiled under the title Kelimal, have immortalized him in Indian music. The image of Banke Bihari was at one time lost. Later it was dug up and enshrined in the present temple. In fact, Banke Bihari is the image of Bala Gopala in the Nimbarka tradition.
- [66.](#) For a glimpse of the devout life of Haridas, we render a portion of Nabhaji's Bhaktamal: 'Continually repeating the holy name of Kunjabehari [i.e., Krishna] and entertaining Kunjabehari with his melodious songs and offering Him the choicest food, Haridas lost himself in joy beholding the divine sport of Kunjabehari with the gopis. He used to feed the peacocks, monkeys, and fish of the Nidhuvan.'
- [67.](#) The image that Sri Ramakrishna saw in that temple was a new one, and not the original. To protect them from the wrath of the Mohammedan rulers, the deities of the famous temples of Gopinath, Govindadeva, and Madanmohan were shifted to Kama and then to Ambar or Jaipur. King Jaisingh II (1699-1743) shifted his capital from Ambar to Jaipur in 1727, and within the next twelve years Govindaji and Gopinathji were permanently installed at Jaipur. It may not be out of place to quote an anecdote narrated by Sri Ramakrishna. Once he said: 'The priests in the temple of Govindaji at Jaipur were celibates at first, and at that time they had fiery natures. Once the King of Jaipur sent for them, but they didn't obey him. They said to the messenger, "Ask the king to come to see us." After consultation, the king and his ministers arranged marriages for them.' Then they gradually lost their spiritual vigour. (Gospel, 166-67)
- [68.](#) Gospel, 362 (modified slightly after referring to the original text of the Kathamrita).
- [69.](#) Vasanti Ashtami, Tuesday 19 Caitra (1274 B.S.).
- [70.](#) Great Master, 273.
- [71.](#) Gospel, 348.
- [72.](#) Ibid., 232.
- [73.](#) Ibid., 207-08.
- [74.](#) Ibid., 469.
- [75.](#) Ibid., 306.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S PILGRIMAGE TO NAVADVIP

A brief account of an excursion that turned into a pilgrimage made by Sri Ramakrishna can provide a window, however small, into the workings of his mind when he was visiting holy places. One may argue that in these days of confusion, disorder, and doubt, the story of a pilgrimage may not be relevant and appealing. But this pilgrimage was not made by an ordinary person. Nor is a pilgrimage comparable to a pleasure or business trip, or to an adventurous expedition. It is primarily a spiritual undertaking, a quest for purity of the heart. It is an attempt to realize within oneself the pure longing of a devotee for the Divine.

In the case of Sri Ramakrishna, charged as he was with spiritual ecstasy, each holy spot was a potential source of joy and inspiration. More often than not, he could detect a spiritual current or a stream of blessing in such a place. Each of Sri Ramakrishna's experiences during a pilgrimage, whether secular or spiritual, had a deeper significance. They could impart blessings and have a direct impact on us. Though his experiences are beyond the grasp of the mind, they touch the very essence of our being and they can help us penetrate certain levels of reality.

All of this took place when Sri Ramakrishna made a pilgrimage in 1870. As on other similar occasions, his travel proved beneficial to all, except to those whose egos made them impervious to his divine influence.

This time Sri Ramakrishna had chosen to visit Navadvip, the place sanctified by the birth and early life of Sri Caitanya, and also Kalna, a town blessed by Sri Caitanya's visit. Born and brought up in the village of Kamarpukur, Sri Ramakrishna had been influenced by the Vaishnava religion preached by Sri Caitanya, and he had cherished the desire of visiting the places associated with Sri Caitanya. As Mathurmohan Biswas was greatly devoted to the saint of Dakshineswar, he considered himself fortunate to fulfil any wish of his 'Baba', and always kept himself ready to make him happy. For this trip a fairly large houseboat partitioned into several cabins was arranged. Besides Sri Ramakrishna and Mathurmohan, the Master's attendant Hridayram was also in the party, as well as one or two of Mathur's relations, some cooks, attendants, and other employees of Mathur's estate. The boat left Dakshineswar on an auspicious day and sailed up the Bhagirathi.

To appreciate this pilgrimage more, we need to see it against the background of two major incidents. Sri Ramakrishna's nephew Akshay, who had lost his mother right after his birth, had by 1869 grown up into a handsome youth and was loved by all—especially by his uncle Sri Ramakrishna. Akshay had been serving as a priest in the temple of Vishnu at Dakshineswar, but in the last part of 1869 he died after a short illness. Describing its impact on his mind, Sri Ramakrishna one day said: 'Akshay died. I felt nothing at the time. I was standing and was witnessing how man dies. I saw there was, as it were, a sword in a sheath and the sword was brought out of it. The sword was not at all affected. . . . I felt great joy to see it. I laughed and sang and danced. . . . The next day I was standing there (pointing to the verandah to the east of the room and near the

courtyard of the Kali temple), and do you know what I felt? I felt as if my heart was being wrung in the way a wet towel is wrung. My heart was feeling for Akshay like that.'¹

Soon after, Mathurmohan suggested this boat trip for a change of air, hoping that Sri Ramakrishna would find some respite from the intensity of his bereavement. Baba readily agreed. Later, in the course of conversation, Sri Ramakrishna referred to this trip, saying: 'Once, for a few days, I was out on an excursion with Mathur Babu in his house-boat. We took the trip for a change of air. During that trip we visited Navadvip.'²

But besides Akshay's premature death, something else had happened which had a direct bearing on this trip. It was a rather strange incident, but one that is relevant to our understanding of Ramakrishna's unique mission. Once Sri Ramakrishna had gone to a Harisabha in Colootolah, Calcutta,³ when the well-known Vaishnava scholar Vaishnavcharan Goswami⁴ was giving a discourse on the Srimad Bhagavata. It seems Sri Ramakrishna had gone there at his invitation. In the Harisabha a seat decorated with flowers was always kept reserved for Sri Caitanya. The Vaishnava devotees believed that Sri Caitanya was always present in his subtle body there, particularly during the devotional songs and dancing, as also during the recitations from the holy Bhagavata. Popularly called 'Caitanya's seat', it was held sacred by the devotees.

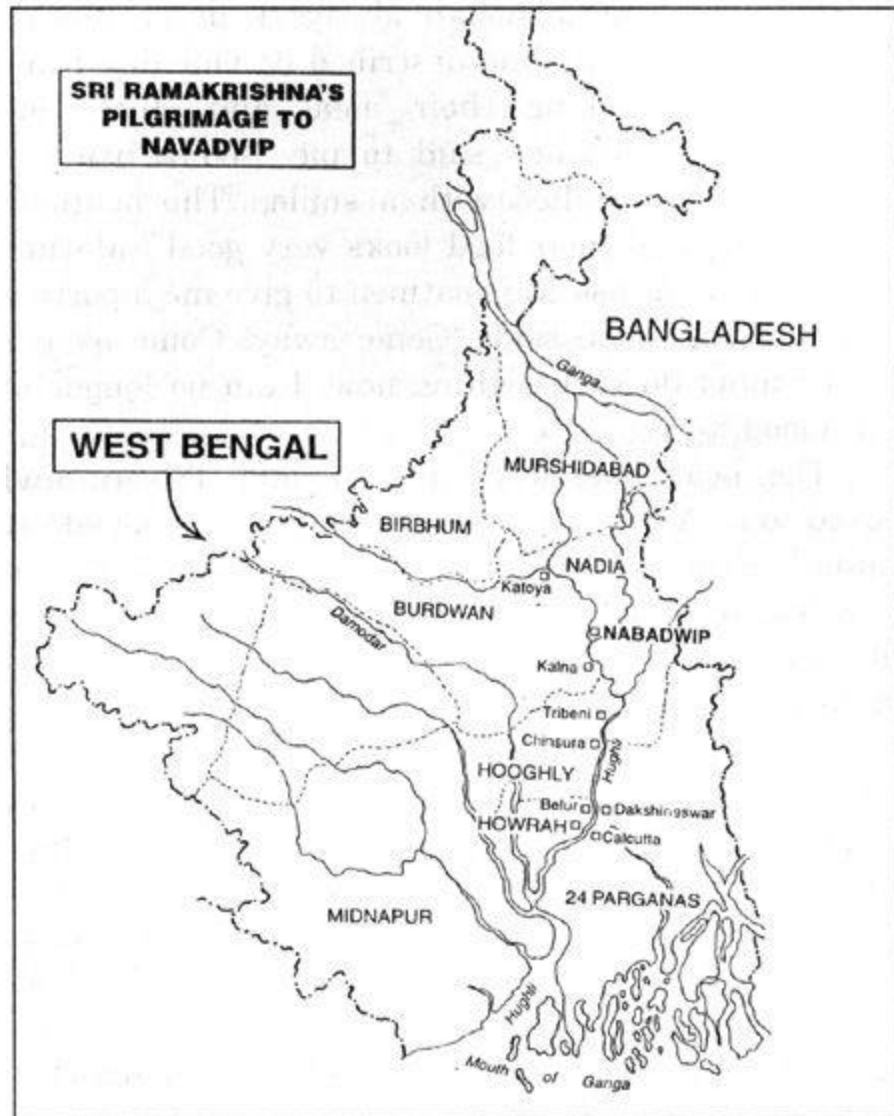
As Sri Ramakrishna listened to the nectar-like words of the Srimad Bhagavata, expounded by Pundit Vaishnavcharan, he was overwhelmed with divine emotion. All of a sudden he rushed forward and stood on Caitanya's seat. The devotees were shocked, but for the most part they remained where they were, watching him in amazement as he stood motionless like a statue with his face radiating joy and his hands raised. Soon after, Sri Ramakrishna regained normal consciousness and immediately left the seat. The more dogmatic Vaishnavas, however, questioned the propriety of Sri Ramakrishna's occupying the seat reserved for the great Sri Caitanya. Later, some of them brought the matter to the attention of Bhagavandas Babaji, the venerable Vaishnava leader of Kalna. A puritanical devotee of Sri Caitanya, Bhagavandasji reacted sharply to this act of transgression by the Paramahansa of Dakshineswar and called him a hypocrite. But it seems Sri Ramakrishna was quite ignorant of these later developments when he joined the boat trip.

According to Hridayram's memoirs the trip took place in the month of Falgun (February-March) 1870. The southern breeze had just set in. The houseboat under sail moved fast at times, and at other times its movement slowed down. One day after their noon meal, Mathurmohan reported to Sri Ramakrishna, 'Baba, while we sat for our noon meal, the wind was so strong that it has helped us cross sixteen krosh [32 miles].'

On either side of the river stretched vast dust-brown fields. But sprinkled here and there were fields of amber-coloured wheat and yellow mustard flowers, as well as sesame plants dancing in the breeze. Most of the fields were close to the quiet-flowing Ganga, beside which ran the Grand Trunk Road. Here and there one could see ponds and clusters of date-palm trees and banana trees. Above, patches of white clouds seemed to be suspended from the azure sky.

On the way nothing worth mentioning happened except for one incident. One day Mathurmohan noticed Sri Ramakrishna standing near the place where the boatmen were

cooking their meal. A couple of years earlier Sri Ramakrishna had practised the spiritual disciplines of Islam, and during that time he had changed his food habits. Apprehensive of another such change, Mathurmohan always kept an eye on him. As Sri Ramakrishna described it: 'One day I saw the boatmen cooking their meal and stood and watched them. Mathur said to me, "What are you doing there?" I replied with a smile, "The boatmen are cooking, and their food looks very good." Mathur felt that I might ask the boatmen to give me a portion of their food, so he said: "Come away! Come away!" But I cannot do such a thing now. I am no longer in that mood.'



The boat passed Srirampur and Triveni and moved on. Along the way, the party stopped at Kalna,⁶ about eighty kilometres northwest of Calcutta, in the district of Burdwan, West Bengal. The town is on the opposite bank of the river from Shantipur, and is popularly known as Ambika-Kalna, after the name of the presiding deity of the town, Siddheswari Kali.⁷ One hundred and eight Shiva temples as well as a temple dedicated to RamaSita built by the royal family of Burdwan have added glory to the place, already sanctified by its holy association with Sri Caitanya.⁸ Moreover, after Turkish rule had been consolidated in Bengal, three mosques had also come up, of which Masjid-e-Jamai was the most prominent. On the occasion of the Id festival, seven to eight hundred palanquins, a popular carrier for the wealthy, used to assemble near this mosque.

The next morning Sri Ramakrishna, accompanied by Hriday, quietly slipped off as Mathurmohan busied himself in arranging for lodgings. There was a cool breeze. Sri Ramakrishna covered his head and body with a red woollen wrapper, while Hriday had a costly shawl on his body. Learning that Bhagavandas Babaji resided at Kalna, Sri Ramakrishna intended to meet him. They made several enquiries from local people and were at last directed to the Nama Brahma Ashrama, the monastery of Bhagavandas Babaji. Established by Bhagavandas, the ashrama included two temples—one of Sri Radha-Govinda and another of Sri Caitanya¹⁰—and a deep brick-walled well with a staircase against the wall. When Babaji became old he could not go to the river for a holy dip. He used to go down the steps of the well to bathe in the water there which people believed had a direct connection with the Ganga. After his bath, he would stand on the steps and practise japa for a long time.

Babaji was held in high esteem for his spiritual attainments. He was also considered an authority in regard to settling disputes on religious matters and determining norms of decorum and conduct for the Vaishnava community.¹¹ A typical devout Vaishnava, Babaji considered himself a humble servant of the Lord. He used to keep himself covered with a kantha (a wrapper made of torn linen), which earned him the popular name Kantharamdas Babaji.¹² He had some psychic powers such as clairvoyance, and so he also came to be known as Siddha,¹³ the Perfect One.

A peculiar mood used to come over Sri Ramakrishna now and then. When meeting distinguished strangers, he would at first feel shy and diffident. It happened this time too. He sent Hriday ahead and followed him at a short distance. On his arrival at the monastery, Hriday found Bhagavandas Babaji telling his beads. Hriday heard him say, 'Some great soul, it seems to me, has come here.' He looked around but could easily discern that Hriday was not the great soul he had expected.

Babaji then, even as he was telling his beads, resumed his deliberation on a Vaishnava who had been guilty of some misdeed. Enraged, Babaji said: 'Indeed! So puffed up is he with pride! I shall seize the rascal's rosary and confiscate it and finally expel him from the community.' At that moment Sri Ramakrishna quietly entered the room, saluted Babaji, and sat down among the listeners. Introducing him, Hriday said: 'Here is my uncle. He becomes overwhelmed uttering the name of God. He has come to pay a visit to you.' Babaji, who was over eighty years old, was an austere monk. And as a leader of the Vaishnava community he was a stern disciplinarian. In contrast, Sri Ramakrishna, then thirty-four, was humble, unpretentious, and immersed in divine bliss. Grace encompassed him, as it were.

In reply to a question by Hriday, Babaji explained that though he had no need for telling his beads, he did so for the good of others who might otherwise go astray emulating his example. Such egotistic words from Bhagavandas, who was reputed to be a holy man, pained Sri Ramakrishna. He, who was dependent entirely on the Divine Mother, was suddenly impelled to stand up and ask: 'What! You are so egotistic even now! Who are you to expel him? How dare you teach people! Can you teach others if He to whom the world belongs does not do that?' By this time his wrapper had dropped to the ground, and his cloth had almost fallen from his loins. No sooner had he stopped

speaking than he went into deep ecstasy, oblivious of his surroundings.

Babaji and the others there sat spellbound looking at Sri Ramakrishna, whose face was radiating divine bliss. Never before had Babaji experienced such a thing. Due to his long practice of spiritual disciplines, his inner sight was opened, and the spiritually-charged psychic force emanating from Sri Ramakrishna stirred him deeply. Far from being resentful, he closely studied the divine manifestations in Sri Ramakrishna, and he could make out unmistakably his spiritual greatness. Perhaps Sri Ramakrishna's enchanting form helped him understand the spiritual greatness of Sri Caitanya.

Babaji was then startled to learn that his visitor was the same person who had occupied Caitanya's seat at Colootolah. Remembering the harsh words he had used against this holy man, Babaji was struck with remorse and repeatedly asked Hriday how he could be absolved of his offence.¹⁴ But the latter assured Babaji that Sri Ramakrishna was all kindness and that he need not be afraid on this account. Thus reassured, Babaji walked seven times around Sri Ramakrishna, who was still standing, and then prostrated at his feet.¹⁵ In the mean time, Hriday chanted a holy name which helped bring Sri Ramakrishna's mind down to the level of normal consciousness. After Sri Ramakrishna took his seat, Babaji again and again begged his pardon. He then offered Sri Ramakrishna some sweets. The Master ate them and chatted happily with Babaji on some spiritual topics.

After that, Sri Ramakrishna left and returned to the boat, only to find that Mathurmohan had gone to the ashrama. When Mathur met Bhagavandas, Babaji talked about Sri Ramakrishna with great reverence, saying: 'He is not only a great man, he is Sri Caitanya reincarnated. As good luck would have it, I met him today.' Mathurmohan saluted Babaji and offered him some money. On his return, Mathurmohan heard Sri Ramakrishna recounting his meeting and praising the spiritual state of Babaji. At Sri Ramakrishna's request, Mathurmohan donated a large sum of money for holding a special festival at the Nama Brahma Ashrama.

This incident is a typical illustration of how Sri Ramakrishna took upon himself the task of helping persons such as Bhagavandas—who were quite advanced on the spiritual path—overcome their shortcomings and thereby advance further towards the highest goal. This meeting left a deep impression on the mind of Bhagavandas Babaji¹⁶ and also indirectly influenced the Vaishnava community. Thus Sri Ramakrishna's visit to the holy place of Ambika-Kalna intensified its sanctity and enhanced its glory. It also resulted in this gem of a story of the meeting of two holy men—a story that has now become one of the legends of that place.

Apparently the party stayed at Kalna for a couple of days. It may be presumed that during his short stay at Kalna, Sri Ramakrishna visited the temple of Siddheswari Kali, who was popularly known as Ambika Devi, as also some other places of interest. Did he entertain Ambika Devi with some songs, as was his wont?

Leaving Kalna, the boat proceeded towards Navadvip, the town blessed by sacred associations with Sri Caitanya. As the boat moved up the constantly flowing Ganga, the pilgrims were struck by the unusual landscape caused by the vagaries of the routes of the two rivers, the Bhagirathi (that is, the Ganga) and the Jalangi, which enters the Ganga

above Kalna. On either side of the Ganga the kash flowers whispered softly to each other, while the wind swept through the mango and jackfruit trees with a sigh, as if to mourn the sorrows of mundane life. But the unmatched beauty of the moon and the stars at night gladdened the pilgrims and gave evidence of the glory of the Creator.

What is amusing about this pilgrimage is that Sri Ramakrishna had at that time doubts about Sri Caitanya being an Incarnation of God. Later, however, he turned into a staunch admirer of his life and ideals, as even a glance at The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna will confirm. Many of the songs that sent Sri Ramakrishna into ecstasy were related to Sri Caitanya and Navadvip. One such song is:

Gora¹⁷ bestows the Nectar of prema;
Jar after jar he pours it out,
And still there is no end!
Sweetest Nitai is summoning all;
Beloved Gora bids them come;
Shantipur is almost drowned,
And Nadia is flooded with prema!

The first couplet of another of his favourite songs is:

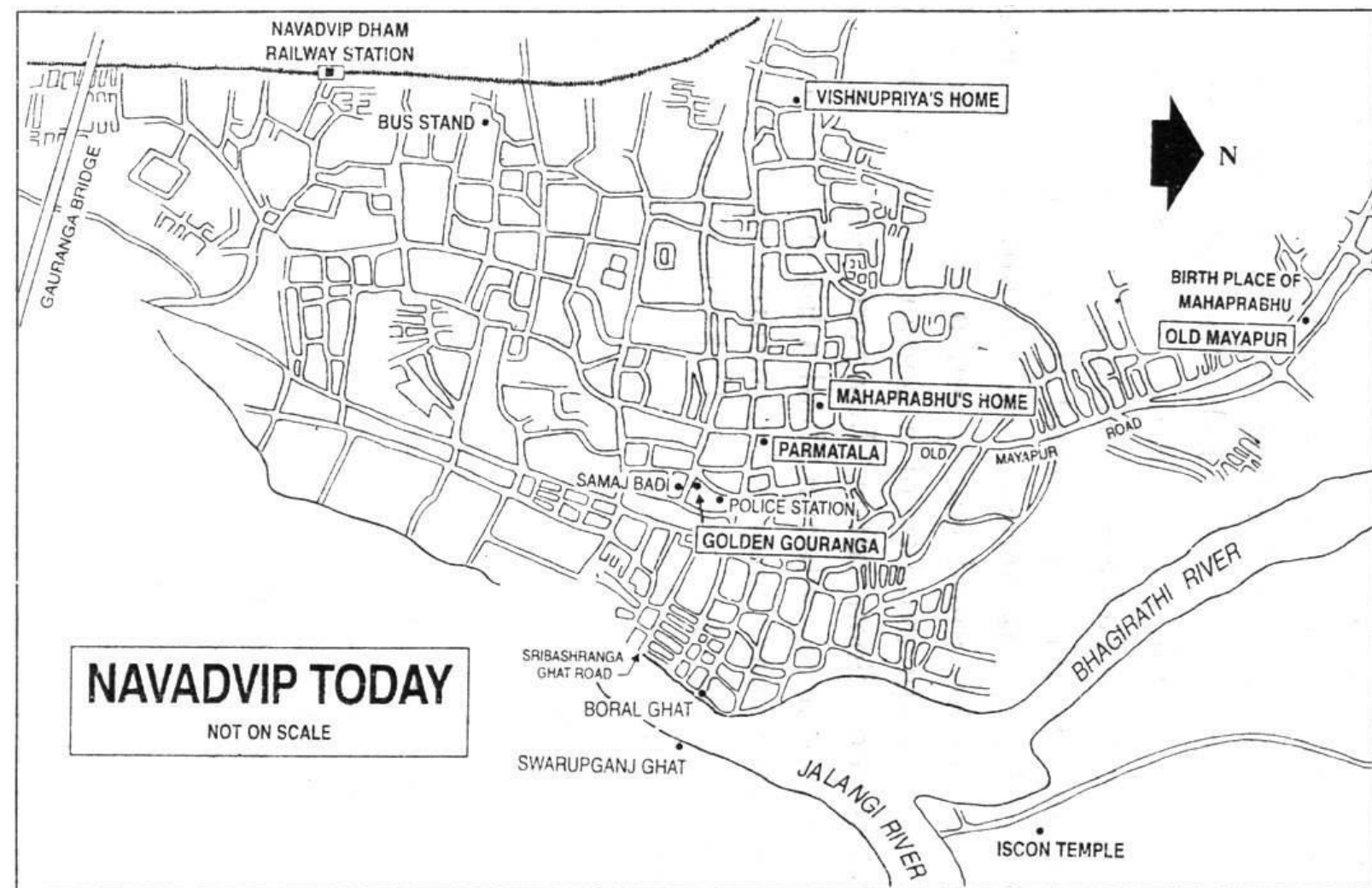
See how all Nadia is shaking
Under the waves of Gauranga's love!

Even before the boat reached Navadvip, Sri Ramakrishna was suddenly overwhelmed by divine emotion as they came to a sandbank. In fact, so overwhelmed was he that he was about to fall into the river. Hriday immediately rushed to the spot and held him. After the boat had passed the sandbank, the Master gradually started regaining normal consciousness. On enquiry it was found that his ecstasy was the result of a vision of Sri Caitanya.

The boat finally reached Navadvip. It is not known if Mathurmohan and others lived in the houseboat or if they lodged in some rented house. Dotted with temples commemorating episodes in the early life of Sri Caitanya, Navadvip is sacred to the followers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. The most famous temples there are: the one with Sri Gauranga's wooden image established by Vishnupriya (Sri Caitanya's wife); Pora-Ma-Tala, the presiding deity of Navadvip; Siddheswari Kali; the Sribhashangan temple; and the Golden Gauranga. Curiously enough, Sri Ramakrishna went round the temples one after another but experienced no significant spiritual emotion. As his mind was a sensitive instrument for gauging the spirituality of a person or place, he felt disappointed. Soon after, however, his disappointment melted away when he had a blissful vision.

Several years later he recounted this experience to some young devotees at Dakshineswar: 'I went to Navadvip with Mathur. I thought that if he [Sri Caitanya] were an Incarnation, there must linger there a little at least of the manifestation; I shall understand it when I see it. In order to detect even a little manifestation (of divinity) I

took walks hither and thither—to the house of the senior Gosain, to that of the junior Gosain, and so on; but I saw nothing particular anywhere; everywhere I found a wooden figure standing with its arms raised upward! I felt dejected to see it. I regretted my going there. Afterwards, I was going to step into the boat for my return trip when I saw in a wonderful vision: Two beautiful boys of tender age—I never saw such beauty; they had the complexion of molten gold—each having an orb of light round his head, raising their hands and looking at me, were running towards me through the sky. And I cried out immediately, "There they come, there they come." Scarcely had I uttered these words before they came and entered here (his own body); I lost normal consciousness and fell down. I would have fallen into the water but for Hridu [Hriday] who was beside me and caught hold of me.¹⁸



As a Geiger counter detects and measures radioactivity, Sri Ramakrishna's sensitive mind could detect the manifestation of spirituality in a place and assess its intensity. More significant than this, however, was his confirmation of the episodes associated with Sri Caitanya as well as the place of their occurrence.¹⁹ His experience proved beyond doubt that God had incarnated as Sri Caitanya to teach people love and devotion and also that Nadia, or Navadvip, was sanctified by his divine sport.

Soon after Sri Ramakrishna regained normal consciousness, Mathurmohan asked him, 'Baba, how did you find Navadvip?' The Master replied: 'I could see that most of the

original sites are lost. Now you see sandbanks here and there in the Ganga. The original Navadvip was there.'²⁰

The Ganga and Jalangi rivers had shifted their courses so many times, submerging homes in some places and at the same time allowing new settlements on newly raised sandbanks, that they had wrought havoc in every aspect of the social and economic life of the people there. Now it is very difficult to ascertain the original site of Navadvip.²¹ The present Navadvip is on the western bank of the Ganga.

The pilgrims then began their return journey. Strangely enough, as the boat passed by some sandbanks, Sri Ramakrishna again went into ecstasy, and he returned to normal consciousness after the boat had left them behind. Observing this, Mathurmohan said: 'You are right, Baba. The original sites are under water. That is why your religious emotions were not manifest in the town. Whereas you experienced ecstasy as the boat passed both ways the same silted up shoals in the bed of the river.'²²

None should fail to note that one fallout of this pilgrimage was Sri Ramakrishna's impact on Mathur's attitude towards other religions. Sri Ramakrishna's relationship with Mathurmohan was quite unusual. At times he would even scold Mathurmohan, adopting perfectly a motherly pique, serious yet indulgent. Mathurmohan was a bigoted devotee of the Divine Mother and hated Vaishnavism. But the Master at last persuaded Mathurmohan to give up his sectarian attitude. He said: 'You ought to honour Gauranga [Sri Caitanya]. He who is your Durga is not different from Gauranga.' By the grace of the Master, Mathur finally came to realize that Gauri [Durga] and Gaur are but two manifestations of the same divine Truth.

In later days many of Sri Ramakrishna's close associates found joy in drawing parallels between the Master and Sri Caitanya. One of them was M., the chronicler of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. Recounting the incidents of one day when the Master was at Balaram Bose's house, M. said: 'That day Balaram's house was like Navadvip when Chaitanya lived there. On the verandah it was like Navadvip, and in the parlour it was like Vrindavan.'²³ We wonder what his reaction would have been on hearing that Sri Ramakrishna himself graced Navadvip with his presence, or that the subtle forms of Sri Caitanya and Sri Nityananda had merged into Sri Ramakrishna at Navadvip itself.

During the return journey, the boat stopped at Vahuda, and Sri Ramakrishna and Mathurmohan went to see the Divine Mother there. Sri Ramakrishna was quite satisfied.

The pilgrims also halted at Triveni, near the Hooghly, and Sri Ramakrishna took a holy dip there. It is primarily for this popular custom, which is something of a religious nature, that Triveni is known among pious Hindus. It is not recorded, however, if Sri Ramakrishna had any profound experience there. Thereafter the boat took them all back to the temple at Dakshineswar.

Needless to say, Sri Ramakrishna's visits to holy places was not for earning merit for himself or for strengthening his faith. All of his pilgrimages were strewn with blossoms of rich spiritual experiences, which he was always eager to share with competent persons. His profound experience at Navadvip verified the historicity of Sri Caitanya and helped detect the location of the holy spots associated with him. There he could perceive the fragrance of Sri Caitanya's presence and come under the spell of his reigning influence.

This is why the Hindu tradition recognizes a holy person like Sri Ramakrishna to be a living tirtha (holy place).



Notes and References

1. Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master, trans. by Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2nd rev. ed., 1956), 340.
2. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981), 549.
3. It was the residence of Kalinath Dutta. Its present municipal address is 26-D, Devendranath Mullick Lane, Calcutta.
4. He belonged to the Kartabhaja sect. His father was Utsavananda Vidyavagish. Sri Ramakrishna met him for the first time at Panihati during the 'Dandamahotsava.'
5. Gospel, 549.
6. According to Sashibhusan Ghosh, the party stopped at Kalna on their return from Navadvip. (Sashibhusan Ghosh, Sri Ramakrishnadeva [Bengali], 170) Kalna was recognized as a subdivisional town from September 1860. Still earlier, it was an important commercial river port.
7. It seems Ambika was originally a Jain goddess. Later she became associated with the Hindu goddess Sri Durga. Ambika-Kalna has been referred to by Vrindavan Das and other Vaishnava poets as Ambua. (Benoy Ghosh, Paschimbanger Sanskriti [Calcutta: Prakash Bhaban, 1957], 226) The present temple of Siddheswari was constructed by Chitra Sen in 1740.
8. Sri Caitanya is said to have rested at Tetultala in Kalna. Worship of Sri Caitanya was introduced first in Srikhanda and Ambika-Kalna.
9. Born in a village of Orissa, Bhagavandas Goswami walked to Vrindavan when he was a young man to meet the Vaishnava saint Krishnadas Babaji of Govardhan who became his guru. Following his guru's instructions, Bhagavandas went to Bengal and spent some years practising spiritual disciplines in a village near Chakdah. Later he finally settled in Kalna. (Haridas Das, Sri Gaudiya Vaishnava Abhidhan [Calcutta: (publ. by author), 1932])
10. In those days the temples were but two thatched cottages. They were later built of brick; also, a memorial for the monastery's founder-abbot, Bhagavandas Babaji, was built behind the temples. (Udbodhan [Bengali], vol. 63, no. 3, pp. 147-50)
11. Great Master, 574-75.
12. Udbodhan, vol. 63, no. 3, p. 150.
13. Haridas Das, Sri Sri Gaudiya Vaishnava Jivan (Bengali), II:194.
14. According to the Vaishnavas, criticizing a devotee is a grave offence, and much more so criticizing a great saint such as Sri Ramakrishna.
15. Gurudas Burman, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Charit (Bengali), 169.
16. M. (Mahendranath Gupta), the recorder of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, visited Bhagavandas Babaji fourteen years later in 1884. Learning that M. was under the loving protection of Sri Ramakrishna, Babaji said, 'You have nothing to worry about.' (Gospel, 449-50)
17. Gora, Gaur, and Gauranga are popular names of Sri Caitanya in Bengal.
18. Great Master, 573-74.
19. Swami Saradananda acutely observed, 'It was from the same high plane again that he . . . had the immediate knowledge of the existence down till today of the subtle presence of Sri Gauranga at Navadvip.' (Great Master, 590)
20. Ibid., 281. In support of Sri Ramakrishna's view we quote a relevant portion of Sri Satyendralal Mazumdar's research published in Sri Caitanya Janmasthan Vitarka, Tar Truti O Samadhan (Bengali, 1989):
'About 105 kms. north of Calcutta, the birthplace of Sri Caitanya in Nadia practically remained undisturbed till the last few decades of the eighteenth century. Major James Renel in his book Memoir of a Map of Hindostan (1788) mentioned, "During eleven years of my residence in Bengal (1764-1775) the outlet or head of the Zellinghy (Jalangi) river was gradually removed three quarters of a mile further down, and by two surveys of a part of the ancient banks of the Ganges, taken about the distance of a year of each other, it appeared that the breadth of an English mile and a half had been taken away." Thereafter the Vaidik Pali, in the northwestern part of Navadvip, comprising the paternal house of Sri Caitanya, was devastated by floods; the area reappeared as shoals of sand separating itself from the then township of Navadvip. When the sandbank got settled Gangagovinda Singh, Dewan of Warren Hastings, built temples for the worship of Sri Govinda, Sri Gopinath, Sri Krishna, and Sri Madanmohan, on the spot where Sri Caitanya is said to have been born. The temples were, however, swept away by the river in 1821. Bholanath Chandra in his book The Travels of a Hindu (1869), Jadunath Sarvadhikari in his book Tirthabraman (1857), W.W. Hunter in his A Statistical Account of Bengal (Vol. 1), testified to the

fact that the birthplace of Sri Caitanya was swallowed by the river. The Ganga formerly held a westerly course and the old Nadia was on the same side as Krishnanagar.'

[21.](#) Kumudnath Mallik, Nadia Kahini (Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 3rd ed., 1986), 280.

[22.](#) Sri Sri Ramakrishna Charit, 172.

[23.](#) Gospel, 498.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S VISIT TO EAST BENGAL

In Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master, by Swami Saradananda, we come across a reference to an incident in Sri Ramakrishna's life about which very little is known:

It was during this period that Mathur, accompanied by the Master, went to his zamindari estate and to the house of his Guru. . . . There the Master saw the extremely miserable condition of the men and women in a village and was very much moved. He invited them all and made Mathur give each of them oil sufficient to cool their head, a full meal and a piece of new cloth. Hriday said that this event happened at a place called Kalaighat, near Ranaghat, when Mathur, accompanied by him and the Master, was on a boat trip in the Churni canal.

Hriday told us that Mathur had his own home in the village called Sonabere, near Satkshira. The villages round it were then included in Mathur's estate, where he went with the Master. The home of Mathur's Guru was not far from this place. . . . The village was called Talamagro. On their way Mathur made the Master and Hriday ride on his elephant and himself went in a palanquin. Pleased with the loving service of the sons of Mathur's preceptor, the Master spent a few weeks there before he returned to Dakshineswar.¹

A critical investigation into this incident has revealed several hitherto unknown or unnoticed facts regarding Sri Ramakrishna's travel to the east:

(a) Among the biographers of Sri Ramakrishna who were his contemporaries were Swami Saradananda, Akshay Kumar Sen, Sashibusan Ghosh, and Gurudas Burman, all of whom have mentioned Sri Ramakrishna's visit to the village Kalaighata on the bank of the Churni River in the district of Nadia (in West Bengal). However, Swami Saradananda and Akshay Kumar Sen perhaps mixed this event up with Sri Ramakrishna's visit to Sonabere and Talamagro, both now in Bangladesh. This happened owing to the proximity in time of their occurrences and also because all those places are relatively close to each other. Moreover, on both visits the Master went as the guest of Mathurmohan Biswas, and Hriday Mukherjee, Sri Ramakrishna's nephew, accompanied him.

(b) It is known that Sri Ramakrishna travelled from Calcutta to Kalaighata by boat, and that he travelled to Sonabere and Talamagro in a horse-drawn carriage as well as a palanquin along Jessore Road and Basirhat Taki Road, and thereafter crossed the Icchamati River, which now forms the border in that area between Bangladesh and the Indian Union.

(c) According to the Great Master, Mathurmohan's guru's family lived in the village Talamagro. But Tala and Magura, or Magro, are two different villages on either side of the river Kapotaksha. This Magura, or Magro, is not the subdivisional town in the district of Jessore but a village in the Satkshira subdivision of the district of Khulna. Mathurmohan's guru's family lived at Tala.

(d) Based on the report of Hriday, the author of the Great Master has written that Mathurmohan had his own home in the village called Sonabere, near Satkshira. But our

enquiries have conclusively proved that Mathurmohan's native home was in the village of Bithari, or Bithiri. He was born there. Next to Sonabere is the village Madra, followed by Chanda, and then by Padmabil, lying on the bank of the Sonai. Across the river Sonai is Bithari, a village under the Swarupnagar police station, in the Basirhat subdivision of the 24-Parganas District of West Bengal (India). On the opposite bank of the Sonai is Bangladesh.

(e) The Great Master mentions that Sri Ramakrishna 'spent a few weeks' at Tala. But considering all relevant facts, we can safely presume that the entire trip took approximately three weeks.

It is strange that sincere and dependable biographers such as Ramchandra Datta, Mahendranath Gupta, Devendranath Basu, and Suresh Chandra Datta did not mention this trip, presumably because their accounts of Sri Ramakrishna's life were too brief for this rather unimportant event. Besides, most of them met Sri Ramakrishna in 1879 or later; and during this period Sri Ramakrishna probably did not mention this trip in the course of his conversations for the simple reason that it probably did not impress him. Also, Hridayram, who had to leave the Dakshineswar temple on June 12, 1881 (the day of the Snan Yatra, the anniversary of the consecration of the Dakshineswar temple), was not readily available to give a report of the trip.

It may be presumed that Sri Ramakrishna was not keen on making this trip or the trip to Kalaighata. His mind was, however, free from calculation, premeditation, or planning. He moved about in childlike obedience to the Mother's will. So when Mathurmohan urged Sri Ramakrishna to join him on both these journeys, the Master must have agreed. An analysis of contemporary events indicate that these trips, like the one to Kalna and Navadvip, had something to do with the premature death of the Master's nephew Akshay. Akshay, the son of the Master's eldest brother Ramkumar, had grown into a handsome and pious youth and was loved very much by Sri Ramakrishna. He died a few months after his marriage in 1869. To assuage the Master's grief and divert his mind, Mathurmohan decided to take Sri Ramakrishna with him on some trips—to Kalna and Navadvip, to his estate at Kalaighata in Ranaghat (West Bengal) for collecting dues, and to Tala and his estate at Sonabere, areas now in Bangladesh.

To clear the reader's mind of probable confusion created by the juxtaposition of the two distinct and different trips to Mathurmohan's estates, we may recall an important and well-known incident that took place during Sri Ramakrishna's trip to Kalaighata near Ranaghat. Our account of the event is drawn from Gurudas Burman's description of it.

Sri Ramakrishna went with Mathurmohan by boat to the latter's newly acquired² estate at Kalaighata, near Ranaghat. When they arrived a crowd of almost naked, emaciated, hungry people thronged the riverside to see the gentry. A terrible drought was ravaging the land, and the villagers had been in the grip of a famine for many months. Naturally the wretched condition of the famished people moved Sri Ramakrishna to bitter tears. On Mathurmohan's enquiry, the compassionate Master said: 'I can't stand to see the suffering of these people. You are a steward of Mother's estate. Give them each a piece of cloth and a good meal, and some oil for their heads.'

Mathurmohan found himself in an awkward predicament. He had come to supervise the

collection of taxes. No doubt, the crops had failed for the last two years and the tenants had been reduced to extreme misery; still he had expected to extract some money from his tenants. Guessing the situation, Sri Ramakrishna pleaded with Mathurmohan to remit their dues. Typical feudal landlord that he was, Mathurmohan tried to prevail upon Sri Ramakrishna, but the latter was inexorable. Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Well, do you think you are the owner of this estate? No, you are only a steward of the Divine Mother. These people are the Mother's tenants. You must spend the Mother's money for them. When they are suffering, how can you refuse to help them as much as you can? This is Mother's command.'

A reluctant Mathurmohan finally gave in. He had cloth brought from Calcutta and gave each person one piece of cloth and fed the people sumptuously for seven days. He also gave them some oil for their heads, and on the seventh day gave a quarter of a rupee to each of them. Sri Ramakrishna was very happy to see seven hundred hungry people eating together for seven days. Pleased to see his Master happy, Mathurmohan returned to Dakshineswar.³

In this context it would be good to take a look at the relationship between Mathurmohan and Sri Ramakrishna. Sometimes Mathurmohan would treat Sri Ramakrishna as his revered spiritual father, and sometimes as an innocent young boy entirely dependent on him. Explaining this, Swami Saradananda wrote:

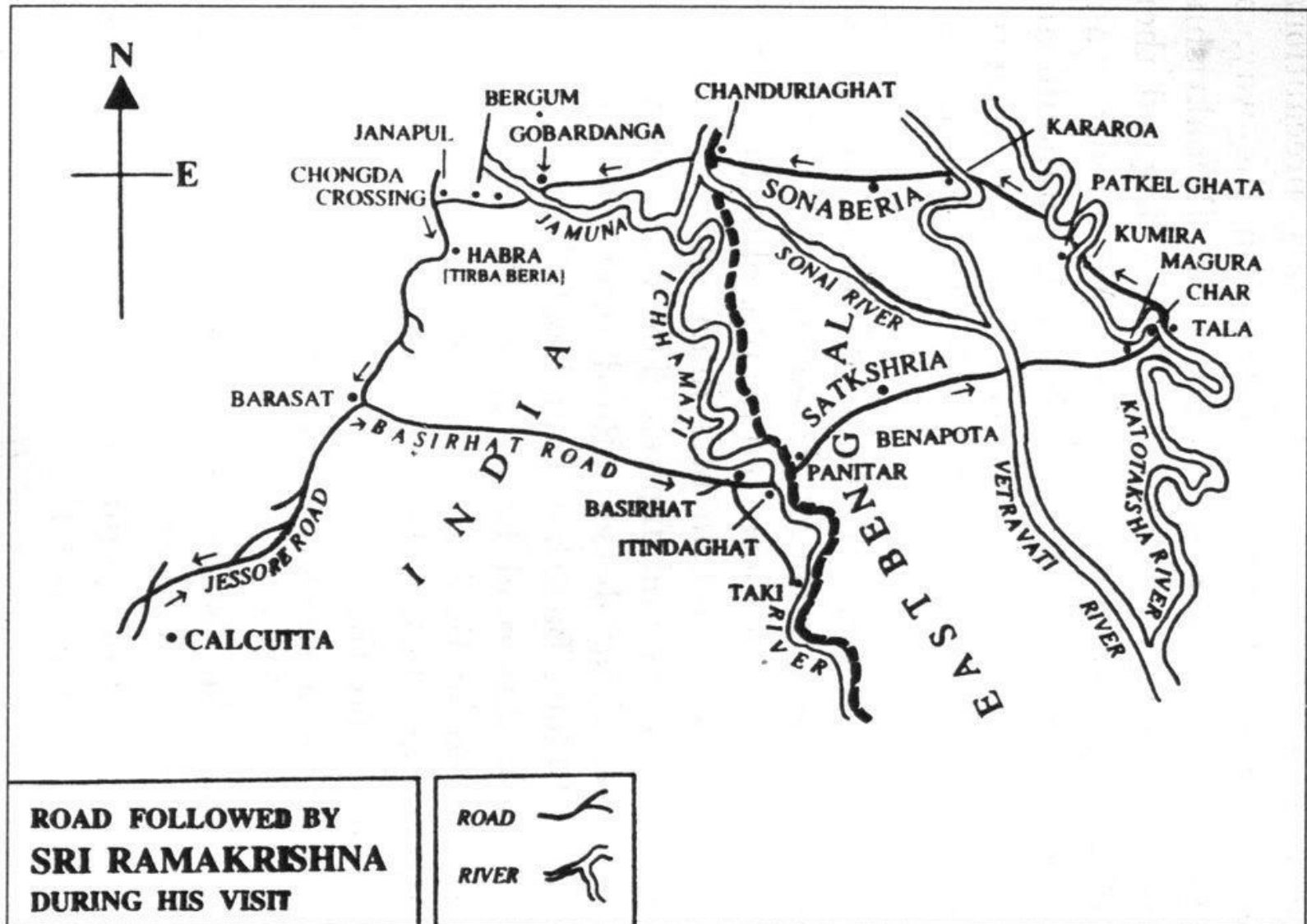
It is very clear that by virtue of the motiveless grace of the Master, Mathur's love was so intensified that 'father' became his very life. Besides that, it was his behaviour like that of a boy, which attracted Mathur in no small measure. . . . Is it, therefore, strange that there naturally arose in the powerful, vigorous and intelligent Mathur an effort to protect him in all circumstances? Therefore, just as on the one hand, he depended on the Master's divine power, so, on the other hand, he always kept himself ready to protect 'father' whom he knew to be like an inexperienced boy.⁴

This is why Sri Ramakrishna readily yielded to Mathur's views and suggestions and agreed to accompany him on these trips.

According to the Great Master, Sri Ramakrishna undertook these two trips to Mathur's estates some time after the death of Akshay, which happened in 1869. Mathurmohan himself passed away on 16 July 1871. So in all probability, Sri Ramakrishna visited Kalaighata (in West Bengal) during the summer of 1870, and East Bengal in the latter part of 1870 soon after Durga Puja. The rest of this chapter deals with the second trip. To help the reader get some idea of this journey, a map of the districts of Jessore and Khulna is given here.

Mathurmohan's trip with his party to East Bengal (now Bangladesh) was arranged in a royal manner and at great expense. Mathurmohan's entourage included Sri Ramakrishna, Hridayram, and a hundred other people, plus elephants, horses, horse-drawn carriages, and palanquins. Early in the morning of an auspicious day the party set out. A pink sun still hung low on the horizon. In spite of the elaborate arrangements and necessary precautions, the trip was not without mishap. On the way, at Deganga,⁵ the palanquin carrying Sri Ramakrishna gave way and the palanquin bearers dropped their burden. Sri

Sankra. A canal, about 23 miles long, stretches from there to Satkshira which was profitably used by traders to carry goods. But it would have been inconvenient for a caravan of elephants, horses, and palanquins to cross the Icchamati at this point.



On the other hand, one can conveniently cross the Icchamati at Itinda on the first route. On the opposite bank of the river lies Panitar, from where an eastward eleven mile road goes to Satkshira. From Satkshira there stretches northward a road leading to Patkelghata. On this stretch one has to cross the Vetravati River, or Budhhater gang (river), on the bank of which lies Vinipota, a large market place. Even in those days there were good arrangements for ferrying carriages, elephants, and horses.⁷ Crossing the river at Vinipota, travellers move on to Patkelghata, a town on the bank of the Kapotaksha River. On the other bank lies Kumiragram, a fairly large and prosperous village. Evidently Mathurmohan's team followed this route.

We presume Sri Ramakrishna, childlike as he was, peeped out of the door of his palanquin now and then to have a glimpse of the exquisite tapestry of Nature woven with yellow and green fields, the blue sky, and village scenes. At times his spirit would wander away, and at other times, perceiving the glory of God all around, he would be overwhelmed with ecstasy.

From Patkelghata to Tala there are two equidistant roads 14 miles long. The first,

starting across the river at Kumiragram stretches eastward to Tala, passing through Islamkathi, Nangla, and Gopalpur. On the second road, however, one does not have to cross the Kapotaksha River at Patkelghata. Instead, one travels through the riverside villages of Patkelghata, Achimtala, Chandkathi, Magura or Magro, Baruipara, and Char. Then, crossing the Kapotaksha at Char, one arrives at the village of Tala. Legends popular in the region, supported by evidence supplied by old people, lend credence to the claim that Mathurmohan's party followed the second route and not the first.

Tala was inhabited by several well-to-do Hindu families. Of them, the family of Ramachandra Basu was perhaps the richest and most powerful. Every year Durga Puja was celebrated on a grand scale in his house. Mathurmohan's guru's family lived in this village. There were also some affluent Muslim families living here.



Ruins of Candimandap, Tala

It is learnt that Mathurmohan's guru's family had migrated from Burdwan. One distinguished member of this family, Bharatchandra Bhattacharya, was a great Sanskrit scholar. Being a liberal man, Bharatchandra had initiated some of Mathurmohan's ancestors, who belonged to the mahisya caste, ignoring caste restrictions. Bharatchandra had to suffer much for this. As a mark of his respect, Mathurmohan donated 360 bighas of land to his guru and erected a large brick house for the family. There was also a chandimandap, which had a few rooms on each side of the main hall. It overlooked a pond that had concrete embankments, and it was an impressive structure. In front of the chandimandap was a bel (vilva) tree on which the Bodhan puja of Goddess Durga used to be performed. It is said that Sri Ramakrishna watched the daily worship of Mother Chandi held in the chandimandap. Another place associated with Sri Ramakrishna is the Kalitala, which is a short distance to the west of the house of Mathurmohan's guru's family. Like other Kalitalas, it had a jeul (odina wadier) tree. According to the village legend, Sri Ramakrishna sat under the tree and was lost in ecstasy.⁸

Being a vijñani (a fully-illuminated soul), Sri Ramakrishna often behaved like a boy of

five. About two miles before the party reached their destination of Tala, he was seized with the idea of riding the elephant which Mathur was then riding. He again and again insisted, 'I want to ride the elephant.' Because of the dangers of the rough road Mathurmohan dissuaded him from it.⁹ However, according to Hriday, on reaching Tala Mathurmohan satisfied Sri Ramakrishna's boyish wish by having him seated on the elephant.



Jeul tree under which Sri Ramakrishna sat, Tala

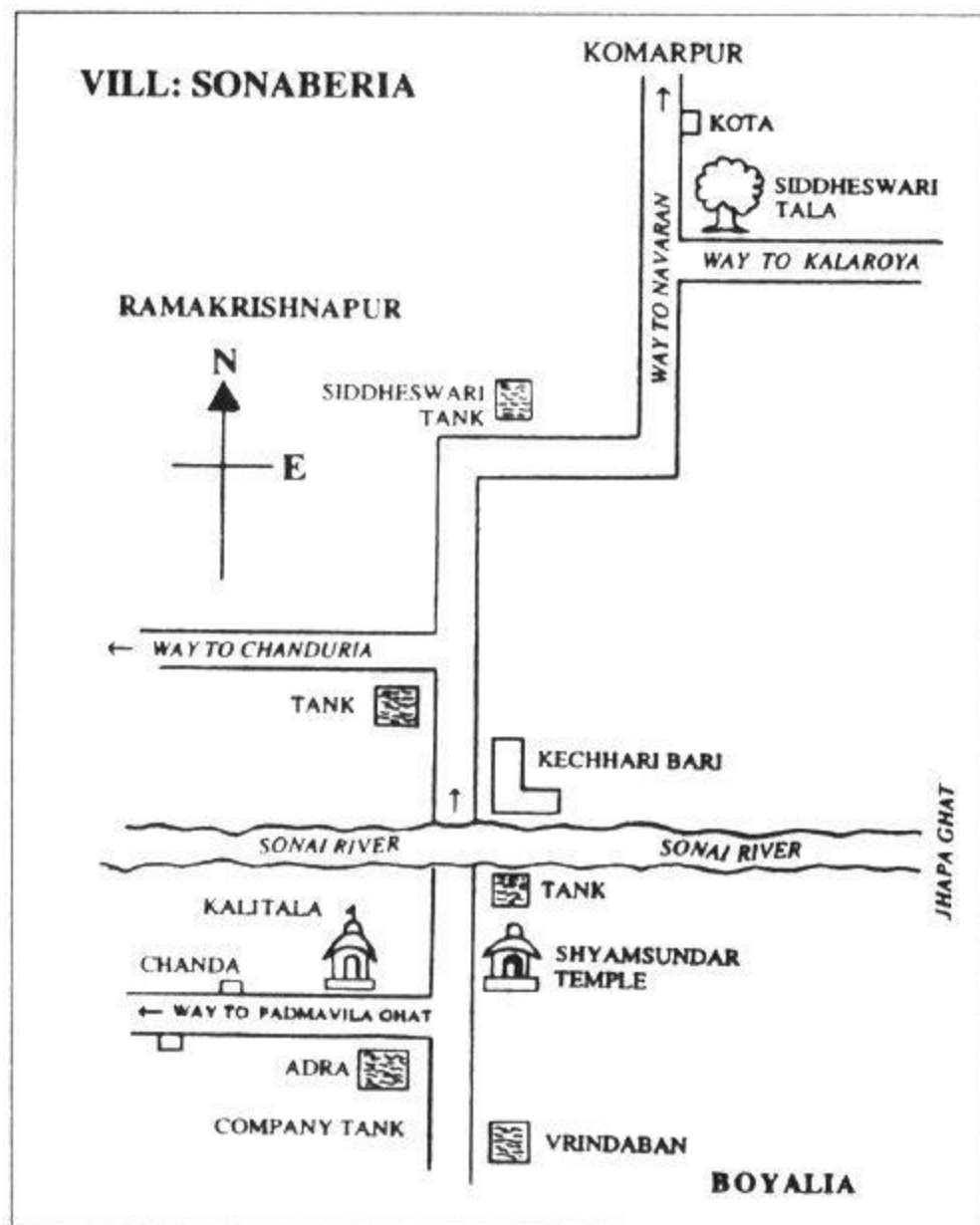
The immediate purpose of Mathurmohan's visit was to settle a long-standing dispute among the members of his guru's family. As Sri Ramakrishna was also looked upon as Mathurmohan's guru,¹⁰ he received a red carpet reception. Indeed, his presence created a sensation. Following the local custom, honoured guests were served the heads of large fish at their meals. Seeing such a large fish head on his plate, Sri Ramakrishna recoiled and said: 'I feel disgusted. It looks like a cow's head.' Mathurmohan intervened and stopped the serving of such fish heads to him afterwards.

Sri Ramakrishna stayed happily at Tala for perhaps a week. And it can be safely presumed that Mathurmohan succeeded in amicably settling the family dispute.

Mathurmohan's party next moved on to Sonabere, about eighteen miles from Tala. The road from Tala to Patkelghata passes through Kumira. Twelve miles northwest of Patkelghata is Kalaroa, a police station of the Satkshira subdivision, on the bank of the

Vetravati River. From Kalaroa, going along a southward road for some distance, one goes five miles west to reach Sonabere. Following this route the party arrived at Rani Rasmani's kacheri (zemindari office) at Sonabere.

The village scenery was enchanting, and, as was his wont, Sri Ramakrishna lost himself in the joy of divine revelation through nature. Sonabere was in the police station of Kalaroa, and it has four roads diverging from it—to Navaran 16 miles to the north, Satkshira 15 miles to the south, Kalaroa 5 miles to the east, and Chanduria 6 miles to the west. The Sonai River flows east to west through Sonabere. Nowadays it primarily serves as a canal for drainage. The Chowdhurys had once been the zemindars of the village, Dhananjay Chowdhury having established this estate. The Chowdhury's family deity was Shyamsundar. As the family's financial conditioned deteriorated, Rani Rasmani purchased the estate. The Great Master says, 'The villages around it [Sonabere] were then included in Mathur's estate, to which he took the Master.' The two-storied, L-shaped, brick kacheri, which the Rani had purchased from the Sannyals, had on each floor three rooms with a wide verandah in front. The driveway connecting the kacheri with the main road was shaded by bakul and bel trees.

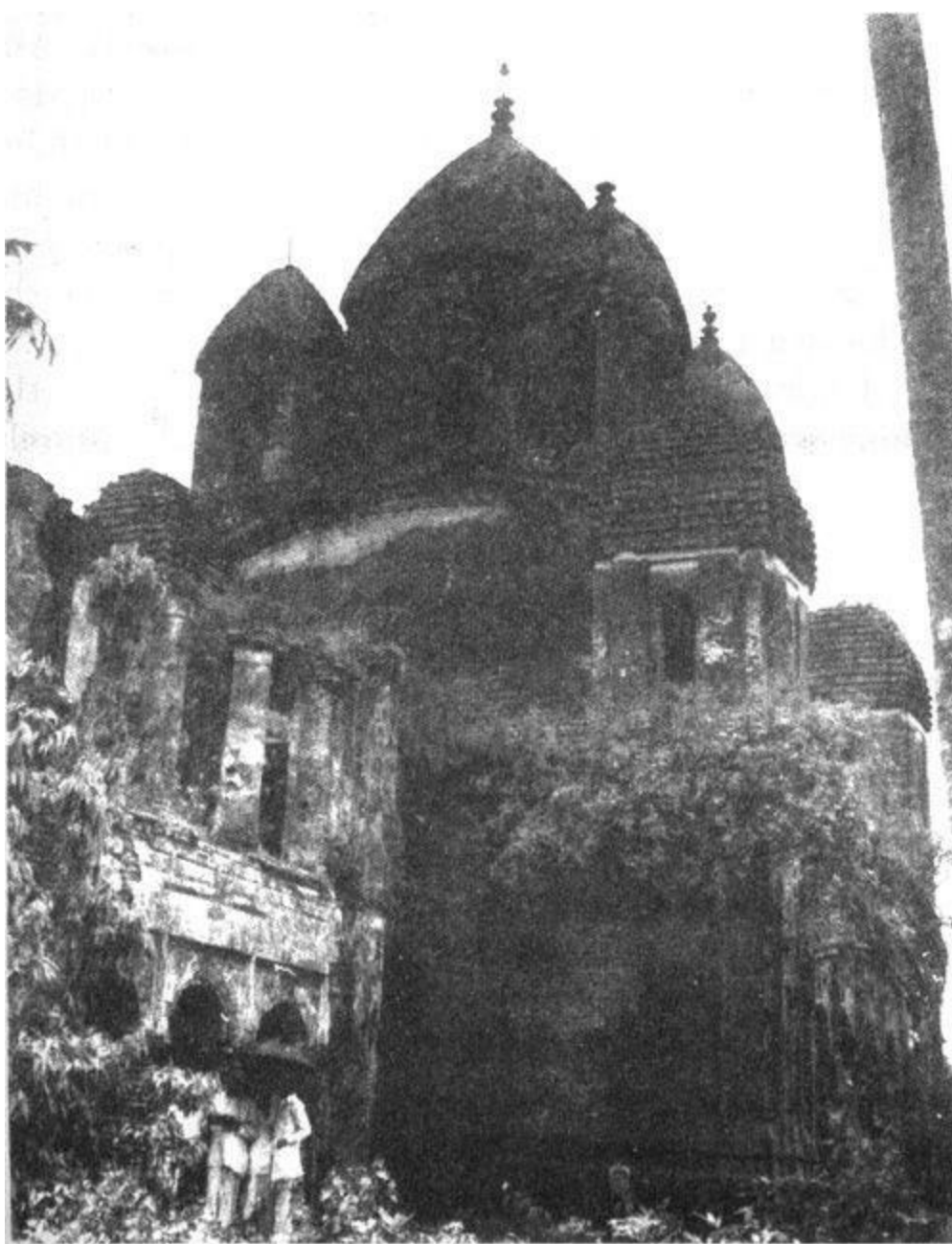


Passing through a tall gateway, flanked on either side by a high wall, Sri Ramakrishna's palanquin moved to the house. The estate people, who were waiting for the party, approached and greeted him with humble cordiality. Sri Ramakrishna and Mathurmohan stayed in this house. About 150 yards west of the house is a large pool with a concrete landing. This house was the residence of the nayeb (steward) of the estate. Even now one can see lying idle on the ground floor a large palanquin, requiring sixteen bearers, that was used by the nayeb of this estate.



Shyamsundar temple (front view), Sonabere

There were four holy places in Sonabere: (a) Mathbari, (b) Kalitala, (c) Vrindavan, and (d) Siddheswaritala. Mathbari is a beautiful temple to Shyamsundar (Krishna). The building has nine turrets in the pattern of the Bhavatarini temple of Dakshineswar, and it was built by Hariram Das in 1767. On the first floor is the shrine (the garbha mandir). Close to the temple, to the west, is a two-storied building called the bhogaghar. Two other temples are in front of the Shyamsundar temple—one of Budo Siva and the other of Sada Siva—and in between them is a small jorbangla (a two-roomed shrine). To the east of the main temple is another Shiva temple having four rooms with a Shiva linga in each.¹¹ Every year on Nil Puja day, in February-March, a large fair is held which still draws thousands of people.

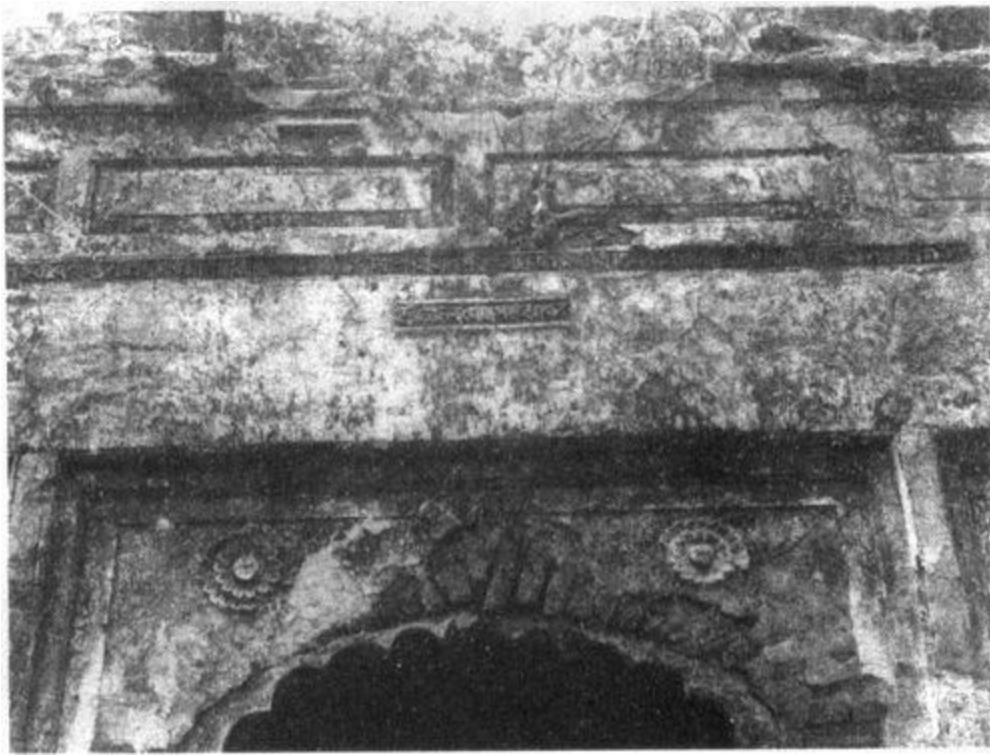


Shyamsundar temple (side view), Sonabere

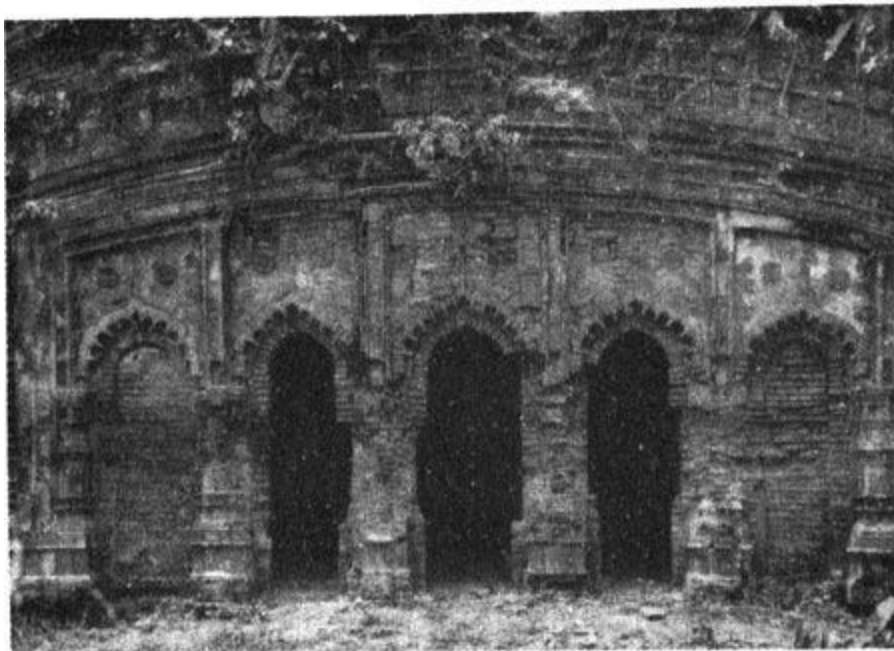
Kalaitala is a raised terrace on which the worship of Mother Kali is performed at different times of the year. Vrindavan is the temple of Vrindavanbehari (Sri Krishna), who is worshipped by a mahisya family with the title of Kapat. And Siddheswaritala is another holy place where stands a pair of bel trees with a platform built around them. Surrounded by a compound wall, the courtyard has an entrance on the southern side and a room with a veranda on the northern side. Close by is the Siddheswari pond.

Charak is a popular festival held at the Siddheswaritala in the month of Caitra (March-April). Local people claim that the worship performed there has always been blessed by the fall of one or two bel leaves on the platform, as a sign of the Divine Mother's grace. Even the European residents belonging to the silk kuthis (business offices) at Sonabere and Budan had witnessed it.¹² Local legends say that during the days of Rani Rasmani and Mathurmohan, on the occasion of the Charak festival, these fallen bel leaves were collected and without delay carried by a horseman to the Janbazar residence of Rani Rasmani in Calcutta. Anyone visiting Sonabere now is certain to hear of another village

legend—that Sri Ramakrishna, sitting under the bel tree, sang several soul-enthralling songs and went into samadhi.



Bhog ghar of Shyamsundar temple, Sonabere



Entrance to Shyamsundar temple, Sonabere

Old people of Sonabere say they heard from their forefathers that Sri Ramakrishna and Mathurmohan had come there from Kalaroa in a palanquin and on an elephant respectively. Many people gathered at the kacheri to have a glimpse of Sri Ramakrishna. Some came out of curiosity, and others to question and learn. But after a few moments in his presence, even a sceptic was forced to admit that behind the Paramahamsa's veil of

simplicity and childlike humility, the light of knowledge was shining. His presence caused quite a stir in the village and created an air of festivity. Mathurmohan had come on an inspection tour and had some duties to attend to. But Sri Ramakrishna, free from encumbrances, moved about like a child of the Divine Mother, as he did at Dakshineswar.

During Sri Ramakrishna's stay at Sonabere an amusing incident happened. A short distance away was the village of Kota, where a number of brahmin families lived who had originally hailed from U.P. and Bihar. Among them was Bamacharan, who was well known for his scholarship. He was deeply impressed with Sri Ramakrishna and used to visit him daily. One day he approached Mathurmohan with an amusing proposal. He said: 'I am begging for the Paramahansa. Please make a present of him to us. I would like to present him before the assembly of scholars.' Mathurmohan was very annoyed and replied: 'How can I make a present of him? Besides, what do you mean? Is he really under my thumb?' Sri Ramakrishna, who was sitting nearby, said, 'Please don't utter such a thing again.'¹³



Siddhesvari tala, Sonabere

After some time Mathurmohan prepared for the return journey, taking a different route. Sri Ramakrishna left Sonabere, leaving behind a host of sweet memories for the local people. Mathurmohan's arrangements were elaborate as usual. A six-mile journey through the villages of Ramakrishnapur, Srirampur, and Chandanpur took the party to Chanduria, an old market place on the bank of the Icchamati River. Crossing the Icchamati there, they passed through Garjana, Chalundi, Panchpota, Suthe, and Khantura to reach Gobardanga.¹⁴ Next, crossing the rivulet Jamuna, the party reached Lakshmipur. From there they moved through Bergum, Janakul, and other places to reach Tababeria (Habra). Lakshmipur and Tababeria are six miles apart, the old roadside trees at Janakul-Payaragachi indicating the age of the road. This road meets the Jessore road one and a half miles before Habra.

When the party reached Tababeria some problems cropped up. Mathurmohan had

some apprehensions which proved to be true. The horses, being tired and annoyed, began to neigh, and the party was forced to halt there for the night.¹⁵ It seems there was rain on the way, and it was difficult for the horses to walk on the muddy road. It also seems that Sri Ramakrishna and Mathurmohan were travelling in hackney carriages which had been waiting for them at Chanduria ghat. The party at last reached Calcutta the next day without further problems.

Around 1881, Khulna and Bagerhat, from the district of Jessore, and the Satkshira subdivision of the 24-Parganas district were brought together under the newly created district of Khulna. So, in terms of the present boundaries, we may say that Sri Ramakrishna visited parts of the two districts of Khulna and Jessore now in Bangladesh.¹⁶



Notes and References

1. Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master, trans. by Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2nd rev ed. 1956), 280-81.
2. Sashibhusan Ghosh, Sri Ramakrishna Deva [Bengali] (Calcutta: Udbodhan, B.Y. 1332), 324.
3. Gurudas Burman, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Charit [Bengali] (Calcutta: Udbodhan, B.Y. 1333), I:139-42.
4. The Great Master, 458-59.
5. Deganga, otherwise known as Diganga, included in the ancient Jessore kingdom, now lies along the Barasat-Hasnabad railway line. It was well known as Gangareja, or Gangabandhan. (See, Satish Chandra Mitra, Jessore-Khulnar Itihas [Calcutta: Dasgupta & Co., 3rd ed.], I:181-82.)
6. From Hridayram's reminiscences narrated at Baranagore Math, Exercise Book, p. 159.
7. Later, a bridge was constructed here.
8. Gathered from the travel records of Swami Paradevananda, head of the Ramakrishna Ashrama, Bagerhat, Bangladesh. The author is also indebted to him for the photographs published with this article.
9. There is another version: Swami Brahmananda heard from Sri Ramakrishna that the latter had travelled to Tala on an elephant.
10. Mathurmohan used to treat Sri Ramakrishna as his revered spiritual father.
11. One Shiva linga was of white marble, while the remaining ones were of touchstone.
12. These Europeans used to trade in silk and cotton products. The East India Company maintained two offices—one at Sonabere and the other at Budan near Satkshira. See, Jessore-Khulnar Itihas, (2nd ed.) II:699.
13. M.'s diary, p. 146.
14. There is yet another route of about seven miles, from Gobordanga to Talaberia via Icchapur and Gaighata. The party did not follow this route.
15. M.'s diary, p. 146.
16. The author wishes to acknowledge here the help he received from Sri Nandulal Chakravorty of Lokashiksha Parisad, Ramakrishna Mission, Narendrapur, in collecting the details of the route followed by Mathurmohan and his party.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S VISIT TO THE SHYAMSUNDAR TEMPLE AT Khardah

In India, even great saints and Incarnations of God, who are themselves centres of people's worship and pilgrimage, visit holy places as if they were ordinary devotees of God. The very thought of it strikes us with awe. These great souls are able to penetrate into and perceive the subtle spiritual layers of the pilgrimage places. Thus, their visits add to the glory of these centres and people's faith in the centres increases. One such pilgrimage centre is the holy shrine of Shyamsundar at Khardah. Here Sri Ramakrishna enjoyed the manifestation of Shyamsundar in his own unique way.

Khardah is situated on the bank of the holy Ganga about twelve miles north of Calcutta. It is an old prosperous town and is one of the railway stations in the Sealdah-Ranaghat section under the Sealdah division of Eastern Railway. Formerly the town was included in the Barrackpore South Municipality, but now it is its own Municipality. From Calcutta one can go to Khardah by bus or by other means of transportation via Barrackpore Trunk Road. Goswamis are the principal as well as the oldest inhabitants of Khardah. Now, of course, people having other titles—such as Shiromani, Bhattacharya, Bose, Ghosh, Biswas, and Sikdar—also live there, as well as members of the mahisya and vyagrakshatriya communities, and carpenters, barbers, confectioners, blacksmiths, potters, washermen, and domes (who tend cremations). There is also a community of Mohammedans living there now. At Rahara, near the Khardah railway station, there is a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission, and there is a public auditorium on the bank of the Ganga.

The main inspiration behind the holy shrine at Khardah was Prabhu Nityananda. In fact, he was responsible for the birth of the pilgrimage centre itself. There Nityananda, the principal associate of Sri Caitanya, started his mission of love to all, irrespective of caste, creed, or social position. We would do well, therefore, to examine briefly the relationship of Nityananda with Khardah.

In 1478, eight years before the birth of Mahaprabhu Sri Caitanya, Nityananda was born in the village of Ekachakra, in the district of Birbhum. His father was Mukunda Ojha and his mother was Padmavati. Their family title was Vatavyal. When Nityananda was only twelve years old he renounced his home and set out on pilgrimage as an avadhuta (an all-renouncing ascetic) in the company of a saint. After an extensive pilgrimage throughout the country, he reached Mathura at the age of thirty-two. From there he went to Navadvip, where he stayed at Nandan Acharya's home and met Sri Caitanya.

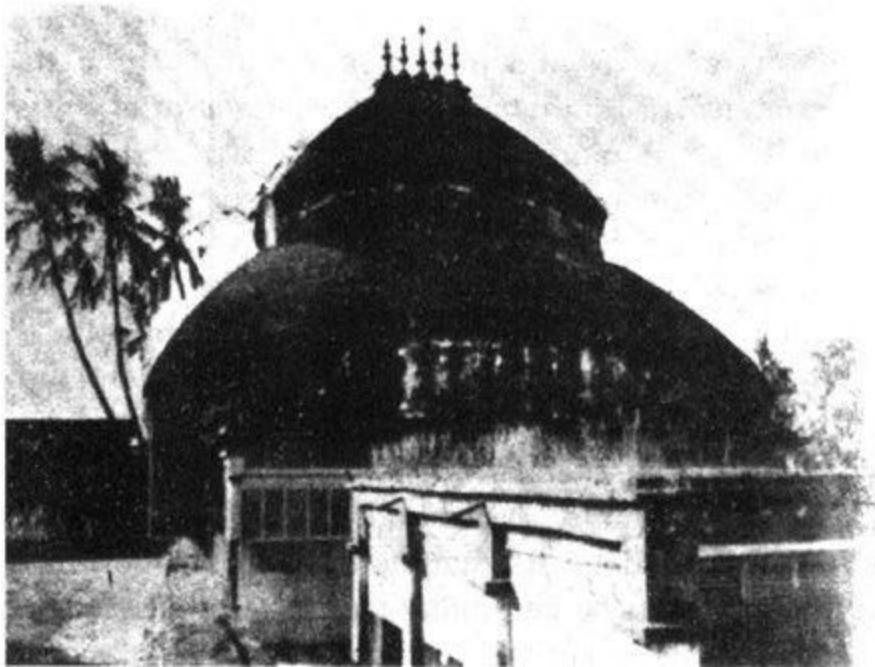
By then, Sri Caitanya had dedicated himself to his mission of love for the benefit of humanity, and Sri Nityananda took a leading role in helping him. Nityananda gradually became the principal organizer and preacher of the movement. It was he who proclaimed Sri Caitanya to be the reincarnation of Sri Krishna and introduced the practice of worshipping Gauranga (Sri Caitanya) in all the Vaishnava homes. The devotees believe that Balaram, Sri Krishna's brother and main companion in Vrindavan, was reincarnated

as Prabhu Nityananda to assist Sri Caitanya at Navadvip. Both of them are worshipped together as Gaur-Nitai.

At Sri Caitanya's request, Nityananda became a householder and married the twin daughters—Vasudha and Jahnava—of Suryadas Pundit in the village of Shaligram. A number of legends are current concerning the marriage. It is said that in deciding the matter, Prabhu Nityananda manifested his supernatural powers.

Along with his family, Sri Nityananda moved from place to place—from Navadvip to Shantipur, and again to Saptagram. Then, responding to the sincere entreaties of his friends and relatives, he agreed to settle down at Khardah. It is said that Nityananda requested the local landlord to give him some land on which he could build a house, but the landlord, instead of agreeing, threw a piece of straw (khar) on the Ganga and told him derisively to live there. Through the supernatural powers of Nityananda, a piece of land soon rose from the riverbed on the spot where the straw had been thrown. He then built a house, which came to be known as Kunjavati, and began to live there with his family. Since then the village has been known as Khardah ('an abyss under a straw'—its earlier name being Chatra).

The three deities—Bankimdev, Tripurasundari, and Anantadev—which had been worshipped in Prabhu Nityananda's ancestral home in Birbhum, were brought to Kunjavati and worshipped there. Now, Tripurasundari and Anantadev are worshipped at the Shyamsundar temple at Khardah, while Bankimdev is being worshipped at the village of Nota. By his wife Vasudha, Prabhu Nityananda had a son named Virabhadra and a daughter named Ganga. For many years he preached Caitanya's religion of love and then departed from this world in 1545 at the age of sixty-eight. His descendents belong to the Goswami lineage.



Shyamsundar temple, Khardah

The greatest attraction at Khardah now is Shyamsundar, the image installed by Virabhadra. But we should first learn something about Nityananda's son, who was a great

devotee of Sri Caitanya and who also preached his religion of love and service. Virabhadra married both daughters, Srimati and Narayani, of Yadunandan Acharya. By his wife Narayani, he had a son named Ramchandra and three daughters. Once a man named Rudraram obtained a large stone from the Badshah (the Mogul emperor) of Gaur and had three beautiful images—Shyamsundar, Radhaballav, and Nandadulal—made from it. Virabhadra was greatly attracted to the image of Shyamsundar and begged for it, but Rudraram refused to part with it. Some days later, when Rudraram was performing a shraddha ceremony at his home for his deceased father, the sky suddenly became overcast with dark black clouds and it started raining heavily. The torrential rain, along with strong gusts of wind, was about to ruin the shraddha ceremony. Virabhadra was present there as a guest, and he used his supernatural powers to save the site of the ceremony from the rain and wind, enabling Rudraram to perform the ceremony in peace. In gratitude, Rudraram presented the image of Shyamsundar to Virabhadra. According to another version of the story, Virabhadra himself pleased the Badshah of Gaur and secured the stone to make the image of Shyamsundar.

The historian W.W. Hunter gives the following account: A devotee named Rudraram lived at Srirampur. Upon receiving a divine command he went to the palace of the Badshah of Gaur, where he informed the Hindu Prime Minister that the stone above the entrance door of the royal palace had to be taken down as it was sweating. Both the Prime Minister and the Badshah looked at the stone. Apprehensive of some calamity, the Badshah gave orders for the stone to be removed. Rudraram then asked the Badshah for the stone, and it was given to him. While putting the stone on a boat, however, it fell into the river, and through an act of God it was swept away by the current and deposited in front of Rudraram's house at Srirampur.¹

Of the three images made from the stone, the image of Radhaballav was kept at the village of Ballavpur, near Srirampur. Virabhadra installed the second image, Shyamsundar, at Khardah.² While the third, Nandadulal, was installed at the village of Sainvona, about eight kms. from Khardah. It is said that the image of Shyamsundar was carved by a man named Rambhadra Das.

After bringing the image of Shyamsundar to Khardah, Virabhadra installed it in a temple at Kunjavati, his ancestral house. When the old temple began to decay a new one was built, and Shyamsundar was reinstalled there with the same daily service and worship. The present temple, it is said, was built by Pateswari Mata. Once the reigning Badshah had her husband arrested and brought to the capital. In order to secure his release, Pateswari Mata raised funds from her disciples. Meanwhile, however, her husband was freed for lack of evidence and he returned home. The entire amount that was raised was then used for building a new temple.



Shyamsundar shrine, Khardah

Built some time around 1751-52 (1673 Saka), the Shyamsundar temple was formerly embellished with beautiful terracotta designs, but those designs have since been destroyed by successive repair work done on the temple over the years. In spite of this, however, the temple is very graceful. It is fairly large and has eight spires, and it faces east. Within the inner shrine is a silver platform on which the images of Shyamsundar (Lord Krishna) and Sri Radhika stand. While the image of Shyamsundar is made of stone, Sri Radhika's image is made of an alloy of eight metals. A sprawling natmandir is in front of the temple, where day and night the sounds of devotional songs, recitations from the scriptures, and discourses reverberate. The different branches of Prabhu Nityananda's descendants take up the worship and service of the deities by rotation.³

Along with Shyamsundar and Sri Radhika, other deities are also worshipped in the inner shrine: Tripurasundari; an image of Nilkantha Shiva (Shiva with a 'blue throat'), which is studded with emeralds and other gems; and Anantadev, a shalagrama shila (a black stone representing Vishnu) which has natural marks on it of fourteen wheels. Also kept in the shrine are a handwritten Punthi by Prabhu Nityananda and a piece of a broken club used by Sri Caitanya at Nilachal (Puri).⁴

Eventually Shyamsundar began calling Sri Ramakrishna, and his call was irresistible. Sri Ramakrishna remembered the repeated invitations of Yadavkishore to come to Khardah, and finally on Wednesday, 29th July 1874 (14th Shravan 1281 B.S.—a full moon day) the Master went to have the blessed sight of Shyamsundar. The visit was at the request of the Goswami family of Khardah. Yadavkishore Goswami was born in the thirteenth generation of the family of Prabhu Nityananda. He was very dear to Sri Ramakrishna and occasionally visited the Master at Dakshineswar. Yadavkishore was also the favourite student of 'Nyaya Ratna' Upendramohan Goswami, the author of Siddhanta Ratna. Later, he studied under 'Nyaya Ratna' Mahesh, the principal of the Sanskrit College, and in 1879 he obtained the 'Vidya Ratna' degree in literature.



Yadav Kishore (standing, left) and some members of his family

In The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, M. gives an interesting description of Yadavkishore's relationship with Sri Ramakrishna. Once Sri Ramakrishna went with some devotees to the Star Theatre, on Beadon Street, to see a performance of the drama Chaitanya Lila by Girish Chandra Ghosh. Yadavkishore also joined the group. During the performance, Sri Ramakrishna went into deep samadhi listening to a song. M. wrote: 'The orchestra played on. Gradually his mind came down to the relative plane. In the mean time a young man of Khardaha, born in the holy family of Nityananda, had entered the box. He was standing behind the Master's chair. Sri Ramakrishna was filled with delight at the sight of him. He held his hand and talked to him affectionately. Every now and then he said: "Please sit down here. Your very presence awakens my spiritual feeling." He played tenderly with the young man's hands and lovingly stroked his face.



Yadav Kishore Goswami

'After he had left, Sri Ramakrishna said to M.: "He is a great scholar. His father is a great devotee of God. When I go to Khardaha to visit Syamasundar, the father entertains me with sacred offerings such as one cannot buy even for a hundred rupees. This young man has good traits. A little shaking will awaken his inner spirit. At the sight of him my spiritual mood is aroused. I should have been overwhelmed with ecstasy if he had stayed here a little longer.'" ⁵

Hearing of the deep attraction a true Vaishnava feels for another Vaishnava, we are simply amazed.

We learn from the reminiscences of the descendants of the Goswami family that one morning Yadavkishore and his brother Harikishore took a small boat to Dakshineswar and found to their surprise that Sri Ramakrishna was all ready to go to Khardah. Though there had been no previous arrangement, the Master seemed to know they were coming. The Master was then taken to the boat and it left. The boat reached Khardah before 10:00 in the morning and moored at Balakhola Ghat (the old ferry ghat at Khardah). Some devotees stood in rows on the bank of the Ganga, and the Master walked flanked by them. The proposal of Yadavkishore to take a carriage was turned down by Sri Ramakrishna, as he preferred to walk. In a short time they reached the precincts of the temple where the Master went into ecstasy. The devotees were filled with delight,

realizing the divine presence of Sri Caitanya within Sri Ramakrishna. As the Master steadied himself, he was brought before the deities, and he gazed at them with singular attention. He then said softly, 'Ma, you're playing the flute?' and again went into deep ecstasy.⁶

By that time the morning service to the deities was over. Annabhog (offering of rice and other food) would be offered with formal worship at 11 o'clock. Sri Ramakrishna remained there with the devotees, absorbed in devotional songs and talk, until the annabhog to Shyamsundar was finished. He was then escorted to 'Balakhana', the home of the Goswami family, where he sat in the southwest corner of the drawing-room, which was on the first floor of the building. On that day, in accordance with the schedule of rotation, the service and worship of the deities was performed by the family of Yadavkishore. Yadavkishore himself, as well as all the members of his family, served Sri Ramakrishna with great devotion and care, and the Master was entertained with the delicious prasada (offered food) of Shyamsundar. The Master was also very much pleased to accept the prasada. After taking rest there for a while, he returned to Dakshineswar.⁷

Sri Ramakrishna's visit to the Shyamsundar temple added a new dimension to the pilgrimage centre at Khardah and rekindled the devotional fervour of the devotees there. To them, Shyamsundar, Sri Caitanya, and Sri Ramakrishna were one. The Shyamsundar temple is situated on the bank of the Ganga, where devotional songs in praise of Sri Krishna and Sri Caitanya, along with the sayings of Sri Ramakrishna, stir the hearts of the devotees even today. And there are devotees today who make a circuit of the pilgrim centres of Belur Math, Dakshineswar, and Khardah.



Notes and References

1. W.W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Bengal (Delhi: D.K. Publ. House, 1973), vol. 1.
2. Another story claims that the image of Shyamsundar was installed and consecrated by Prabhu Nityananda himself. A reference to that effect is in the book Nityananda Vansavistar, by Sri Vrindavan Das. And the book, Sri Sri Nityananda Sakti Ma Jahnava, by Nemaichand Goswami, also supports this view.
3. In earlier days twenty-two seers of rice were offered for the annabhog. This was later reduced to eleven and a quarter seers. At present five seers of rice are offered.
4. On both walls of the main entrance leading to the inner shrine of the temple, photographs of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Ma Sarada Devi are now hung.
5. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, translated by Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981), 555-56.
6. According to the printed account given by Sri Srishkishore Goswami, grandson of Yadavkishore, Sri Sri Shyamsundar, since he was first worshipped, always assumes the form of Shyama (Kali) on the night of Shyama worship. Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Shyamsundar as Kali is also mentioned by Brahmachari Akshay Chaitanya. According to him: 'On one occasion the Master went to Khardah from Dakshineswar accompanied by Pundit Yadavkishore Goswami of Nityananda's family. Seeing the image of Shyamsundar, he said to Yadavkishore, 'What? You've brought me to see Shyam only to show me Kali?' After taking the delicious prasada of the deity, he was happy and said, "Ah! you have entertained me with prasada worth one hundred rupees!"' (Brahmachari Akshay Chaitanya, Thakur Sri Ramakrishna [Bengali])
7. In the reminiscences of Sri Srishkishore Goswami, dated 31.3.97, it is said: 'Once in 1874 AD (14th Shravan, 1281 B.S.) Sri Sri Ramakrishnadev, accompanied by my grandfather Yadavkishore Goswami, came to the temple of Sri Sri Radha-Shyamji. On that day it was our turn for the worship and service to the deity. After the worship Sri Sri Thakur was highly satisfied as he took prasada at Balakhana, our ancestral house. We have heard about it so many times from my grandmother and from my father, Nemaikishore Goswami, who personally witnessed the incident. Swami Punyananda of

the Rahara Ramakrishna Mission knew of it and he would talk about it.'

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S VISIT TO BALI-DIWANGANJ

The district of Hooghly, being a low-lying region with heavy rainfall and intersected by three large rivers and numerous small streams, suffers from occasional floods. Bali-Diwanganj, on the right bank of the Dwarakeswar River, is a still lower area, and it quietly bears the heavy brunt of these natural calamities. Devastating inundations as well as the partial failure of crops in 1883 and 1897 no doubt hindered the development of the region. Yet there were some remarkable incidents in the history of the village which people continue to cherish. One such incident we shall narrate here.

The village of Bali-Diwanganj (named thus to distinguish it from Bally, or Bali, in Howrah) lies six miles from Arambag. The Bali hat (market), two kilometres from Diwanganj, is held twice a week and is a popular trading centre. Once a flourishing village, its fabrics of tussar and rangina (made from silk, tussar, and cotton), which were marketed in North India as well as outside India, have shown a decline in sales in recent times.¹ Household utensils made here also used to be in demand, particularly pitchers made of brass and bell-metal, but these handicrafts too are no longer popular. Cotton fabrics, however, as well as products made from horn are still produced. According to the 1901 census, eighty-two per cent of the population were Hindus belonging to numerous castes.

In the sadgop caste (one of the lower castes) there was a family named Modak who ran a confectionery business. As chance would have it, the Modak family was most unexpectedly blessed by the unheralded visit of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, who stayed in their cottage for three days. This was the most remarkable incident in their family history.

Sri Ramakrishna was indeed remarkable. World-renouncing sannyasins considered him the ideal sannyasin, and righteous householders regarded him as the ideal householder to emulate. Yet Sri Ramakrishna always differentiated between conduct appropriate to householders with families to protect and support, and conduct proper for renunciates. To the renunciates he taught the strictest principles of renunciation. But to the householders he taught the delicate balancing act between attachment for and detachment from things of this world. He was already well known as the spiritual guide of Mathurmohan Biswas, the son-in-law of Rani Rasmani, and his teachings were proclaimed by Keshab Chandra Sen, who respected him as a spiritual giant. He also had by this time a following of devoted disciples. But Sri Ramakrishna was unconcerned about such achievements and lived the life of an innocent child sitting on the lap of the Divine Mother.



Banshidhar Modak's house, Bali - Diwanganj

From 1877 (1283 B.Y.) Sri Ramakrishna visited Kamarpukur once a year for four consecutive years. Usually he left Dakshineswar on the fifth day after the Snanyatra festival (in June-July) and returned before Durga Puja (in September-October).² During these three months the high tide in the Ganga would rise above the river embankment, making the floor of Sri Ramakrishna's room damp and practically uninhabitable. Besides Kamarpukur, he would also visit Jayrambati and Hriday's home in Sihore. The last trip must have happened before 1881,³ as Hridayram, the Master's nephew, served as the manager for the trip. Hridayram had to leave the Dakshineswar temple and the Master's service on 12th June 1881 (the day of the Snanyatra festival, the anniversary of the temple's consecration) after incurring the wrath of Trailokyanath Biswas (Mathurmohan's son) for worshipping his young daughter's feet.

Among these four trips, the last one was unique and of special interest. This was the only time he travelled to Kamarpukur via boat, and it was the only time he is known to have travelled with Sri Sarada Devi. Moreover, according to M. (in the Bengali Kathamrita), on the Master's last trip in 1880, instead of leaving in June or July, he left on 3rd March (21 Phalgun) and returned to Dakshineswar on 10 Oct. (25 Ashwin). In 1880, Sri Ramakrishna's birthday fell on Friday, 12 March, so he was most likely in Kamarpukur on that day.

In those days there was regular steamer service between Calcutta and Ghatal. Circumstantial evidence, however, suggests that on this trip Sri Ramakrishna travelled from Calcutta to Bandar, and from there by another boat along the Dwarakeswar river to Bali-Diwanganj.⁴ Senior and knowledgeable people of the locality say that in those days there were two possible river routes between Calcutta and Bali-Diwanganj. Early in the morning a steamer of the Hore Miller Co. used to leave Armenian ghat at Calcutta. It then entered Rupnarayan, an important river, at Geokhali. After crossing Kolaghat in the

afternoon, it carried the passengers to Ranichak.⁵ Then one could take another boat and reach Bandar by early evening. The alternate route was to take the steamer from Calcutta to Ghatal and then another boat to Bali-Diwanganj.

Hriday told M. that they had travelled by country boat and the fare was ten rupees. M. recorded this in his diary.⁶ We get a few more interesting details of this trip from the lips of Sri Sarada Devi which Nikunja Devi in turn passed on to her husband, M. Sarada Devi had told her: 'We travelled together by boat to Bali [Diwanganj] and from there to Kamarpukur. On this trip we ate together, we sang songs in chorus, and we shared prasad [offered food].'

One day during this trip Sri Ramakrishna told Holy Mother, 'I know who you are, but I shall not disclose it right now.' Another day, pointing to his own body, he told her, 'In here you will find everything.' Perhaps Sri Ramakrishna was hinting that the Divine Mother was enshrined within him.

The Modak family at Bali-Diwanganj was prosperous, and the members of the family were known for their righteousness. Both Banshidhar, the head of the Modak family, and his wife, Giribala,⁷ had endeared themselves much to the villagers. Banshidhar had just completed the construction of a cottage for the family, and he greatly cherished the hope that it could be sanctified by the presence of some holy person before the family formally occupied it. His desire was fulfilled most unexpectedly.



Shrine room of Banshidhar Modak's house

Sri Ramakrishna's party reached Bali-Diwanganj before dusk, but by then it was raining heavily. Hriday went to find some shelter for them for the night, and he heard of Banshidhar Modak's pious resolve. Hriday approached him, and Banshidhar welcomed them warmly. Happy to have Sri Ramakrishna and his party as his guests, Banshidhar and his wife began serving them, although they perhaps did not know then the identity of their guests. Banshidhar ran from door to door in the pouring rain to collect suitable food.

The next morning Hriday wanted to start for their destination, much against Banshidhar's pleading that they should stay for at least three days. But as it continued raining the party remained. In the mean time the identity of the visitors was disclosed and the news spread. Goswami brahmins and Vaishnava devotees came to the house and listened to the Master's words. Gradually the villagers flocked to the house, singing the

glory of Sri Krishna and dancing. The house turned into a mart of joy. According to the Punthi, the fortunate ones among the crowd were blessed with the vision of Sri Ramakrishna in the form of Sri Krishna—wearing a yellow silk cloth, a crown of peacock feathers, and playing the flute.⁸

As if to fulfil Banshidhar's cherished desire it rained incessantly for three days, so Sri Ramakrishna remained at his house. On the fourth day the sky became clear, and the Master, with Sri Sarada Devi and Hriday, left for Kamarpukur. It is presumed that Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother went by palanquin and Hriday on foot.⁹ But, for the Modak family of Bali-Diwanganj, those were never-to-be-forgotten days. Those memories have not only inspired the succeeding generations of the family, they have also become part of the local legend which people there remember with joy and pride.¹⁰



Notes and References

- ¹. Amiya Kumar Banerjee, *Gazetteer of India: West Bengal* (Hooghly, 1972), 286-87.
- ². Information given to Brahmachari Akshay Chaitanya by Lakshmi-di, Sri Ramakrishna's niece. (See, Brahmachari Akshay Chaitanya, *Thakur Sri Ramakrishna* [Bengali], 189.)
- ³. Akshay Kumar Sen's claim that this happened before Sri Ramakrishna met Keshab Chandra Sen in 1875 seems to be incorrect.
- ⁴. Brahmachari Akshay Chaitanya, *Sri Sri Sarada Devi* (Calcutta: Calcutta Book House, 7th edn.), 40.
- ⁵. L.S.S. O'Malley in his *Bengal District Gazetteers* (Hooghly, 1912, p. 202) says, 'Another line of steamers runs from Armenian Ghat (Calcutta) to Ranichak in the Midnapore district, opposite the point where the boundaries of the Hooghly and Howrah districts meet.'
- ⁶. M.'s diary (unpublished), p. 147.
- ⁷. This information was from Banshidhar's great-grandson, Dulal Modak, and his aged mother when the author met them at their residence in 1980. Dulal Modak was running a cycle-repair shop.
- ⁸. Akshay Kumar Sen, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi* (Calcutta: Udbodhan Office), 3.11.
- ⁹. According to the Punthi, Sri Ramakrishna went straight to Sihore (Hriday's native village) and not to Kamarpukur. Circumstantial evidence does not seem to corroborate this claim.
- ¹⁰. The descendants of Banshidhar have placed photographs of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda in one of the rooms, which they use as their family shrine.

GOD'S ENCHANTING PLAY

Attraction and repulsion play eternally in this universe. In the insentient realm, one object attracts another object. And in the sentient realm, sentient beings attract one another. But with human beings especially there is a sense of love and affection that underlies such attraction. The sages of the Upanishads unravelled the mystery behind this and said, 'Atmanastu kamaya sarvam priyam bhavati—Everything appears loving and dear because of the Self (the Atman),¹ on whose existence depends the existence of everything.

The feeling of love and affection is intensified, however, when the omniscient Lord descends to play among human beings in a human form. In devotional scriptures his play is called *lilavilasa*, 'divine sport', and it is enacted by taking the help of *yogamaya*. Both *maya* and *yogamaya* manifest an inexplicable power of attraction and bewitchment. *Maya* casts its spell on people who have outgoing minds and care nothing for God, while *yogamaya* draws the devotees of God closer to him. It is said in the *Vaisnavatosani* commentary on the *Srimad Bhagavata*, '*Yogamaya parakhyacintyasaktih—Yogamaya is the power of the supreme Consciousness, the Self.*'² It helps human beings become drawn to God. God needs nothing for himself. Nevertheless, he indulges in various divine sports out of his overflowing joy, for in distributing the bliss of his supreme Self, he tastes his own bliss.

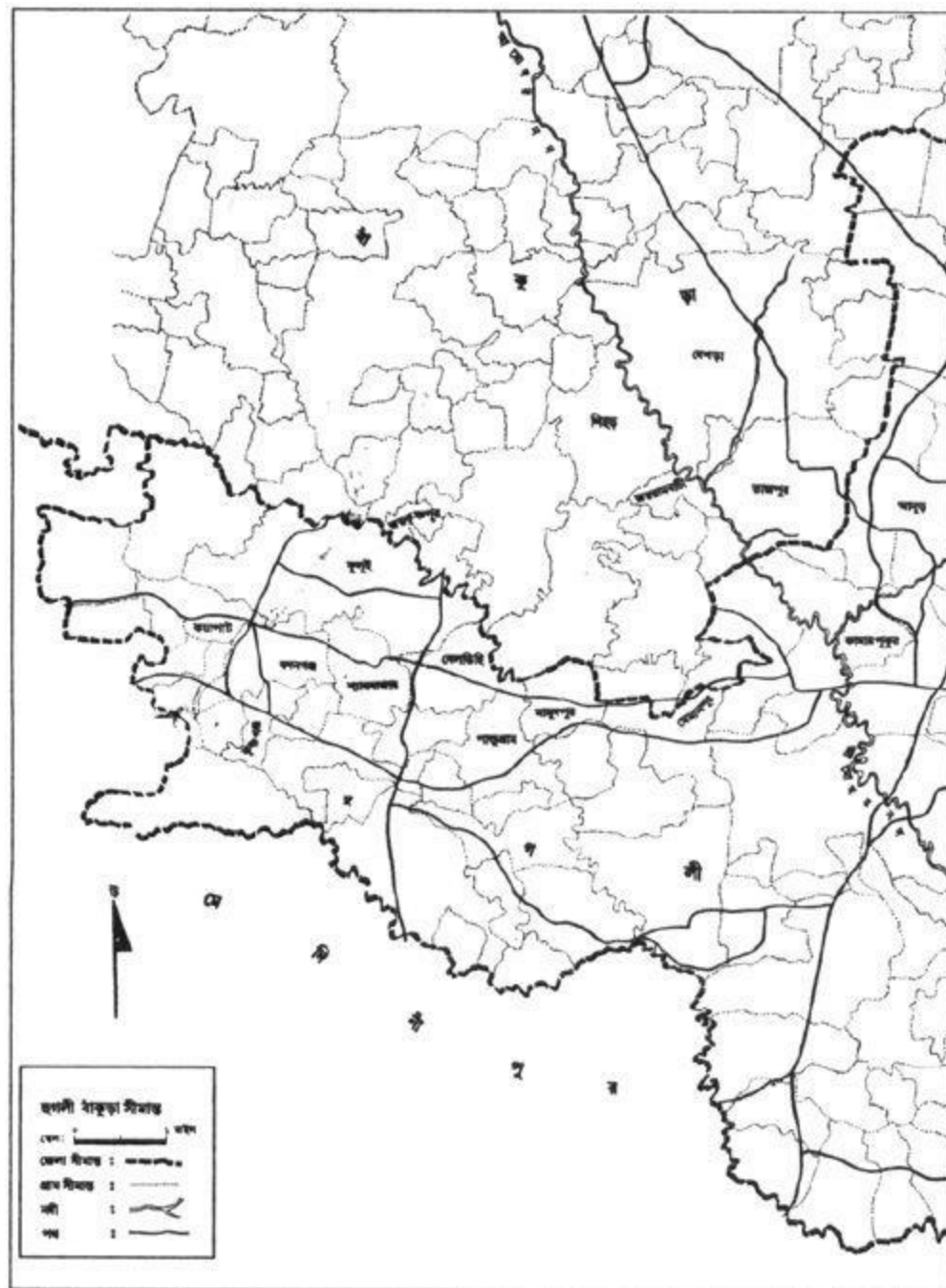
Vaishnava scholars say there are three ways that *yogamaya* works in the play, or *lila*, of an Avatar: There is the *maya* that draws him towards the creation (*unmukhamohana*), the *maya* that draws him away from the creation (*vimukhamohana*), and the *maya* that makes him forget his Self (*atmamohana*).³ God himself becomes bewitched by *atmamohana*, and this is how he plays. Sri Ramakrishna once said, 'But the Incarnation of God puts a bandage over His eyes by His own will, like children playing blindman's buff.'⁴ This is why the Avatar's *lila* is so mysterious yet at the same time so attractive.

In recent times, the omniscient Lord appeared as Sri Ramakrishna in Kamarpukur, a remote village about one hundred kilometres northwest of Calcutta, the then capital of British India. Kamarpukur is situated close to the meeting point of four districts of West Bengal—Hooghly, Bankura, Burdwan, and Midnapore. After spending his childhood and adolescence in Kamarpukur, Sri Ramakrishna lived most of the rest of his life just outside Calcutta, in the temple garden of the Divine Mother Kali at Dakshineswar. People from all walks of life came there to meet him. They were drawn to him, just as bees are drawn to the beauty and fragrance of a fully blossomed lotus.

In order to understand the significance of Sri Ramakrishna's divine sport, it is necessary to understand the circumstances in which it was enacted. India was then under British rule after having been plundered for centuries by successive hordes of Sakas, Huns, Pathans, and Mughals. Exploited and often tortured by greedy foreign rulers, the common people were living in poverty and ignorance, with rampant epidemics. At the same time, those who received Western education were encouraged to throw the old value-systems to the wind. Some wanted to uproot all religious faith from people's minds, while others

wanted to replace their faith with yet another religious creed. However, rural India was for the most part untouched by such crazes.

A large portion of the rural population of West Bengal near Kamarpukur comprised primitive aborigines and scheduled castes within the Hindu society. The vitality of Jainism had dried up by the twelfth century. And though the Pal dynasty had formally espoused Buddhism, the influence of this religion also did not last long. Indeed, the reawakening of the brahminical religion that had swept the country during the fourth and fifth centuries had greatly influenced this part of the country. Before Sri Caitanya's religion became popular in Bengal, traditional Hindus worshipped Shiva, Shakti, and Vishnu (Vasudeva). Tantric cults flourished at this time, though most people were hardly aware of them. Popular religious cults helped their growth.



Area near Sihore

With the advent of Sri Caitanya a new spirit was infused into religion. There is no doubt

that many of the associates of Sri Caitanya—such as Nityananda, Advaitacarya, Uddhakaran Datta, and Kamalakar Piplai—played important roles. But it was mainly Srinivasa and Narottama who were responsible for the popularity of the new Vaishnava religion in some areas of Bengal. The oppressive King Veer Hambir had a change of heart after being initiated by Srinivasa. A couplet composed by the king himself bears this out: 'The heart of Veer Hambir ever meditates on Vrajapur, where millions of bees fly about humming.'⁵ The patronage of this royal family brought about a renaissance in the fields of religion, literature, art, and architecture.

One of the important developments of this new religion was the change in Vaishnavism itself. The four-armed Vasudeva, bearing the conch, discus, mace, and lotus, was replaced by Kalosona (the Precious Black Jewel—a name of Krishna), or Nanicora (the Butter-Thief—Krishna as a child), or Shyama Ray (the Blue King—another name of Krishna). And by the side of Krishna appeared Radhika, the embodiment of divine bliss. Sri Caitanya was said to be the manifestation of both Radha and Krishna together. In describing the religion of love propagated by Sri Caitanya, Krishnadas Kaviraj wrote, 'When attraction for Krishna is very deep, then only can it be called true love [prema].'⁶ Sri Caitanya's divine play manifested devotion and love in profusion.

There is no denying the fact that the encounter between two vastly different cultures—Aryan and non-Aryan—and their gradual merger over time, brought about many changes in people's lives. Many high-caste Hindus began worshipping non-Aryan deities, such as Dharma Thakur, Manasa, Pashupati (Shiva), and Sitala, and at the same time, primitive aborigines became deeply influenced by Hinduism, especially by the religion of love preached by Sri Caitanya.⁷ Yet underneath these developments there also flowed, unnoticed by most people, another spiritual movement—that of mystic sadhana. This was a nationwide movement and was found even in rural areas. About this, Dr. Sashibhusan Dasgupta wrote: 'Side by side with the commonly known theological speculations and religious practices there has been flowing in India an important religious undercurrent of esoteric yoga practices; . . . when associated with the speculations in Bengal Vaisnavism the same esoteric practices have been responsible for the growth of the esoteric Vaisnavite cult, known as the Vaisnava Sahajiya movement.'⁸

Mystic sadhana became so deeply rooted in the country that even the religious reawakening that took place after the advent of Caitanya could not stem the tide of its growth. On the contrary, the meeting of these two movements gave rise to new communities such as the Aul, Baul,⁹ Neda, Kartabhaja, Sain, Daravesa, etc. While discussing Sri Caitanya, Akshay Kumar Datta mentioned thirty such communities.¹⁰ At least a few practitioners from each of these communities lived in the area where Sri Ramakrishna was born. One can find references to these communities in page after page of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, indicating that the Master was well acquainted with them. Moreover, not content with acquaintance alone, Sri Ramakrishna examined the views and practices of all of them in the light of his own vast experience and magnanimous outlook and, when necessary, directed many of their followers towards higher paths.

According to the communities of mystic sadhana, there are three grades of

practitioners: the beginner (pravartaka), one advanced in spiritual disciplines (sadhaka), and the liberated (siddha). Then there are five states associated with those practitioners: nama, mantra, bhava, prema, and rasa. Nama and mantra are associated with the pravartaka; bhava with the sadhaka; and prema and rasa with the siddha.¹¹ Sri Ramakrishna observed that the Bauls describe the state of perfection as sahaja, or the 'natural state'. There are two signs of this state: First, the perfect man will not 'smell of Krishna', which means that he keeps all his spiritual feelings within. Second, he is like a bee that lights on a lotus but does not sip its honey. This means that he may be in the company of a woman but he has no attachment. He has completely mastered his senses.¹²

Sri Ramakrishna said: 'The Bauls do not like the worship of an image. They want a living man. That is why one of their sects is called the Kartabhaja. They worship the karta, that is to say, the guru, as God.'¹³ He also observed: 'Many of the Bauls follow a "dirty" method of spiritual discipline. It is like entering a house through the back door by which the scavengers come.'¹⁴

But he also found that many men and women of these communities had advanced in spiritual life. One was Saday Babaji, who was a good singer of devotional songs. The other was Sari or Sarasvati Pathar, who probably lived at Sihore. Once Sri Ramakrishna said: 'The people of a particular community dine in the houses of people of their own community, but won't take food in houses of those not belonging to their community. The Mallicks dined at Sari's house but refused to eat at Hriday's house. They said, "He's a jiva." I went to their house [that is, the house of the Mallicks] one day with Hride. What a healthy tulsi bush grew in the courtyard! They offered me some fried peas and puffed rice, and I took some of it. Hride took a good quantity and fell ill afterwards.'¹⁵

Such was the environment of rural West Bengal when Sri Ramakrishna was born. Once when he was just a child he had the vision of the goddess Vishalakshi. He later said, 'Since that day I have been an altogether different man.'¹⁶ From then on he spent much of his time absorbed within himself, lost in a world of divine thoughts. After coming to Dakshineswar, he attained an even greater state of divine inebriation and realized that the Blissful Mother of the universe, the essence of Consciousness, abides everywhere and in everything. He then practised spiritual disciplines following the scriptural injunctions of the Puranas, the Tantras, and the Vedas, and those of Islam and Christianity as well. In each path, he reached the ultimate realization. He also became established in the supreme knowledge of Brahman.

As it is not possible for the mind to remain continually in the state of non-dual Brahman, the Divine Mother commanded Sri Ramakrishna to keep his mind in bhavamukha, a state between the Absolute and the relative planes of existence. Before that, the driving force of his life had been to realize God in different aspects. But for the rest of his life, his mission was to help others realize God. He then freely distributed the bliss of the Self, impelled by the overflowing joy within him. The devotees also were overjoyed to get a taste of supreme love. Sri Ramakrishna once told them: 'Do you know why God incarnates Himself as a man? It is because through a human body one can hear

His words. He sports through it. He tastes divine bliss through a human body.^{'17}

With his mind almost continually in an ecstatic state, Sri Ramakrishna would sing, cry, dance, or talk about God. At other times he would worry about the devotees or grieve over people's sufferings. In countless ways he delivered the afflicted and the sinners. But above all, he distributed pure divine love to everyone, regardless of caste or creed. His appearance in Bengal, which was already steeped in the love of Sri Caitanya, naturally gave rise to speculations that he was the reincarnation of that great soul. The devotees perhaps remembered the promise given by Sri Caitanya in the Sri Sri Caitanya Bhagavata: 'I will manifest my wonderful play once more. My form will be that of bliss during the singing of the glory of God.'¹⁸

Even earlier, sankirtan, or group singing of the name of the Lord, had been predicted in the Srimad Bhagavata.¹⁹ There it is mentioned that in the kali yuga the Lord will be worshipped through the sacrifice of group singing (sankirtan yajna). This was introduced by Sri Caitanya. It was not known earlier. It is said in the Sri Sri Caitanya Bhagavata, 'Lord Sachinandan [Sri Caitanya] sings to teach others what sankirtan is.' Standing on the crest of a wave of bliss, as it were, Sri Caitanya laughed and cried and sang and danced, his heart overflowing with love and his voice choked with emotion. And the force of his love and devotion overwhelmed the devotees, who were carried away by the surging waves of joy.

Sri Ramakrishna re-established this practice of devotional singing at Dakshineswar, as well as at the Harisabha in Calcutta, at the holy shrine at Panihati, at the Chariot Festival at Mahesh, and also in some remote villages in the Bankura and Hooghly districts of West Bengal. Whoever saw him in ecstasy felt that he was another Caitanya. Sri Ramakrishna himself said: 'Or again, I would be absorbed in Gauranga [i.e., Sri Caitanya]. He is the harmonization of two ideals: the Purusha [the conscious principle] and the Prakriti [primordial Nature]. At such times I would always see the form of Sri Gauranga.'²⁰ Gauranga was said to be 'Krishna within' and Radha without' (antah Krishna bahih Radha)—that is, the states of Purusha and Prakriti merged in one.

According to Ramchandra Datta, 'The exalted fervour of Sri Ramakrishna's dancing and singing cannot be compared with anything other than that of Sri Caitanya.'²¹ Observing Sri Ramakrishna in an ecstatic state during a sankirtan at Balaram Bose's house, M. wrote, 'It appeared as if Chaitanya himself were dancing with his devotees, intoxicated with divine love.'²² And describing Sri Ramakrishna's ecstatic state as he danced before the chariot at Mahesh, Akshay Kumar Sen said, 'The Lord of the Universe was lost within himself.'²³ Girish Ghosh also wrote, after seeing the Master's dancing: 'The whole world was shaking under the spell of that ecstasy. It wasn't Nadia alone—everything was shaking. There is no doubt that whoever saw that dancing was immediately drawn to the divine.'²⁴

These descriptions of Sri Ramakrishna's ecstatic moods are, no doubt, good, but none of these writers—Ramchandra Datta, M., Akshay Kumar Sen, or Girish Ghosh—had the good fortune to witness the Master's bewitching lila that had taken place a few years earlier in some villages near his birthplace. Perhaps it was because he wanted this play to

be enacted to its utmost that he chose for its location these rustic, remote villages, away from the constraints of urban manners and decorum.

Some time before going to these villages, Sri Ramakrishna was in Dakshineswar and a desire arose in his mind to have a vision of Sri Caitanya with 'mass singing down the city lanes, captivating one and all'. Soon after, he was standing on the northern verandah of his room when he saw—not in a trance, but with his physical eyes—Sri Caitanya amidst a sea of people, singing and dancing. Coming from the direction of the Panchavati, between the banyan and bakul trees, the procession turned and went towards the main gate of the Dakshineswar temple. In the words of the Sri Sri Caitanya Bhagavata, 'Millions and millions of voices were raised, and the great sound "Haribol" filled the heaven, the earth, the nether world, one and all.'²⁵ The procession moved quickly. In the centre was Sri Caitanya, with Nityananda and Advaitacarya on either side. Sri Caitanya's ecstatic state flooded all vicinity. Some people in his party were laughing, some were crying, others were shouting 'Haribol', and still others were dancing. They were swimming in the waves of divine bliss. Sri Ramakrishna also was totally absorbed in the mood of Gauranga, and he was surprised to observe the bewitching power of the sankirtan.

But to taste divine bliss all alone is not the reason an Avatar comes to this world. He is always eager to help others taste this bliss and to draw the ignorant towards the lotus feet of God. That is why wherever he goes there is a mart of joy and people all around get some experience of divine bliss. There are, however, different manifestations in the divine sports of the Avatars. In the life of Sri Ramakrishna, it was in the remote villages of Fului and Shyambazar that his divine lila burst into full glory.



Hriday's house, Sihore

Soon after Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Sri Caitanya's sankirtan, he left for Kamarpukur. With the onset of the monsoon, the water at Dakshineswar used to become undrinkable, and the high tide also would overflow the banks of the river, making the Master's room damp. That is why he would go to Kamarpukur at that time and also spend a few days at Hriday's house at Sihore. Sihore is an old, prosperous village situated to the south of the Kotulpur police station. Hridayram, the third son of the Master's second cousin, was only

four years younger than him. Both of them had been employed at the Kali temple in Dakshineswar at the same time. At Hriday's house in Sihore the deity Shridhar was worshipped daily. A building for religious purposes (a chandimandap) was in front of the house, and at the Master's suggestion, sankirtan used to be organized there. Kedarnath Mukhopadhyaya, whose house was just north of Hriday's, was but a boy in those days, but many people later heard about those kirtans from him.



Family shrine (Candimandap), Hriday's house, Sihore

Quite a few stories are told concerning the Master's visits to Sihore. During the last part of his first four years of sadhana at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna spent some time at Kamarpukur. While there, he went one day to Hriday's house at Sihore in a palanquin. Under the deep blue sky lay a vast field filled with paddy, green and dark blue in colour. Suddenly two beautiful young boys came out of his body. Sometimes they walked along slowly, and at other times they ran playfully here and there. Sometimes they would go far off into the fields in search of wildflowers, and at other times they would walk beside the palanquin. They constantly laughed and joked and talked. After some time they came back and entered the Master's body. About a year and a half later, Bhairavi Brahmani came to Dakshineswar. Hearing about this vision, she said, 'My child, what you have seen is all true; Chaitanya is manifest this time in Nityananda's sheath [body].'²⁶

On another occasion Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Once, at Sihore, I fed the cowherd boys. I put sweets into their hands. I saw that these boys were actually the cowherd boys of Vrindavan, and I partook of the sweets from their hands.'²⁷

In both of these incidents the aura of Caitanya is clear. The importance of Caitanya in Sri Ramakrishna's divine play is indisputable, and so is the village Sihore.

In the southern part of Sihore stands Naphar Barujje's house. Naphar was very devout and had implicit faith that Sri Ramakrishna was his Chosen Deity. He had two sons—Digambar and Hriday. When Digambar was managing the family, they became fairly wealthy and the present house was constructed. His estates were spread over seven or eight mahallas (i.e., large plots of land) and brought in much income. Every day their family deity, Shridhar, was worshipped in a small but beautifully-designed building. In the

days of Naphar the building had mud walls. There was also a thatched chandimandap, but it was destroyed in a severe storm. An eight-spired thatched building was then constructed in its place, and later the thatched roof was replaced by one made of tin. The goddesses Durga and Kali were worshipped in that building. Naphar most likely organized sankirtans there in his day, as he was an expert kirtan singer. ²⁸ On several occasions Sri Ramakrishna participated in sankirtans there, ²⁹ and the stories of those days are greatly treasured by the family.



Sridhar temple, Naphar Barujje's house, Sihore

Many people of the brahmin-dominated village of Sihore thought Sri Ramakrishna was illiterate, and the Pundits ignored him. But once during one of the Master's visits something happened to open their eyes. Before narrating this incident the author of the Punthi says, 'Unless one sees the manifestation of divine power, faith doesn't grow in one's heart.' A group of brahmin Pundits of Khanakul had come to Sihore on some business. One day they met the Master and began arguing with him about some point in the scriptures. How Sri Ramakrishna dealt with them is described in the Punthi thus: 'Like a valiant lion, the Lord cut to pieces all abstruse theories that defied explanation. In simple words and with the help of numerous examples, he removed all doubts. Even the dullest person could not fail to understand.'³⁰

The renowned Pundits at last admitted defeat. Moreover, the Master's words made a deep impression on their hearts. The news soon spread far and wide, and as the days passed people started flocking to Hriday's house to enjoy the blessed company of the Master. The author of the Punthi wrote: 'Like one link of a chain that pulls along with it the rest of the chain, scores of people began coming to see the Lord.'³¹ Sometimes Hriday invited brahmins or Vaishnavas and gave them a feast. And occasionally he took the Master to some nearby villages where there were sankirtans.

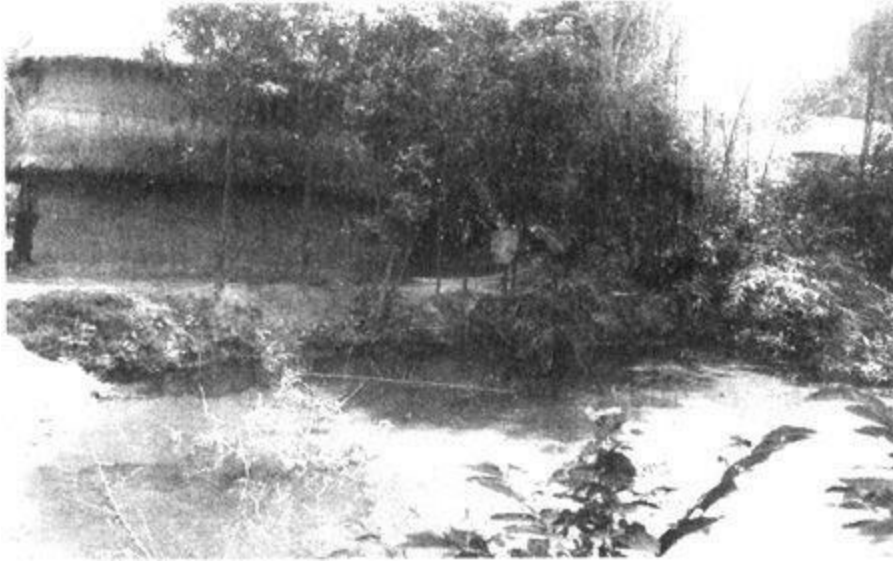


Old Raghuvir temple, Fului - Shyambazar

Shyambazar and Belte are two villages that are next to each other. Shyambazar is situated south of Sihore. A municipal union was formed in 1877 at Shyambazar on an experimental basis, but as it did not run satisfactorily it was dissolved in 1885. At one time the cotton and tasar silk of this area were well known. A Shiva temple, named Gangadhar Jiu, is there which is very old. At the section of the village called Daspara a three-day sankirtan festival, with different parties of kirtan singers playing in nine decorated huts, is still very popular. There are two abandoned temples on the north side of the main road, almost in the middle of the village—one to Raghuvir (Rama) and the other to Shiva. A temple to Rameshvara is nearby. On the south side of the road there is a Durga mandap in ruins. At one time Shiva and Durga were worshipped there. In front of it was the village school.

Between the Raghuvir temple and the Shiva temple stood the house of the Mallicks. It had two stories and faced south. A lane ran between the houses of Ishan Mallick and

Srinath Mallick.³² Srinath was probably the younger brother of Ishan. Then, about a two-minute walk south of Ishan Mallick's house was the home of Ishan Chaudhury, a devout brahmin. A Guin family³³ living here was also associated with Sri Ramakrishna. Manik Ganguly, the author of Dharmamangal, was born in Belte. In his work he eulogized the village deities, such as Bankura Ray of Belte and Dolu Ray of Shyambazar.



Natavar Goswami's house, Belte

Natavar Goswami was another pious man who used to worship Sri Ramakrishna as his guru. According to the Punthi, his house was at Shyambazar, but actually he lived in the village of Belte. If one proceeds from Shyambazar by the eastern path, one comes across a lane on the left side just before entering Belte. Going down that lane, one finds Natavar Goswami's house on the right side.³⁴ There was a shallow pond by the side of the house and a mango tree in the courtyard. The house was on the western side of the courtyard, and there was a storehouse to the north and a shrine for the deities to the east. Lord Vishnu was worshipped daily in a stone along with Balagopala and the goddess Sitala.

In the Bengali months of Bhadra and Caitra, the deity Shyamsundar from the village of Pandu would come to Natavar's house and accept worship and service for ten days. The descendants of Natavar eventually moved to the village of Kayapat, and there Natavar's grandson Anil Goswami now has the image of Shyamsundar, made of eight metals, which Natavar had worshipped. It is very likely that Natavar began worshipping Shyamsundar after coming in contact with Sri Ramakrishna. Lakshminarayan Goswami and Shyamsundar Goswami used to live in the southern and northern parts of Natavar's house respectively. Lakshminarayan was an expert at playing the khol (a large drum used mostly for accompanying kirtans).



Shyamsundar at Natavar Goswami's house. This image was worshipped by Ramakrishna

The Goswami community lived in the western part of the village Belte, and a number of weaver families lived in the eastern, western, and southern edges of the Goswami locality. Most of the weavers were Vaishnavas. It is possible that they were the community Sri Ramakrishna was referring to when he said: 'There are weavers in the villages near Kamarpukur. Many of them are Vaishnavas and like to talk big. They say: "Which Vishnu does he worship? The Preserver? Oh, we wouldn't touch him!" Or: "Which Siva are you talking about? We accept the Atmarama Siva." Or again, "Please explain to us which Hari you worship." They spin their yarn and indulge in talk like that.'³⁵

Natavar was a great devotee and so was his wife. She was 'Mother Lakshmi personified, as it were'.³⁶ One day they brought Sri Ramakrishna to their house and served him with much love and devotion. This was before Mathurmohan passed away in July 1871. Akshay Kumar Sen wrote in the Punthi: 'Natavar and his wife served the Master with great devotion. The fried patol that they served him was so delicious that later the Master told Mathur about it, saying, "I have never before tasted such sweet fried patol." Mathur then enquired how the brahmin lady had cooked it, as Sri Ramakrishna had enjoyed it so much. Natavar and his wife did not have any children, so they asked the Master, the fulfiller of all desires, for his blessing. He was gracious to them and said, "You will have a child." As his words were infallible, they were blessed shortly afterwards with a beautiful son.'³⁷

Thereafter, whenever Natavar heard about Sri Ramakrishna's arrival at Sihore he would rush to receive him, bringing with him a group of weavers who sang kirtan. On reaching the Master, Natavar would lie prostrate at his feet and then escort him to his house accompanied by people singing kirtan all the way. Meanwhile, the news would spread of the Master's arrival, and hundreds of people would assemble at Natavar's house. When the kirtan was over they would all have some offered food. The author of the Punthi wrote: 'While the Master met people at the house of the Goswamis, the poor people would bring provisions with great love. For the sake of the Master they begged from village to village while hundreds and hundreds of people assembled there.'³⁸ We can

assume that Sri Ramakrishna sometimes stayed at Natavar's house for a number of days. Besides Sihore, other villages nearby were also sanctified by the touch of Sri Ramakrishna's feet. Stories about his divine play in those places are part of the village lore. One such village is Kayapat. It falls within the jurisdiction of Goghat police station and is just northeast of the Midnapore district. Within the precincts of the Kayapat market is the Yajneswar Shiva temple. In front of the temple is a hall (natmandir). It is not unlikely that the Master travelled three and a half miles from Sihore by palanquin to participate in the sankirtans held at the natmandir.³⁹ To the west of the Kayapat bus stand, opposite the police station, stands the eight-spired temple to Bhubaneswar Shiva. It was here that Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, underwent the scorching of the spleen treatment.⁴⁰



Yajneswar Shiva temple, Kayapat

To the south of Kayapat is the village of Krishnaganj. In those days there was a famous khol player named Raicharan Das living there.⁴¹ Swami Saradananda wrote in Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master: 'As soon as he played on the Khol, the Master would go

into ecstasy.'⁴² The village Badanganj is next to Kayapat and Krishnaganj. The famous Vaishnava scribe Aulia Manohar Das used to live at Badanganj, and his tombstone can still be seen.⁴³ Did Sri Ramakrishna come here? According to some he visited this village also. It is very likely that he went there at the request of the devout Raicharan. Past Badanganj are some paddy fields, and after that one comes to the village Shyambazar.

Memampur, or Meherbanpur, also falls within the ambit of Goghat police station. It is about three miles south of Sihore. Next to Memampur is Maragere, the native village of Pratap Hazra. The Pancharatna temple of Shyamsundar at Memampur is especially beautiful. It is said to have been founded by Aulchand.⁴⁴ In 1892 it was renovated and a beautiful stage (rasamancha) for theatre, drama, etc., was built in the southwest corner. Aulchand passed away on the auspicious day of Anantacaturdasi, and since then a twelve-day festival is held at that time every year. One of the major attractions of the festival during Sri Ramakrishna's time was the kirtan singing by the famous singer Gopal. According to the Punthi: 'His voice was so sweet that his name was known throughout the country. His home was not in this part of the country but was somewhere to the north.'⁴⁵



Shyamsundar temple, Memanpur

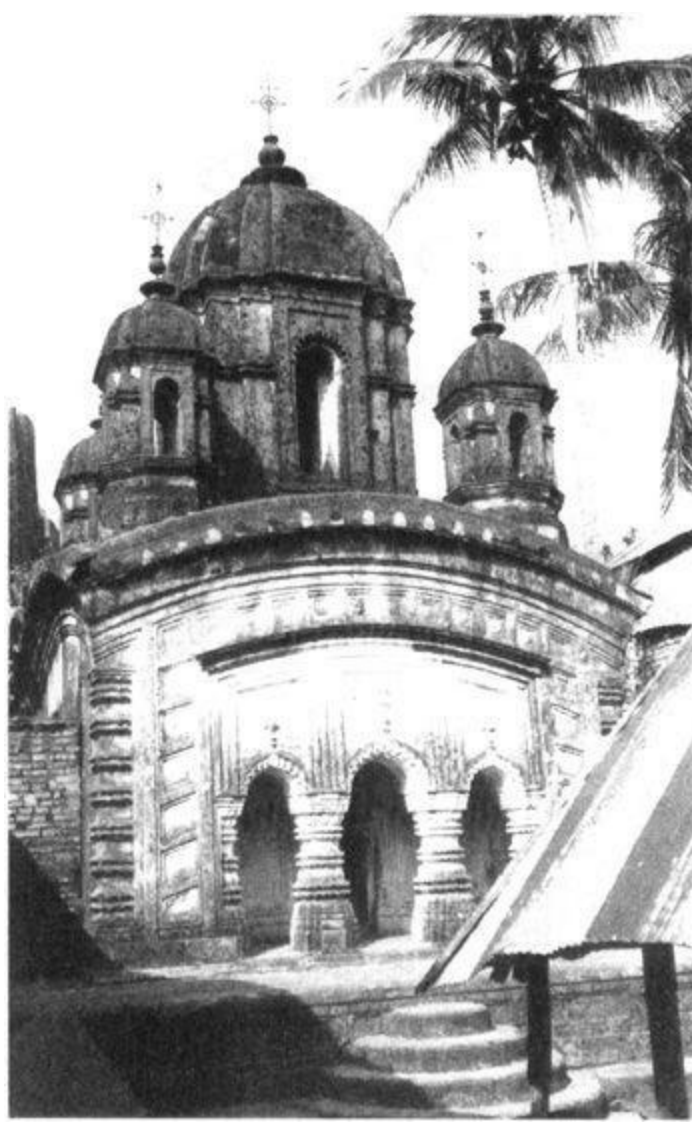
Nowadays the kirtan is held only for the last four days of the festival. People say that Sri Ramakrishna had a vision of this image of Shyamsundar on his way to another village. He also talked to the villagers sitting on a ledge outside the temple.⁴⁶ When M., the recorder of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, visited this village in 1886, Gurudas Goswami, the manager of the temple, conveyed his regards to the Master through M. Gurudas had been charmed by Sri Ramakrishna's personality.⁴⁷

Pandugram is east of Shyambazar. Here Radharani and Shyamsundar are worshipped daily in an exquisite stone temple founded by Aaulchand. To the west of this temple is another temple to Shridhar Jiu. Here also a twelve-day festival is held every year starting from Anantacaturdasi. In the garden at the southwest corner of the Shyamsundar temple there is a stage used during the Holi festival. The non-stop day and night kirtans held there during Holi are famous. Nearby is the Bargidalam, which is now totally in ruins.

There, women, children, and old people of the village used to take shelter during Bargir raids.⁴⁸ It had been built by the wealthy Goswami community of the village. This village also was sanctified by Sri Ramakrishna's feet.⁴⁹



Shyamsundar Jiu temple, Pandugram



Sridhar Jiu temple, Pandugram

Sri Ramakrishna indulged in his divine play in all these villages around Sihore, and the waves of joy flowed all around. But by far the greatest manifestation of divine bliss occurred at Fului-Shyambazar. According to The Great Master, the incident we are going to describe happened just before Sri Ramakrishna met the physician Mahendranath Pal—that is, some time after 1875. Sashibhusan Ghosh thought it occurred in 1879 or 1880, and Brahmachari Akshay Chaitanya put it between 1876 and 1878. The recorder of the Gospel made two references, indicating that Sri Ramakrishna's last trip to Kamarpukur was in 1880, and that he left Dakshineswar on 3 March and returned on 10 October. After examining the evidence, it seems likely that the incident at Fului-Shyambazar occurred in 1880. That year the festival of Anantacaturdasi fell on 19 August, so it seems probable that the Master came to Sihore some time before 19 August and returned to Kamarpukur in the first week of October, staying at Sihore for one and a half months. The writer of the Punthi said that Sri Ramakrishna went to Sihore straight from Dakshineswar, after stopping at Bali-Diwanganj. But the writers of both the Gospel and The Great Master hold that Sri Ramakrishna went to Sihore after going to Kamarpukur. We have accepted the latter view.

A large number of orthodox brahmin families lived in Sihore then, most of whom used

to worship Vasudeva Vishnu. Even now seventy-five percent of the population there is equally divided between brahmins and sadgops (a lower caste), while the rest are low-caste Hindus. In those days the orthodox brahmins used to look down on the worship of Radha-Krishna and on Hari sankirtans, both introduced by Sri Caitanya. Perhaps it was because most followers of Sri Caitanya's religion belonged to lower castes. Then again, the moral degeneration of communities such as the Kartabhaja also hardened the attitude of orthodox Vaishnavas. In fact, as the Punthi says: 'When the devotees of Caitanya were seen, they were jeered and chased away with sticks. And as soon as the singing of "Gaur-Nitai" in sankirtan was heard, the villagers snatched their khols and broke them.'⁵⁰

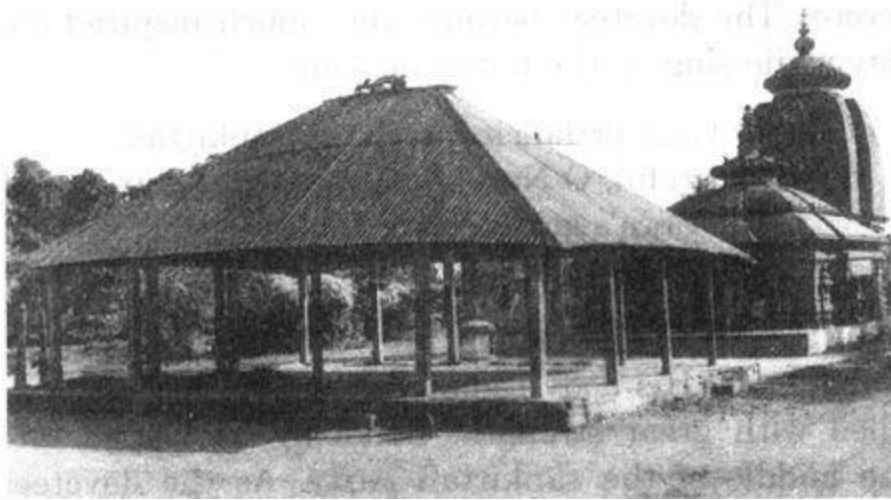
This was the last time that Sri Ramakrishna came to Sihore. As he entered the village he was in an ecstatic mood and he had a vision of Sri Caitanya dressed as a dancer wearing a black-bordered cloth. It was during this trip that the desire came to Sri Ramakrishna to propagate around the area of Sihore the ideal of Sri Caitanya's religion of pure love. He knew that most of the orthodox Vaishnavas had never tasted the joy of divine love. Moreover, he found that a large number of people belonging to different communities based on the religion of Sri Caitanya were participating in amoral and licentious activities in the name of religion. Sri Ramakrishna therefore took some steps to solve the problems. Soon after his arrival he selected some places in the villages where Hari sankirtans could be arranged. Then he also organized sankirtan processions in which he himself participated. Slowly the villagers' interest in Sri Gauranga was aroused, and all opposition melted away. As the writer of the Punthi wrote: 'All began singing kirtan with much devotion, and the great devotee Naphar led the singing.'⁵¹



Rasamanch, Pandugram

One of the places where they began assembling for their kirtans was the courtyard of the Shantinath temple. This was a favourite meeting place of the villagers. The temple faces east, and its spire is thirty feet tall and eleven feet eight inches on each side. Shantinath, a svayambhu (self-manifest) Shiva linga, is worshipped daily there. It is said that many years ago the zemindar of Sihore, the Maharaja of Burdwan, as well as one of the ancestors of the present worshipper of the temple, both received a divine command in their dreams to build the temple. Earlier an ascetic had been practising spiritual disciplines in the nearby jungle, but he died. Following the instructions received in their dreams, they searched through the ascetic's belongings and found three gold bricks, which were sold to build the temple. The Maharaja of Burdwan then made an endowment of a plot of land to meet the expenses of the service and worship of the deity, and the

Bandyopadhyaya family of the village was assigned the responsibility of this service and worship, and was given the title Chakravarty.⁵²



Shantinath Shiva temple, Sihore. Natmandir (front) is where Ramakrishna danced

The open space in front of the temple (the jagmohan) is 15 feet in height, and it is 18 feet 8 inches on either side. The temple and the jagmohan were each constructed with four-cornered sloping roofs, and judging from the architectural style, the temple was probably built in the seventeenth century.⁵³ In front of the jagmohan stands a brick natmandir with a tile roof. It is a replica of the previous one that was destroyed in the great storm of 1349 B.S. (1942 or 43). Every year on Caitrasankranti, the end of the Bengali year, a Gajan fair⁵⁴ is held for ten days at the temple from the 22nd of Caitra to the 1st of Vaishakh.

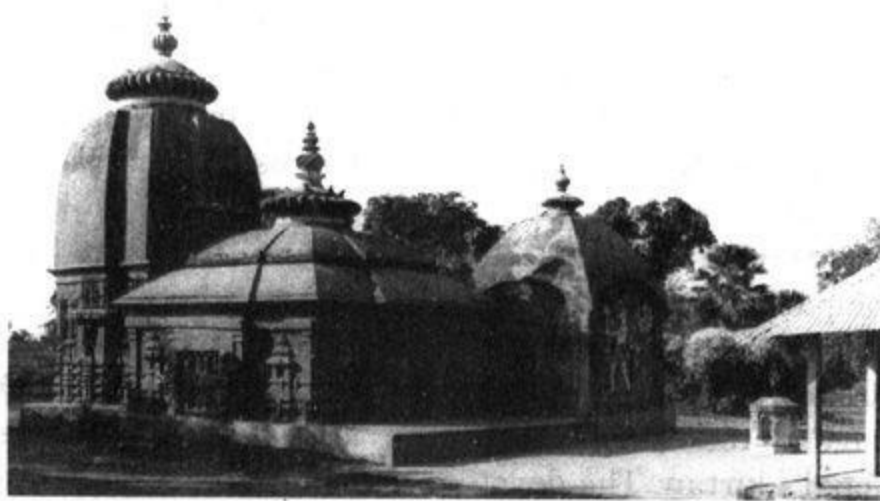
As Sri Ramakrishna began participating in the sankirtans at the temple, people's enthusiasm grew. One day while they were singing, their devotional fervour became intense. The author of the Punthi wrote: 'The devotees became very much inspired one day while singing the following song:

My Gora is dancing with the sankirtan.
Be careful, O Narahari, stay near Gaur,
Lest Gora's golden body
Fall to the ground.

'Hearing the song, the Master went into mahabhava. His body radiated a golden hue and was filled with great strength. Suddenly he leaped into the middle of the sankirtan party. As the devotees repeated those lines of the song again and again, the Master became more and more absorbed and gradually lost all outer consciousness. Who can understand these things? He then began rolling around on the rough, hard stones on the ground, and his tender body was scratched all over.'⁵⁵

The Master's ecstatic mood showed no signs of abating, nor did he notice the injuries on his body. Hriday then began repeating a mantra in the Master's ear, and at last he regained external consciousness. Because of the rough stones on the ground, no further

kirtans were held at the Shantinath temple lest the Master be injured again.



Shantinath Shiva temple, Sihore

Sri Ramakrishna then decided to take a further step to introduce Sri Caitanya's religion of love among the people. He noticed that the brahmins never wore tulsi rosaries around their necks, so one day he procured twenty rosaries of tulsi beads, gathered the devotees together, and narrated to them the glories of the tulsi. The devotees reverently saluted the tulsi. Then, to each one who worshipped the Narayana shila (a shalagrama—a stone representing Vishnu) in his home, the Master gave a tulsi rosary and said: 'Every day first touch the tulsi rosary to the Narayana shila. Then repeat the mantra you have received from your guru, and after that wear the rosary around your neck.'⁵⁶ One by one each of the devotees left for his home with the tulsi rosary, except Naphar Barujje, who remained seated there. Naphar had unwavering faith in Sri Ramakrishna. Looking at the Master, he saw Lord Shridhar in him. He then placed the rosary at the Master's feet, and the Master went into samadhi. Overjoyed, Naphar picked up the rosary and put it around his neck.

Having got a taste of divine bliss in the company of the Master, the people at Sihore became eager for more. Meanwhile, the Dvadasa festival had already started at Memanpur on Anantacaturdasi (19 August 1880), and the main attraction there was Gopal's kirtan. The devotees at Sihore had a desire to enjoy Gopal's kirtan in the blessed company of Sri Ramakrishna. The Master, however, was reluctant to go to Memanpur, and sent Hriday instead to find out what Gopal's kirtan was like. It was almost evening when Hriday reached Memanpur, and Gopal was just finishing his kirtan. Hearing that Sri Ramakrishna was at Sihore, Gopal along with his party immediately set out to meet him. When they were about a mile from the village, the kirtan party started beating the khol and sounding the ranasinga. The Master could hear it, but others could not. Soon after, Gopal and his party reached Hriday's house. The Master was then in deep ecstasy, and Gopal prostrated at his feet.

The news of Gopal's arrival spread quickly, and the villagers rushed to Hriday's house. When the Master regained external consciousness, Gopal started his kirtan, singing: 'Who indeed has brought the world-bewitching [bhuvanasundara] Gora to Nadia? Such beauty, it seems, even the Creator has not seen. He made the form, but he must not have

glanced at it. For had he seen it, he certainly would not have let it go.’⁵⁷ The Master was delighted with the singing and started introducing akhara (light improvised phrases), heightening the devotional fervour: ‘O Gopal, what are you saying? Gora’s form was not made by the Creator. It was the Self-manifest form of the Supreme. It was not created.’ Through the grace of the Master, the radiant form of Gora Ray (Sri Caitanya) shone in the hearts of all the kirtan singers. Gopal felt blessed, and at the conclusion of the singing he lay down prostrate at the Master’s feet. It was then late at night, and the festivities concluded with a sumptuous feast given by Hriday.

Sri Ramakrishna also stayed at this time at the house of Natavar Goswami. It is said in The Great Master that Sri Ramakrishna ‘lived there for seven days and enjoyed the bliss of Sankirtan with the Vaishnavas of Shyambazar’. Also, ‘Isanchandra Mallick of that place invited him with great respect to his house to share the bliss of Sankirtan there’.⁵⁸ Gurudas Burman wrote that Sri Ramakrishna went to witness a ‘twenty-four hour Hari sankirtan’ at Shyambazar. While the author of the Punthi wrote that in order to entertain the Master with some good kirtan singing, Natavar invited the famous kirtan singer Dhananjay De of Ramjivanpur and the khol player Raicharan Das of Krishnaganj to his house. Actually, these facts do not contradict each other. The kirtan was held at Natavar’s house on the first day.

Dhananjay’s sweet voice accompanied by Raicharan’s adept khol playing created a magic spell, and most likely the Master swam in an ocean of divine bliss. He was then totally intoxicated with Sri Caitanya’s ecstatic love. His face beamed with divine bliss. It was most likely this incident that he was referring to when he later reminisced: ‘Once, at Syambazar, they arranged a kirtan at Natavar Goswami’s house. There I had a vision of Krishna and the gopis of Vrindavan. I felt that my subtle body was walking at Krishna’s heels.’⁵⁹

The devotional fervour of the kirtan had reached a peak when the host, Natavar, faced an unexpected problem. The highest seat—the place of honour—was reserved for Sri Ramakrishna. Everyone else sat on a lower seat. But when the Goswamis of Pandugram, who had been specially invited, arrived, they felt insulted, thinking that Natavar was slighting them. They became very angry and left in a huff. Natavar begged them to excuse him, but all his entreaties failed. He felt helpless. When Sri Ramakrishna came to know everything, he called for Natavar and said: ‘Stop the kirtan. Go immediately and bring the leader of the group.’ Natavar obeyed. As soon as the leader of the Goswamis came, the Master left his seat and saluted him. The brahmin hung his head in shame. Then, in order to console the brahmin, Sri Ramakrishna began to discuss the scriptures with him. The Goswami listened to the Master with rapt attention, tears pouring from his eyes. All the Goswamis then fell at the feet of the Master and begged his forgiveness. Natavar was greatly relieved.⁶⁰

In contrast, the next day Sri Ramakrishna began enjoying a feast of sankirtan outside the Mallick’s temple at Shyambazar. As it is said in the Punthi, ‘The next day the Master assembled all the brahmins and awakened intense joy in everyone by singing the glories of Hari.’ The Master’s presence breathed new life into their kirtans, making everyone intoxicated with devotional fervour. Sri Caitanya had said: ‘By repeating Krishna’s name

once, one is redeemed of all sins. Repeating the names of the Lord confers nine kinds of devotion.⁶¹ Like Caitanya, Sri Ramakrishna performed his divine lila to show people what joy there is in repeating the name of the Lord. One moment the Master would dive deep into the ocean of bliss, and the next moment he would surface again to scatter drops of joy all around. Through the inscrutable power of yogamaya, an illusory spell was cast at Shyambazar, hypnotizing everyone who saw it. Sri Ramakrishna himself once said: 'Yogamaya, the Primal Power, has a power of attraction. I applied that power myself.'⁶²

Akshay Kumar Sen, the author of the Punthi, described what happened: 'For seven days and seven nights sankirtan continued. Ceaseless chanting of Harinama resounded in the air. . . . The Master became so absorbed while dancing that he would lose all body consciousness, yet he had the strength of millions of elephants, and the earth would shake at the touch of his feet. When he would lose all external consciousness and become motionless, people thought that he was dead. But a moment later they would see his face shining like the moon, and then he would again start dancing with even greater strength, singing the name of Hari. People were amazed and started saying to one another: "Has anyone seen such a person before? One moment he seems to be dead, and the next moment he is full of strength!"'⁶³

Gurudas Burman wrote: 'From the very beginning of the kirtan the Master would frequently lose external consciousness. At times he would dance in an ecstatic state, and it was so beautiful that it seemed as if there were no bones in his body—as if his body were a lake, rippling in the breeze of divine love. Other times his ecstasy was so deep that he stood motionless with tears of love pouring from his eyes. Hriday would then come and recite the holy mantra Om in his ears, and the Master would again start dancing madly while singing in his beautiful voice. People everywhere began to say, "A man has come to Shyambazar who dies seven times a day while singing kirtan and then revives." Gradually the waves of divine love spread far and wide and thousands and thousands of people⁶⁴ started gathering to participate in the ecstatic singing and dancing. Some were singing with great emotion, some were dancing, while others were rolling around and around in the dust.'

People swarmed there, oblivious of their duties and even their bathing and eating. Even the village women rushed there, leaving behind their usual shyness. People became mad just to get a glimpse of Sri Ramakrishna. According to the Punthi: 'Desirous of catching a glimpse of him, people climbed up to the rooftops and on the trees. So many people climbed on the trees to see his dancing that the trees seemed to be made of human beings.'⁶⁵ In that joyous atmosphere, one born dumb was found chanting Hari's name, a one-legged man was found dancing, and one born blind could see the blessed name.⁶⁶ Strange, incredible things began to happen.

The sight of the Master dancing, intoxicated with divine love, raised a storm of spiritual fervour in the minds of the people. Some of the more knowledgeable and devout Goswamis began to realize that the compassionate Lord had assumed a human form and was showering his love and grace on them, regardless of any consideration. They thought: 'Is he the visible manifestation of bliss? Is he divine love personified? Is he the embodiment of faith? Or has the very heart and soul of compassion come to the earth? Is

he grace itself manifest? And do the nine kinds of devotion originate from him?'⁶⁷

Sri Ramakrishna's entrancing beauty, and his total absorption in the music and songs, hypnotized everyone present, though only a few could see beyond the external play and grasp its inner meaning. As the author of the Sri Sri Caitanya Caritamrita rightly said, 'Through ordinary eyes he appears to be ordinary, but the eyes of devotion perceive his true nature.'⁶⁸

An Avatar seeks the help of yogamaya in order to allow others to taste divine bliss. Yet he himself temporarily comes under its spell and becomes enchanted by his own nature. This is how he enjoys the state of divine bliss. Later, Sri Ramakrishna described his experience to the devotees:

'Once I visited Hriday's house at Sihore. From there I was taken to Syambazar. I had a vision of Gauranga before I entered the village, and I realized that I should meet Gauranga's devotees there. For seven days and nights I was surrounded by a huge crowd of people. Such attraction! Nothing but kirtan and dancing day and night. People stood in rows on the walls and even were in the trees.'⁶⁹

'I stayed at Natavar Goswami's house. It was crowded day and night. In the morning I would run away to the house of a weaver⁷⁰ for a little rest. There too I found that people would gather after a few minutes. They carried drums and cymbals with them, and the drum constantly played: "Takuti! Takuti!" We would have our meal at three in the afternoon.

'The rumour spread everywhere that a man had arrived who died seven times and came back to life again. Hriday would drag me away from the crowd to a paddy-field for fear I might have an attack of heat apoplexy. The crowd would follow us there like a line of ants. Again the cymbals and the never-ending "Takuti! Takuti!" of the drums. Hriday scolded them and said: "Why do you bother us like this? Have we never heard kirtan?"

'The Vaishnava priests of the village came and almost started a quarrel. They thought I would take their share of the fees from the devotees. But soon they discovered that I didn't touch a piece of cloth or even a thread. Someone remarked that I was a Brahmajñani. So the Vaishnava pundits wanted to test me. One said, "Why hasn't he beads, and a mark on his forehead?" Another of them replied, "They have dropped from him, as the dry branch from a coconut tree." It was there that I learnt this illustration of the dry branch of a coconut tree. The upadhis, limitations, drop when one attains Knowledge.

'People came thronging from distant villages. They even spent the night there. At Syambazar I learnt the meaning of divine attraction. When God incarnates Himself on earth He attracts people through the help of Yogamaya, His Divine Power. People become spellbound.'⁷¹

Another day Sri Ramakrishna said: 'I wanted to know the experiences of Gauranga and was shown them at Syambazar in our native district. A crowd gathered; they even climbed the trees and the walls; they stayed with me day and night. For seven days I had

no privacy whatever. Thereupon I said to the Divine Mother, "Mother, I have had enough of it."⁷²

M., the recorder of the Gospel, gave elsewhere some additional information about this event. According to him, the devotees participating in this event included Natavar Goswami, Ishan Mallick, and Saday Babaji.⁷³

In the villages near Shyambazar it is said that the people thought Sri Ramakrishna was a true Baul. They would say, 'A Kshyapa has come.'⁷⁴ Kshyapa means a Baul.

Another piece of information was gathered by Prabodh Kumar Chattopadhyaya, an earnest seeker of information on Sri Ramakrishna. On enquiries he learnt that Hriday was able to rescue Sri Ramakrishna, who was by this time completely exhausted, only after seven days. On the plea of taking a break, Hriday took the Master away from the large gathering of people through the lane between the houses of Ishan Mallick and Srinath Mallick. They then moved north, taking the road towards Kamarpukur from Shyambazar. Walking further, they reached Sihore through Majhipara.

It is also learnt from a rather long letter, dated 23rd Vaishakh 1303 B.S. (4th May 1896), written by Hriday to the monks at Alambazar Math, that the Goswamis of Sihore became insanely jealous of Sri Ramakrishna, seeing the tremendous love and reverence that the villagers had for him. They even planned to kill him. Later they decided to try and defeat him in a debate. The subject of the debate was 'What is the true path—that of the Vaishnavas or that of the Shaivites?' After a long discussion everyone agreed with the Master's view—that both paths are true.

The blissful Lord plays eternally, but the devotees always desire to enjoy his human play. His play as a human being is extremely attractive, especially when the Lord indulges in it to enjoy his own bliss and he shares this bliss with others. People then become mad with love of God. Those who know the scriptures say that the Lord does this with the help of his yogic powers. Under the spell of yogamaya, he creates a bewitching atmosphere, captivating everyone who comes near him. Such a play happened at Fului-Shyambazar when Sri Ramakrishna released a flood of divine bliss. Like Sri Caitanya, he also sported as 'God-incarnate enjoying ecstasy during sankirtan' (sankirtan-ananda-vihval-avatara).⁷⁵ The divine love within him overflowed, overwhelming one and all. In greater or lesser degree, everyone who witnessed the incredible event became immersed in the Master's divine sport. Perhaps it was the wish of the Great Enchanter, 'May all be under a divine spell.' And so it happened. Fortunately for us, those who saw it left behind their sweet memories of the Master's play.



Notes and References

- ¹. Brhadaranyaka Upanisad 2.4.5.
- ². The 'Vaisnavatosini' gloss on śloka 10.29.1 of the Srimad Bhagavata.
- ³. Srimad Bhagavata, ed. by Krishna Goswami. vol. 3, skanda 10, p. 1707.
- ⁴. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981), 243.
- ⁵. Narahari Chakravarty, Bhaktiratnakar, 7.61.
- ⁶. Krishnadas Kaviraj, Sri Sri Caitanya Caritamrita, Madhyalila, chapter 23.

7. 'The new life breathed into Bengal Hinduism by Chaitanya's creed burst forth in another direction. The Vaishnava Gosains set themselves to converting the aboriginal tribes and thus brought a new light into their lives after ages of neglect, contumely and superstition.' (Jadunath Sarkar, History of Bengal, [1948], II:221-22.)
8. Sashibhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (1969), Introduction, 33-34.
9. According to one group of scholars Sri Caitanya was the original guru of the Bauls and other similar sects. But according to Kshitimohan Sen (in his book *Banglar Baul* [1954], 48), long before Mahaprabhu's advent Baulia thoughts and Bauls were mentioned.
10. Akshay Kumar Dutta, *Bharatvarshiya Upasak Sampraday* (Calcutta: Pathbhavan, 1376 B.S.), 110-49.
11. *Obscure Religious Cults*, p. 141.
12. *Gospel*, 513-14.
13. *Ibid.*, 514.
14. *Ibid.*, 513.
15. *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (Calcutta: Udbodhan, Oct. 1998), 523.
16. *Gospel*, 891.
17. *Ibid.*, 782.
18. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. by Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2nd rev. ed. 1956), 169.
19. 'He is luminous like a blue gem and is adorned with ornaments. He bears the discus and other weapons and is accompanied by his entourage. The wise devotees worship him through sacrifices consisting of singing his name and glories.' *Srimad Bhagavata* 11.5.32.
20. *Gospel*, 743.
21. Ramchandra Datta, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadever Jivanbrittanta* (Calcutta; Sri Ramakrishna Yogodyan, 7th ed.), 69.
22. *Gospel*, 497.
23. Akshay Kumar Sen, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi* (Calcutta: Udbodhan Office, 10th ed.), 577.
24. Girish Chandra Ghosh, *Thakur Sri Ramakrishna O Swami Vivekananda* (1389 B.S.), 109.
25. Vrindavan Das, *Sri Sri Caitanya Bhagavata* (Sri Chaitanya Math), 2.23.380.
26. *Great Master*, 169.
27. *Gospel*, 232.
28. Sri Ramakrishna once said: 'People said I was insane. . . . I visited my father-in-law's house, and they arranged a kirtan. Naphar, Digambar Barujje's father, and others came. It was a great sankirtan. . . .' *Kathamrita*, 230.
29. This information on Naphar Barujje was obtained from Panchanan Bandyopadhyaya, his great-grandson.
30. *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi*, III.6.
31. *Ibid.*
32. This information has been obtained mostly from Shivaprasad Chattopadhyaya, a former resident of Shyambazar, and supplemented by other residents.
33. In 1886 M., the recorder of the *Gospel*, met a member of that family at the village.
34. The information on Natavar Goswami's house has been obtained from Prabodh Chakravarty, who is the present owner of Natavar Goswami's land. Other facts have been obtained from Jivan Kolay.
35. *Gospel*, 489.
36. Gurudas Burman, *Sri Ramakrishna Charit* (Bengali), I:154.
37. *Punthi*, III:6. Natavar's son was named Radhagovinda. He had two sons, Sripati and Pashupati. Sripati drowned in a pond when he was a child.
38. *Punthi*, III:6.
39. On page 44 of the Bengali *Kathamrita*, there is a footnote stating that Sri Ramakrishna participated in a sankirtan at Kayapat. Manmathanath Konar, the Headmaster of Badanganj High School, used to show the spot to the students. Swami Gauriswarananda (Rammay Maharaj) also spoke of the place. The source of this information was the founder and first Headmaster, Prabodh Chakravarty.
40. This was called pile daga (scorching of the spleen). 'This was a queer remedy of a bygone age. Its curative effect was disputable, but the suffering of the patient was indescribable. After ablution, the patient was made to lie on the ground and held down by some strong persons, so that he might not escape. Then the medicine-man would take in hand a burning piece of jujube wood and rub it on a plantain leaf over the region of the spleen. The skin would get burnt and the patient would shriek and scream.' (Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1993], 57-58.)
41. Manmathanath Konar used to show the students Raicharan's house also.
42. *Great Master*, 316.
43. *Paschimbanger Puja-Parvan o Mela*, ed. by Ashok Mitra (Delhi: Manager of Publ., 1969), II:649.
44. Aulchand was the founder of the Kartabhaja sect, though his disciple Ramsharan Pal was the one who popularized

it. There are several versions of Aulchand's life, each of which seems to be somewhat exaggerated. He passed away in 1691 Saka (1812 or 13 AD) at Boyal and was cremated at the village of Parari. He had twenty-two disciples, including Ramsharan Pal.

[45.](#) Punthi, III:11.

[46.](#) The information about this village was obtained from Sachidananda Goswami, the priest of the Pancharatna temple.

[47.](#) Swami Prabhananda, Sri Ramakrishner Antyalila (Bengali), II:139.

[48.](#) 'Bargir' is a Marathi word meaning a soldier riding a horse. During the time of Alibardi (died 4 April 1756), Bengal was attacked by an army of 40,000 soldiers on horses, led by Bhaskar Pundit. After a truce was called, Bhaskar Pundit and his army left Bengal. Thereafter, however, stray groups of Marathi bandits frequently returned to attack and plunder towns and villages of Bengal. Known as Bargirs, these bandits remained a source of great trouble till the British could establish law and order.

[49.](#) Gurudas Goswami provided the information on this village. His father Harihar Goswami (Narayanananda Brahmachari) met Holy Mother a number of times.

[50.](#) Punthi, III:11.

[51.](#) Ibid.

[52.](#) Satugopal Chakravarty, the present sevait of the temple and also Headmaster of the Ramakrishna Mission School, Jayrambati, supplied this information.

[53.](#) Amiya Kumar Bandyopadhyaya, Bankura Jelar Purakirti (Calcutta: Calcutta Municipal Division, 1971), 122-23.

[54.](#) A Gajan fair is a festival in honour of Shiva. It is held for ten days and begins on the last day of the Bengali year (the last day of the month of Chaitra, in the middle of April).

[55.](#) Punthi, III:11.

[56.](#) Ibid.

[57.](#) Ibid.

[58.](#) Great Master, 316.

[59.](#) Gospel, 348.

[60.](#) Punthi, III:11.

[61.](#) Sri Sri Caitanya Caritamrita, Madhyalila, chapter 25.

[62.](#) Gospel, 720.

[63.](#) Punthi, III:11.

[64.](#) In 1881 the population of the Shyambazar Municipality was 19,635. So it was quite possible that 'thousands and thousands of people' could have attended this kirtan festival in 1880.

[65.](#) Punthi, III:11.

[66.](#) Ibid.

[67.](#) Kavikarnapura (Paramananda Sena), Caitanyacandrodaya. IV:7.

[68.](#) Sri Sri Caitanya Caritamrita, Adilila, chapter 5.

[69.](#) There is a striking similarity between this incident in Sri Ramakrishna's life and the description of Caitanya's return to Bengal from Puri in the Sri Sri Caitanya Bhagavata. In the Caitanya Bhagavata, Vrindavan Das describes the crowd of people who came to see Caitanya when he was at Vidya Vachaspati's home: 'The whole village began to become excessively crowded. There was no empty space. People climbed to treetops and roofs. Their eagerness to see Him [Sri Caitanya] increased with every passing moment. The extraordinary phenomenon was that although the trees and roofs were overcrowded no houses collapsed or trees fell crashing down. All this happened by the transcendental potency of the Lord. Endlessly their eyes remained fixed on His perfect and beautiful face. Once having seen Him, they had not the desire to return home. They chanted jubilantly and drank in the captivating beauty of the Lord with their immovable glances.' (Vrindavan Das, Sri Sri Caitanya Bhagavata, ed. by Bhakti Vaibhava Puri Goswami Maharaj [Berhampur, Orissa: Sri Bhakti Bigyan Nityananda Book Trust, 1998], 481.)

[70.](#) Popularly known as 'Bayen's house', this house stood on the eastern edge of the village. The word 'bayen' means a deft drummer. The owner of the house was an expert khol player and was known as Rammay Bayen, but his original surname was Das. He had a son named Sudhir. He had two pucca houses with openings on the east and west, which stood a short distance from Natavar Goswami's house. These houses no longer exist, but the marshy ditch behind them is still there. It is popularly believed that the Master came here to take rest and passed into deep samadhi.

[71.](#) Gospel, 536-37.

[72.](#) Ibid., 359.

[73.](#) Precise details about Saday Babaji are not available, but he was well known in those days. It seems that he belonged to the Sahajiya Vaishnava sect. An old woman, who was perhaps Saday Babaji's disciple, used to visit Prabodh Kumar Chatterjee, a resident of Shyambazar. She lived at Pandugram. She had short hair, wore a tulusi rosary around her neck, and carried a begging bowl. Shivaprasad, the son of Prabodh Kumar, often heard her speak reverently about Saday Babaji.

[74.](#) 'A few amongst them [the Bauls] would receive the title Kashyapa. Indeed, the word Kshyapa and Baul are

synonymous. The word "baul" is another form of the word "batul", mad.' Bharatvarshiya Upasak Sampraday, 113.
[75](#). Sri Sri Caitanya Bhagavata, 3.3.426.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA IN THE JOYOUS MART OF HARINAMA

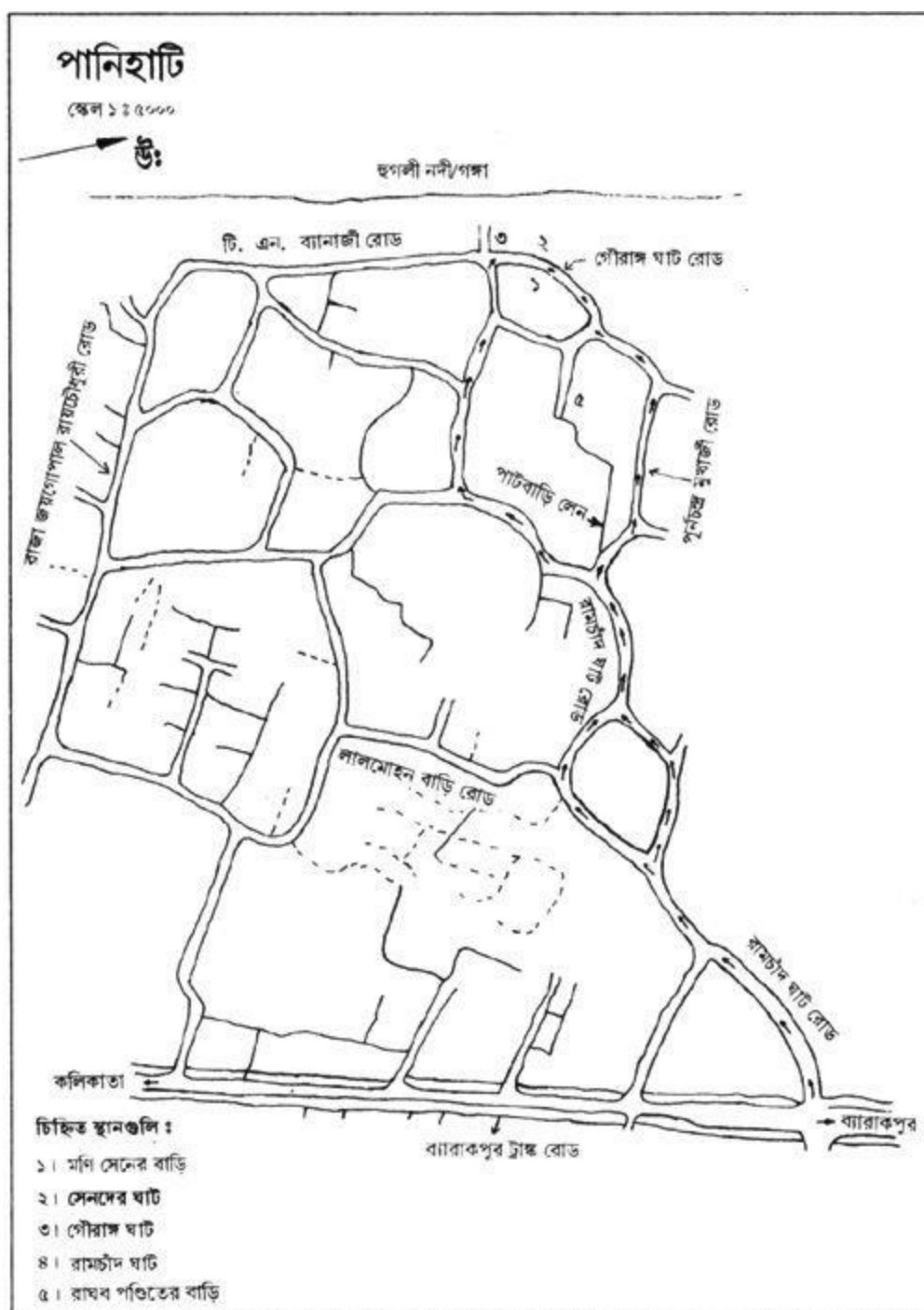
The whole of India is a mart of joy, resounding with the name of God. In some places the market is teeming with activity, and in other places it is slack. But wherever the Lord and his associates come to distribute the divine name, an exceptional stir is created. People all around then rejoice in taking the name of the Lord. Peneti, or Panihati, in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, is one such mart of joy that has been resounding with God's name for hundreds of years. Twice the Lord appeared here in human form, set up his stall, and flooded the place with joy by freely distributing the name of God.

In many places in India a festival is held once a year in which the chanting of God's name resounds through the air. These joyous marts of Harinama are usually held to commemorate a certain incident—one that perhaps happened at that very place. And along with the festival, a market is often set up offering a variety of merchandise. One such market is held at Panihati during the Harinama festival there.

A study of the history of the area around Panihati reveals that the jungles and cremation sites on the banks of the Ganga and the Adiganga—beginning from Halishar, Khardah, Panihati, Dakshineswar, and Chitpur all the way to Kalighat, Boral, Baruipur, Baharumayda, Jaynagar, Baragi, Madhabpur, and Chatrabhog—were formerly abodes of Vamachari Tantric ascetics, Kapalikas, and Shaivite yogis of the Nath sect. ¹ But after the advent of Sri Caitanya many changes took place in these areas.

Panihati and Khardah are two villages that lie side by side on the bank of the Ganga and are closely associated with Sri Caitanya's associates Raghav Pundit and Prabhu Nityananda respectively. Panihati, however, was a thriving centre of temples and monasteries when Khardah was still a dense jungle, and it had also been a recognized commercial centre long before Raghav Pundit lived there. In those days it was known as Panyahati. According to scholars, Panihati and Peneti are corrupted forms of Panyahati. A variety of goods and wares were produced there in those days, including combs made from horn. ² But over the years the market declined and moved elsewhere.

At the end of the third century, Maharaja Chandraketu built a large fort at Panihati where an image of the Divine Mother Bhavani was installed. The water supply and sewage systems built by the Maharaja can still be seen today. ³ Another of his memorable achievements was the construction of a high road from Berachampa-Deganga to Panihati. Even during the reign of King Ballal Sen, Panihati was a well-populated town. Another ruler of Gaur was Hussain Khan, who conferred on himself the title Shah. He appointed a kazi at Panihati, which indicates that the town had by then become the headquarters of a subdivision. ⁴



Panihati is about fifteen kilometres north of Calcutta, and is surrounded by Agarpara to the south, the Ganga to the West, Sukhchar to the north, and Sodpur to the east. Three highways approach it, the latest being Barrackpore Trunk Road, and the others being Murshidabad Road (the old Nwababi Road) and the road originating from Raja Ramchand ghat going to Barasat, Berachampa, Basirhat, Taki, etc. The town has grown, and is now an industrial centre with textile mills as well as chemical, iron and steel, rubber, and porcelain factories. Since 1900 it has had its own municipal corporation.

But the main thing Panihati is known for is its annual festival. Since the sixteenth century it has become an important pilgrimage and religious centre and a mart for chanting the name of God. Every year for more than four hundred years, thousands and thousands of people have been coming to attend this mart of joy to sing the name of the Lord. The history of this festival is quite interesting.

Panihati was the ancestral home of Raghav Pundit, an elderly associate of Sri Caitanya.

According to the Sri Caitanya Caritamrita, 'Raghav Pundit was the Lord's foremost follower.'⁵ And according to the Sri Gaurganoddeshadipika, Raghav Pundit was Dhanistha Sakhi during Sri Krishna's days in Vrindavan.⁶ The image of Madanmohan, which Raghav worshipped, as well as Radharaman, the family deity of Raghunath Das Goswami, plus images of Mahaprabhu Caitanya and Sri Nityananda, are now being worshipped at the shrine at Raghav's house. In the western corner of the courtyard, in a malati grove, is a memorial at the site of Raghav Pundit's samadhi. When Sri Caitanya was alive, Raghav's sister Damayanti used to prepare various spices, pickles, and other things for the Master to eat, and every year before the Rathayatra (the Chariot Festival) Makaradhvaj Kar would accompany Raghav to Puri, carrying the food in Raghav's bag. Recently 'Raghav's bag' (jhali)⁷ has been included in an exhibit in the courtyard at Raghav's house. Besides Raghav Pundit, three other disciples of Sri Caitanya—Makaradhvaj Kar, Purandar Pundit, and Kashi Mishra—had their homes at Panihati.



Mahotsavtala, Panihati, where the main festival takes place

On the bank of the Ganga at Panihati there is a banyan tree over seven hundred years old with a platform around it. Of late a peepal tree has grown close to the river. The Mahotsavtala, the shrine at the centre of the annual festival, is near the banyan tree. From there the steps of Gauranga ghat go down to the river. Formerly the steps of this ghat were wide and spacious, but during some recent repair work they have been narrowed. Here at this ghat, two great saints of Bengal landed—Sri Caitanya (1486-1533) and Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886). To the south of this ghat is the recently reconstructed and spacious Raja Ramchand ghat. Ramchand's guru's family lived at Panihati, and at his guru's request Ramchand built this ghat. To the north is the Sen ghat in front of the house of the Sens.

A replica of the temple of the Sixty-four Mahanta Samaj at Vrindavan is under another banyan tree. A short distance from the Mahotsavtala is the beautiful Pancharatna temple founded by Nandalal Dawn. Its presiding deity is Jagaddhatri. Kaivalya Math is located at the birthplace of Nityagopal (later, Jnanananda Avadhut), who was blessed by Sri

Ramakrishna.

Besides the festivals we are going to discuss, another festival at Panihati has become well known. This is the Rasa-lila festival, organized once a year by the RoyChaudhury family, which celebrates Krishna's play with the gopis of Vrindavan. In the book Sambadpatre Sekaler Katha there is a description of the Rasa festival of 1830 (1237 B.S.), celebrated by Rajkrishna Roy Chaudhury.

About five hundred years ago the region of Bengal on both sides of the Ganga was being swept away by the love of Gauranga (Sri Caitanya), and the homes and market places there reverberated with the names of God. In the fifth year of his sannyas, on Saradiya Vijaya Dasami (28th September 1514),⁸ Sri Caitanya, accompanied by a few of his followers, left Nilachal (Puri) in order to see his mother and the Ganga. After eighteen days of journey, he arrived at Panihati by a boat that he had taken from Pichalda. The day was Krishna Dvadasi in the month of Kartik (i.e., the twelfth day of the black fortnight of the Bengali month corresponding to October-November). A large crowd came to meet him. As Kavi Karnapura wrote in his drama, Sri Caitanya Candrodhayam: 'The moment Mahaprabhu Sri Caitanya arrived at the bank of the Ganga, scores of people came from all directions and crowded around. How can this wonderful event be described?'⁹

The Caitanya Caritamrita added: 'Raghav Pundit came and escorted Prabhu [Sri Caitanya] away, but due to the great crowd it was difficult to walk. After staying there that day, Prabhu left the next morning for Kumarhatta [i.e., Kamarhati], where Srivas lived.'¹⁰



Gauranga ghat, Panihati, associated with Caitanya, Nityananda, and Ramakrishna

Several Vaishnava books mention the Caitanya Premotsava (the festival of divine love) held at Panihati commemorating this event. For about eighty years this festival has been celebrated, along with a one-day fair, in remembrance of Caitanya's visit. Sri Caitanya arrived at Panihati on a Sunday. If the above-mentioned lunar day does not fall on a Sunday, then the festival is held on the Sunday just after it. Every year at this time the devotees are carried away on waves of devotional fervour.

The Caitanya Bhagavata, however, gives a somewhat different version of Sri Caitanya's visit. Its author, Vrindavan Das, was earlier than Krishnadas Kaviraj, the author of the Caitanya Caritamrita. The date of the composition of the Caitanya Bhagavata is 1575-76, while that of the Caitanya Caritamrita is 1615-16. According to Vrindavan Das, Sri Caitanya came to Panihati in June 1515 while returning to Puri after visiting his home. He first stayed at Srivas's house at Kumarhatta and then came to Panihati. When he arrived, Raghav lay prostrate before him welcoming him. Vrindavan Das wrote: 'Sri Gauranga Hari stayed at Panihati for a few days, showering his blessings.'¹¹

He specially blessed the devout Raghav Pundit and his sister Damayanti for their devoted service. According to the Caitanya Bhagavata, he said, 'I derive the same pleasure at Raghav's place as I get from bathing in the Ganga.'

On the authority of these two source books—the Caitanya Bhagavata and the Caitanya Caritamrita—some claim that Sri Caitanya visited Panihati twice.¹² Others say that the same incident was recorded in those two books differently. But all agree that the extraordinary waves of divine love raised by Sri Caitanya at Panihati, as well as the presence of Sri Nityananda (1473-1545), gave the movement tremendous impetus.¹³ Sri Nityananda's role in the propagation of Sri Caitanya's religion was especially important, particularly in Panihati, and was next only to that of Sri Caitanya.

In 1516 (1438 Saka), for three months, Sri Nityananda stayed at Panihati and day and night danced in ecstasy, singing the name of the Lord. As the Caitanya Bhagavata described it: 'In the village of Panihati, Prabhu Nityananda rejoiced in ecstatic singing and dancing for three months. And for those three months, no one there lived in the material world. No one had any human requirements or wants.'¹⁴

Sri Nityananda and his disciples lived at that time at Raghav Pundit's place, and their ecstatic singing and dancing converted it into a second Navadvip. One day Sri Nityananda was having a ceremonial bath with sacred water while sitting on Raghav's Vishnu-khatta (seat). At that time 'kadamba flowers were seen on a Jambir (pomelo) tree'. Then suddenly the fragrance of damanak flowers was noticed in the air. Sri Nityananda explained the phenomena to his followers, saying, 'Prabhu Sri Caitanya himself has come all the way from Nilachal to see your dancing and singing.' The devotees rejoiced to hear these words. In this way, for three months 'the ecstatic waves of Nityananda's singing the names of the Lord flooded all the villages on the banks of the Ganga'.

Hearing that Sri Nityananda had come to Panihati, Prince Raghunath Das (1495-1585) hurriedly came from Saptagram and surrendered himself at his feet. In those days Saptagram was the foremost commercial centre in Bengal. Two brothers—Hiranya and Govardhan—had been awarded lease rights by the Pathan Badshah of Gaur. After paying the king an annual revenue of 800,000 rupees, their annual income from the property was 1,200,000 rupees. Hiranya had no children. Raghunath was the only son of Govardhan and was to inherit that vast wealth, but from his childhood he had no interest in the world. On the advice of Sri Caitanya, however, he had married and led a dispassionate householder's life.

The day Raghunath came was Sukla Trayodasi (the thirteenth day of the bright fortnight) of the month of Jaistha (May-June) in 1516. This incident is described in the

sixth chapter of the Antyalila of the Caitanya Caritamrita thus: 'At Panihati he [Raghunath] saw Prabhu Nityananda with a group of kirtan singers, attendants, and a crowd of people. Like the rising sun, Prabhu Nityananda was seated on a platform under a tree on the bank of the Ganga with devotees all around him. Seeing him from a distance encircled by the illumined devotees, Raghunath was struck with wonder and lay down prostrate where he was. An attendant then said, 'Raghunath is prostrating.' Hearing this, Nityananda said to Raghunath: 'You thief! Now you come to see me. Come, come here. Today I'll punish you!'

There are several explanations of why Sri Nityananda called Raghunath a thief. According to orthodox Vaishnavas, Sri Caitanya was the coveted treasure of Nityananda, and only those fortunate ones blessed by Nityananda could get the opportunity to take refuge with Sri Caitanya, and none else. But Raghunath enjoyed Sri Caitanya's blessed company twice without the knowledge of Nityananda—once at Shantipur and later at Puri. So this was as good as stealing Nityananda's treasure.¹⁵ Giving another interpretation, Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sen said that despite having an innate detachment for the world, Raghunath feigned deep attachment to appease his family. Because of this deception Nityananda called him a thief.¹⁶ According to still another view, Raghunath had secretly come to Panihati with the intention of seeing and serving Nityananda and his followers, and this is what earned him the epithet 'thief'.

With his head bowed, a delighted Raghunath came forward to accept the 'punishment' given by Nityananda. Krishnadas Kaviraj wrote: "'Feed my people with chira [flattened rice] and yoghurt," [said Nityananda]. When Raghunath heard this, his heart was filled with joy. Immediately he called people from his village and had them bring food and vessels. Chira, yoghurt, milk, sandesh, sugar, and plantains—all the food was distributed. As news of the great festival spread, brahmins and others gathered in large numbers.'

The chira was soaked in water in large vessels. Then part of it was mixed with the yoghurt, sugar, and plantain, and the rest was mixed with thickened milk, champa-plantain, sugar, ghee, and camphor. Sri Nityananda sat on an elevated platform, and around him sat Ramdas, Sundarananda, Gadadhar Das, Kamalakar, Sadashiva, Purandar, and other distinguished Vaishnavas and invited brahmin pundits. A large number of people sat on the ground, while others sat on the bank of the Ganga. Each person was given two small earthen bowls—one containing the chira mixed with yoghurt, and the other containing the chira mixed with milk. There were twenty people serving.

After everyone had been served, Prabhu Nityananda performed a miracle. As Krishnadas Kaviraj described it: 'When everyone had been given chira, Prabhu Nityananda, through meditation, made Mahaprabhu [who was then living at Puri] come to the festival.' Welcoming Mahaprabhu, Nityananda showed him the bowls of chira and then playfully took a bit from each bowl and put it in Mahaprabhu's mouth. Sri Caitanya in turn took some and put it in Nityananda's mouth. Only a few fortunate devotees who had divine sight could see their play. Then the two of them sat down on seats next to each other, and at Nityananda's prompting 'the blessed sound "Hari! Hari" filled the air. Sanctifying their food thus with the name of Hari, the Vaishnavas began to eat.' The devotees felt as if they were enjoying a picnic by the river with Krishna on the bank of the

Yamuna—as if Panihati had been turned into Vrindavan. Meanwhile, some wayside stalls came up and did brisk business. Attaining the grace of Prabhu Nityananda thus, Raghunath Das felt blessed.

That evening, sankirtan was organized at Raghav Pundit's house. Krishnadas Kaviraj wrote: 'After making the devotees dance for some time, Nityananda himself began dancing and flooded the land with love. . . . Who can describe the beauty of his dancing? Mahaprabhu [Sri Caitanya] himself came to witness it.'

Another feast was then given to the devotees. Mahaprabhu again accepted the offered food, sitting next to Prabhu Nityananda, though only Nityananda could see him. As the Caitanya Caritamrita says: 'There was so much food, the devotees feasted to their hearts' content. They finished their meals and then left, chanting all the while "Hari! Hari!"'

The next morning Nityananda was sitting under the banyan tree surrounded by his disciples when Raghunath Das approached and prayed to him, 'Please be gracious and awaken consciousness in me.' Seeing his great earnestness, Nityananda put his feet on Raghunath's head and blessed him, saying, 'Very soon you will attain the grace of Caitanya's blessed feet.' After consulting with Raghav Pundit and taking permission from Prabhu Nityananda, Raghunath respectfully gave an offering to each of the devotees. He gave seven tolas of gold (1 tola = 180 grains) and one hundred rupees to Prabhu Nityananda, two tolas of gold and one hundred rupees to Raghav Pundit, and to everyone else—Nityananda's attendants and others who had taken refuge in him—Raghunath gave between two and twenty rupees. Raghunath returned to Saptagram, and a short while later he was able to renounce the world permanently and take refuge at Sri Caitanya's feet.

The previous day at the festival Prabhu Nityananda had said in an ecstatic mood: 'I am a gopa. I enjoy feasting merrily by the river in the company of other gopas.' At Vraja, Krishna and Balaram one day had a picnic on the bank of the Yamuna with the other cowherd boys, and the memory of those days was awakened in Nityananda's mind, absorbed as he was in the mood of Balaram.¹⁷ In order to commemorate this re-enactment of the gopa's divine play at Vraja, as well as the grace bestowed on Raghunath Das, the devotees assemble every year at the Mahotsavtala on Sukla Trayodasi (the thirteenth day of the bright fortnight). As long as Raghav Pundit was alive, he used to organize this festival. That is why it is known as 'Raghav Pundit's Chira Mahotsav', or simply 'the Chira Mahotsav' (the festival of flattened rice), or sometimes as 'Danda Mahotsav' (the festival to commemorate Raghunath's 'punishment').

For the past several hundred years, thousands and thousands of devotees have come to Panihati and been blessed by the waves of love set in motion by Mahaprabhu Caitanya and Prabhu Nityananda. And over the years Vaishnava saints and devotees have carefully maintained shrines and sites connected with their visits here. In the Caitanya Mangal, Jayananda wrote: 'Panihati has no peer among the villages on the banks of the Ganga. It is the site of large religious organizations and temples whose flags are flying.' Naturally then it is considered one of the most important centres of Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

Since the days of Sri Caitanya much water has flowed down the river past the sacred Mahotsavtala ghat, and many changes have taken place in the area—physically, socially,

and politically. Even within this past century the population has increased from four thousand in 1911 to more than two hundred and six thousand now. The quiet green village has been converted into a congested urban centre. In the nineteenth century the great changes taking place in nearby Calcutta, which was then the British capital of India, also swept through the neighbouring areas. When the RoyChaudhury family introduced European meals at their Rasotsava for their European guests, the village people were shocked. Gradually, because of such practices, people's enthusiasm for these festivals waned.

With the appearance of Sri Ramakrishna, however, the waves of divine love were restored, and people of all classes found joy and inspiration at Panihati. In the book Bhaktiratnakar it is said, 'Different shades of spiritual moods find their expression in the village Panihati.' And with the coming of Sri Ramakrishna a new dimension was added. Sri Ramakrishna, who was the personification of all sacred traditions and practices, established Panihati as a great centre of harmony by breaking down all communal barriers. In the history of Panihati, Sri Ramakrishna's divine play there was undoubtedly the most remarkable event of the nineteenth century.

Sri Ramakrishna's presence at the Panihati Mahotsav year after year created a tremendous stir. His intense love for God and his ecstatic singing and dancing flooded the area with new life and washed away all contrary ideas and influences that had accumulated through the years. Reflecting on the Master's influence on the large crowd gathered there, Ramchandra Datta wrote: 'We have had occasions to witness many sankirtans and emotionally-charged devotees, many learned ascetics, many expert musicians, many good performances of singing and dancing; but the sublime, expert singing and dancing of Paramahansa Deva cannot be compared with anyone else's except that of Caitanya Deva. Only those who have heard him singing the name of the Lord can understand. It is hardly a matter of surprise that the devotees of Hari would be filled with divine love and devotion on hearing that sankirtan. But even those having depraved instincts and emotions, who do not believe in God and are completely devoid of love and devotion, whose minds are either empty or made of iron, who imitate Western manners and consider it uncivilized to dance in public or on the street before others, and who say that emotional expressions of love and devotion are symptoms of insanity—even they are completely overwhelmed with divine love and join in the singing and dancing.'¹⁸

M., the recorder of the Gospel, also witnessed the Master's dancing at Panihati and described it thus: 'Thousands of devotees were gathered together for the festival. Wherever one looked there was a forest of human heads. The crowd seemed to become infected by the Master's divine fervour and swayed to and fro, chanting the name of God, until the very air seemed to reverberate with it. Drums, cymbals, and other instruments produced melodious sounds. The atmosphere became intense with spiritual fervour. The devotees felt that Gauranga himself was being manifested in the person of Sri Ramakrishna. Flowers were showered from all sides on his feet and head. The shouting of the name of Hari was heard even at a distance, like the rumbling of the ocean.'¹⁹

The appearance of Sri Ramakrishna every year at Panihati, a place sanctified by Sri Gauranga, held great attraction for everyone, so naturally the pilgrims, and especially the

local people, eagerly awaited his visits. According to Sashibhusan Ghosh, Sri Ramakrishna first participated in the Panihati festival in 1868, but according to Swami Saradananda, the author of Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master, the year was 1858.²⁰ After examining all the facts, we are inclined to accept the second opinion. In that year the Danda Mahotsav was held on Thursday, 24th June. Learning about Sri Ramakrishna's desire to participate at the Panihati festival, his patron Mathurmohan made the necessary arrangements. Most probably the Master went there by boat from Dakshineswar along with his nephew Hriday. Mathurmohan also went along incognito and hired a guard to protect Sri Ramakrishna in case he had any difficulty.

When Sri Ramakrishna arrived the festival was in full swing, and the name of God was reverberating through the air from the crowd. Seeing the Master, the very image of Sri Caitanya, people were beside themselves with joy. And when he started dancing in ecstasy, thousands of people chanted the name of God as loud as they could. It was an extraordinary scene.

On that day Vaishnavcharan, a highly learned scholar and 'one who had attained supreme knowledge', met Sri Ramakrishna for the first time at Mani Sen's temple. He could immediately recognize that Sri Ramakrishna was 'in a high state of spirituality and that he was one of the rarest of great souls'.²¹ Vaishnavcharan bought some chira, mangoes, curds, and sweets, mixed them in an earthen bowl, and then offered it to the Lord and joyfully took the prasada along with the Master. But according to Gurudas Burman, Sri Ramakrishna passed into such a deep state of ecstasy that he couldn't eat anything. While returning from the festival to Calcutta,²² Vaishnavcharan stopped at the Dakshineswar Kali temple to see the Master again, but he left disappointed on hearing that Sri Ramakrishna had not yet come back.

Mani Sen was specially blessed by the Master. After Mathurmohan died on 16th July 1871, Mani Sen took on the responsibility of looking after the Master's needs until Sambhucharan Mallick took over.²³ Radha and Krishna are the family deities of the Sens²⁴ and are worshipped in their house daily. Their two-storied house is built on a foundation three feet above the ground. The parlour is on the lower level. To the south of the house is the front gate, which leads to a garden, and next to the garden is the family temple. Gaur and Nitai are in the centre of the shrine, with Radha and Krishna to the south and Revati and Balaram to the north. Other deities in the shrine include Jagannath, Balaram, and Subhadra, Mangalachandi, and a Narayana shila. Recently at the top of the building the following inscription has been added, most likely inspired by the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna: 'Om Amritatirtha! Sarva dharme ek bhagavan.' (Om, the holy place of nectar! The same Lord is in all religions.)

According to Ramchandra Datta and Swami Abhedananda, Sri Ramakrishna attended the Panihati festival every year thereafter. M., the recorder of the Gospel, attended the festival at least twice with the Master, but he has given us a description of only one of those incidents, that of 1883. M. said, 'The Master came here almost every year.' Describing Sri Ramakrishna's visit to the festival in 1885, Swami Saradananda wrote that the Master 'joined that festival many times before'. So, according to him, the Master did not attend the festival every year. Swami Saradananda added, 'But, owing to various

reasons, he had not done so for a few years since his devotees, educated in the Western way, came to him.’²⁵ It appears from various facts that during this time he attended the festival in 1881, 1883, and 1885.



Entrance to Mani Sen's house, Panihati

Details of the 1883 visit are given in the Gospel as well as in Swami Adbhutananda's reminiscences. The festival was held that year on 18 June. After eating his lunch, Sri Ramakrishna left for Panihati in a carriage arranged by Ramchandra Datta. Ram, M., Rakhal, Bhavanath, Latu, and a couple other devotees accompanied the Master. This was the first time Latu had attended the festival. The carriage moved along Magazine Road and then went down Barrackpore Trunk Road. On the way Sri Ramakrishna was in a light mood and joked with the young devotees. The carriage arrived at Panihati via Ramchand Ghat Road and soon after, reached the festival grounds.

Before the devotees knew what had happened, Sri Ramakrishna left the carriage and ran into the crowd. Navadvip Goswami, the guru of Mani Sen's family, was singing kirtan on his way to Raghav Pundit's temple. The Master immediately joined his kirtan party and started dancing in ecstasy. The sight of the Master's God-intoxicated dancing filled the hearts of the people with bliss. Every now and then he lost all external consciousness and remained standing in samadhi, carefully supported by Navadvip Goswami lest he should fall. Shouts of 'Haribol' reverberated through the air, and people from all sides started throwing flowers and batasa (a kind of sweet) towards the Master. The Master's divine intoxication was contagious, and the atmosphere became intense with spiritual fervour. As people jostled each other to see him, the Master danced in a semi-conscious state. When he regained external consciousness, he began singing, with others joining in the chorus:

Behold, the two brothers have come, who weep
while chanting Hari's name,
The brothers who dance in ecstasy and make
the world dance in His name!

People then began dancing with the Master, who was again in ecstasy. Some felt that Gaur and Nitai both were dancing in the form of Sri Ramakrishna. After that, the Master sang:

See how all Nadia is shaking
Under the waves of Gauranga's love!

The kirtan party moved slowly forward. Seeing the Master, one was reminded of Kavi Karnapura's description of Sri Caitanya attending the Snan Yatra (the Bathing Festival of Lord Jagannath) at Puri. He wrote: 'Who is this golden jewel before my eyes, whose glorious rays, like those of the sun, dispel all worldliness from people's minds, and whose infinite grace and beauty has flooded all directions with the nectar of divine love?' Similarly, the grace, beauty, and ecstasy of the Master, who was the embodiment of renunciation, removed from the minds of the people all attachment for the world and filled them with divine love. It seemed to them that this very earth had been turned into heaven.

On reaching Raghav Pundit's temple, the kirtan party went round and round, all the while singing and dancing. Sri Ramakrishna saluted Raghav's family deity, Madanmohan, and then headed towards Mani Sen's Radha-Krishna temple on the bank of the Ganga with the crowd around him. Very few could enter the temple precincts with the Master. The rest jostled each other for a glimpse of him. The Master's dancing was at its best in the temple courtyard. M. wrote: 'In a mood of intoxication he began to dance in the courtyard of the shrine. Every now and then his body stood transfixed in deep samadhi. Hundreds of people around him shouted the name of God, and thousands outside caught the strain and raised the cry with full-throated voices. The echo travelled over the

Ganges, striking a note in the hearts of people in the boats on the holy river, and they too chanted the name of God.²⁶

Some additional facts are known from the reminiscences of Latu (Swami Adbhutananda): 'On that occasion we saw the Master in the deepest state of samadhi, and we became afraid. His breathing had stopped. His face, eyes, mouth, chest, everything had become red. Even the palms of his hands were red. Seeing him in that state, people began pushing and shoving each other to take the dust of his feet. We were in great difficulty. In spite of our telling them not to, everyone wanted to touch the Master. No one would listen to us, and so there was a row. Ram Babu said: "Leto, don't stop them. Let them be blessed by touching him." But I did not agree. I had personally seen how he suffered when touched by people while he was in a state of samadhi. Though Ram Babu repeatedly told us not to, three of us—Rakhal, Bhavanath, and I—took the Master away and brought him to the parlour. But would the people stop? Even as we took him away they scrambled to touch his feet. Do you know what Ram Babu did then? He grabbed a handful of dust, touched it to the Master's feet, and began distributing it to everyone. Only then could the Master be taken away.'²⁷

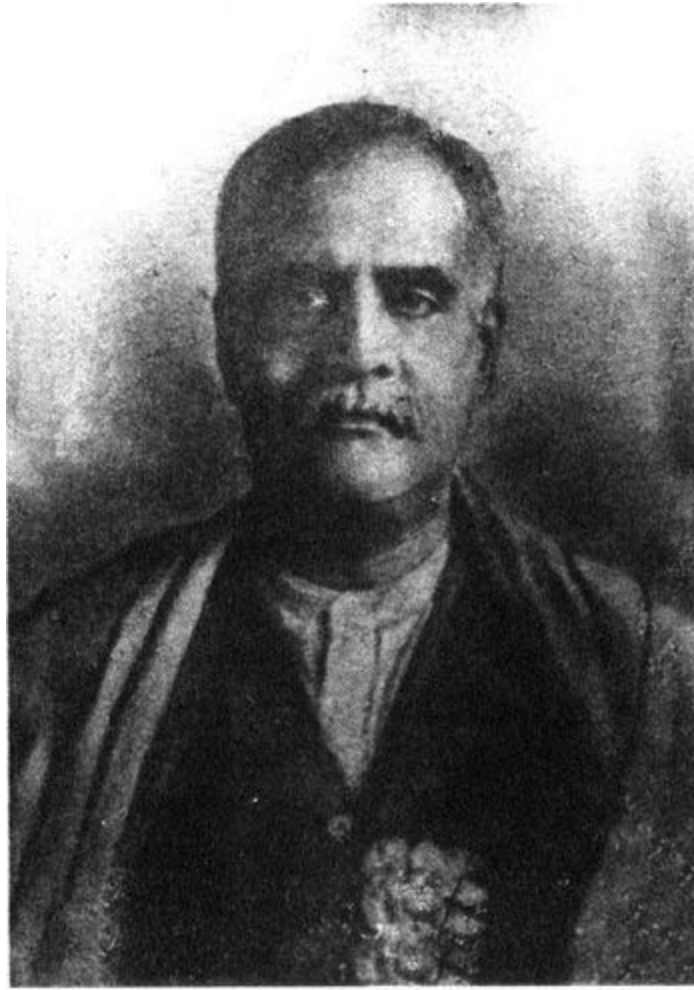
Sri Ramakrishna rested for a while in Mani Sen's parlour and then he and Navadvip Goswami were taken to another room and served refreshments. Afterwards the Master's companions were also taken to a room and given refreshments. Sri Ramakrishna himself helped serve them. After eating they all returned to the parlour, including Navadvip Goswami. When Mani Sen offered to pay the carriage fare, the Master told him it was not necessary. Navadvip then introduced his son, who was a student of the scriptures, to the Master.

Sri Ramakrishna said to them: 'The important thing is to know the essence of the scriptures. After that, what is the need of books? One should learn the essence and then dive deep in order to realize God. The Divine Mother has revealed to me the essence of the Vedanta. It is that Brahman alone is real and the world illusory. The essence of the Gita is what you get by repeating the word ten times. The word becomes reversed. It is then "tyagi", which refers to renunciation.' Navadvip explained: 'Not exactly "tyagi". It becomes "tagi". But it means the same thing. The word "tag" joined with the primary suffix "ghang", plus the secondary suffix "in", makes "tagi". But "tyagi" and "tagi" mean the same thing.' Sri Ramakrishna then said: 'The essence of the Gita is: "O man, renounce everything and practise spiritual disciplines for the realization of God."²⁸

While speaking of Sri Krishna and Arjuna, Sri Ramakrishna went into samadhi. His body suddenly became motionless and his eyes fixed. His breathing could hardly be noticed. Everyone gazed at him in amazement. After regaining some consciousness, Sri Ramakrishna again spoke to Navadvip, advising him to live in the world and at the same time call on God. A true devotee, he said, is one who dwells in God, whose mind, life, and inmost soul are merged in God.²⁹

As the invited brahmins and Vaishnavas took their leave, Mani Sen presented to some of them two rupees and to others one rupee. He offered five rupees to Sri Ramakrishna, but the Master would not accept anything in spite of repeated requests. At last, some of Mani Sen's friends gave the money to Rakhal to buy some mangoes and sweets.

According to Latu's account: 'Rakhal bought one basket of mangoes and another basket of sweets with the money and returned to Dakshineswar. But seeing this, the Master was very much displeased and warned Rakhal, saying: "Listen, don't ever do that again. Your acceptance is the same as my acceptance. Birds and monks do not lay things up."'^{[30](#)}



Mani Sen

Sri Ramakrishna then returned to Dakshineswar, and the devotees also returned to their homes carrying within their hearts the sweet, blissful memory of the occasion. The holy town of Panihati, which had been sanctified by the presence of Sri Caitanya and Sri Nityananda, was further enriched by Sri Ramakrishna's visit. His divine play in Mani Sen's courtyard^{[31](#)} added a new chapter to its history.

Without doubt, Sri Ramakrishna rejuvenated Panihati as a pilgrimage centre by his visits year after year on the occasion of the Chira Mahotsava.^{[32](#)} But the wonderful divine fervour that he manifested during his last visit in 1885 was perhaps never seen before. On that last occasion he went there with a special purpose. He wanted his young English-educated devotees to witness how Vaishnavas of various sects—such as nedas and nedis (shaven-headed monks and nuns), Auls, Bauls, and so forth, illiterate though some may be—enjoyed the bliss of divine love while singing the name of God. 'A fair of bliss—a veritable mart of the name of Hari—assembles there on that day,' he told his disciples. 'You "Young Bengal" have never seen such a thing. Let us go and witness it.'^{[33](#)} The devotees were delighted. But some were apprehensive of the Master's health. He was

then having a pain in his throat which was later diagnosed as cancer.

In 1885, the festival was held on Thursday, 25 June. That morning about twenty-five devotees, headed by Ramchandra Datta, came to Dakshineswar in two rented boats.³⁴ A separate boat was arranged for Sri Ramakrishna. By ten o'clock everyone had finished eating and they set off in the boats for Panihati. A few women devotees were included in the party.³⁵ About noon the boats reached the festival grounds at Panihati. Lush green trees—mango, berry, neem, and kadamba—lined the banks of the river. The sky was overcast, and at times it drizzled making the paths muddy. A large crowd had gathered under the old banyan tree, and a few kirtan parties were performing. But in spite of everything there was an emptiness about it all. As Swami Saradananda, who was present then, described it, 'It was everywhere a sort of lifeless affair.'³⁶

Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples left their boats and went straight to Mani Sen's house. The whole household welcomed the Master and then took him to their parlour to rest. The room was well furnished in the English style. After about ten or fifteen minutes, Sri Ramakrishna got up and went with the devotees to the Radha-Krishna temple to pay his obeisance. The temple was near the parlour. After gazing at the beautiful images of Radha and Krishna for a while, the Master made his salutations in an ecstatic mood. Just then a kirtan party entered the courtyard in front of the temple and began singing the name of the Lord. A tall, fat, middle-aged Vaishnava with a sacred thread and a tuft of hair on his head also came in. He had a rosary in a bag and a bunch of coins tied in a corner of the clean white cloth he was wearing. He was tidily dressed with a shawl on his shoulder. As the kirtan party sang, he began to roar and dance and wave his arms, as if he were in a state of ecstasy. Seeing him, Sri Ramakrishna whispered to the disciples standing nearby, 'Mark the hypocrisy!'

A moment later everything changed. With one leap the Master jumped into the middle of the kirtan party and went into ecstasy. Due to the pain in his throat, the devotees had earlier asked him not to mingle with any kirtan party so that he could avoid going into ecstasy, but now it was all forgotten. One moment he was dancing with the strength of a lion in a state of partial consciousness, and the next he was still, without any external consciousness. The devotees stood around him. After witnessing the fake trance of the Vaishnava, people were delighted to see Sri Ramakrishna's divine ecstasy.



Courtyard in front of Mani Sen's temple where Ramakrishna danced

Swami Saradananda describes the Master's dancing thus: 'Dancing under the influence of spiritual emotions, he was now proceeding, now receding with a rapid step to the timing of the music. He seemed like a fish swimming about in great delight in a sea of bliss. . . . Overflowing with the intense joy of divine feeling, when his body swayed to and fro in quick steps, one seriously wondered whether it was made of any solid, physical substance at all. One thought as if waves, mountain high, rose in a sea of bliss and were going forward carrying everything before them and would melt that very moment, liquid in liquid, and vanish out of people's sight.'³⁷ The Master was wearing a bright ochre-coloured silk cloth that blended with his skin, and as he danced in ecstasy he seemed to be 'surrounded by flames of fire'.³⁸ It was as if Sri Caitanya had appeared again in ochre clothes.

In an article entitled 'Nritya' (Dance), Girish Chandra Ghosh wrote: 'Prakashananda Sarasvati was a very austere yogi and did not care for Sri Gauranga. At Kashi he was absorbed in sadhana on 'Soham' (I am He). . . . Once he saw Gauranga dancing before him. Gauranga's movements were like waves, causing hundreds of moons to strike him

and bounce back. The austere sannyasi was at that time studying the Upanishads. Becoming distracted, he looked up. Then he went back to his studies. But again he looked up and saw Gauranga dancing before him. It seemed that Gauranga was on a dancing spree. Without any music, without any singing, Gauranga was dancing in ecstasy in sannyasin's garb. Prakashananda kept staring. His eyes became fixed on him, and he was oblivious to everything else. Suddenly the fearless sannyasi became agitated and started running. Though he was out of breath, he ran and ran till he reached Gauranga and embraced him. We would not have believed this if we had not seen Ramakrishna Paramahansa. "Nadia is shaking, shaking madly." To the rhythm of the mridanga [a classical drum], Ramakrishna was dancing. The whole world was shaking under the spell of that ecstasy. It wasn't Nadia alone—everything was shaking. There is no doubt that whoever saw that dancing was immediately drawn to the divine.³⁹



Inside Mani Sen's temple

After about a half an hour Sri Ramakrishna regained normal consciousness, and the devotees started escorting him towards Raghav Pundit's house. The kirtan party followed them singing with great enthusiasm:

Who is singing Hari's name upon the sacred Ganges' bank?
Is it Nitai that has come, the giver of heavenly love? . . .⁴⁰



Raghav Pundit's samadhi (left) museum (right), Raghav Pundit's house, Panihati

They thought—indeed, the whole gathering thought—that Nitai, the bestower of divine love, had appeared again at Panihati. After moving but a few steps forward, Sri Ramakrishna would go into samadhi and stand motionless. Then, regaining partial consciousness, he would take three or four more steps and again go into ecstasy. People came rushing there from all sides, and other kirtan parties joined them. They were all singing with great enthusiasm. The huge crowd of people proceeded slowly with the Master in front. Occasional drizzles created puddles of water in places.⁴¹

Suddenly the devotees noticed a wonderful change in Sri Ramakrishna's physical features. As Swami Saradananda describes it: 'His tall figure as seen by us daily, looked much taller and appeared to be as light as a body seen in a dream. Getting brighter, the light dark colour of his body turned into a fair complexion. Brightened by the divine mood and lit up by an incomparable smile coming out of his slightly parted lips, his face beaming with glory, peace, bliss and compassion, spread a wonderful light, which illumined all sides. Bewitched, as it were, by the sight, the vast congregation forgot all other things and followed him almost unknowingly.'⁴²

Girish Chandra Ghosh also attested to this extraordinary incident: 'I failed to determine his complexion even after seeing it so many times before. At different times I have seen him with different complexions. At Panihati I saw his body having different colours.' Akshay Kumar Sen described it in the Punthi thus: 'At Raghav ghat, on the way to the Radha-Krishna temple, the Master suddenly went into ecstasy. We had never seen such ecstasy in him before. He had been looking up in the sky to the southeast when he suddenly lost all external consciousness. He became absolutely still, as if he were an inert object.'⁴³ Sri Ramakrishna remained in that state for about an hour. Some of the devotees tried to bring his mind back to normal consciousness by repeating the sacred word Om. Not getting any result, however, they became extremely worried. At last the Master himself regained external consciousness.

Meanwhile, some of the women devotees had offered a few platefuls of sweets to the

images of Gauranga and Nityananda and were bringing them to Sri Ramakrishna. On their way, a man dressed as a Vaishnava monk snatched a plate from one of the devotees and came to the Master. Pretending to be overwhelmed with devotion, he put one of the sweets in the Master's mouth. Immediately, at the man's touch, the Master's whole body recoiled and his ecstasy was broken. He spat out the food and rinsed his mouth, while the man slunk away. Then the Master took a little of the offered sweets from one of the women, and the rest was given to the devotees.



Inside museum, Raghav Pundit's house, Panihati

It took almost three hours to reach Raghav Pundit's house. After saluting the deities in the temple, the Master rested for about a half an hour. Seeing then that most of the crowd had gone away, the devotees took Sri Ramakrishna to the boat. There is no mention in The Great Master of the Master's taking prasad at Mani Sen's house. Every year the Master used to take the prasad of Radha-Krishna at the Sen's house after visiting the temples and participating in the sankirtans. The question then arises, was there any departure from the custom that year? Most likely not. In Latu Maharaj's reminiscences it is said, 'The Master received prasad that year, and after taking it, he blissfully danced with both hands raised.'⁴⁴ It can be reasonably guessed that on the way back from Raghav Pundit's cottage, Sri Ramakrishna took prasad at the Sen's residence and after that went to the boat.



Shyamsundar shrine, Raghav Pundit's house, Panihati

Just as the boat was about to start, a wonderful incident took place. An elderly devotee named Navachaitanya Mitra came running like a madman to Sri Ramakrishna and fell at his feet. Weeping bitterly, he begged for the Master's grace. Sri Ramakrishna then went into an ecstatic mood and touched him. At the Master's touch, Navachaitanya was beside himself with joy. He danced and sang the Master's praises without any restraint and prostrated at his feet again and again. Sri Ramakrishna gently stroked Navachaitanya's body and he became calm. After Navachaitanya had left the boat, the Master started for Dakshineswar. The sun was about to set.

Many of the places associated with Sri Caitanya at Navadvip have been washed away by the Ganga, but at Panihati everything has been well preserved. The Vaishnavas firmly believe in Caitanya's 'abiding presence at Raghav's cottage'.⁴⁵ Panihati is where Sri Caitanya began preaching his religion of love, and it is where the tradition of malsa bhoga (offered food in an earthen bowl) began.⁴⁶ Vaishnavas believe that the holy town of Panihati continually vibrates with consciousness, and that is why for hundreds of years devotees have gathered here to sing the name of the Lord and pray. In the language of Sri Ramakrishna it may be said: 'Their devotion has made God-consciousness solidified here. That's why divine feelings and divine visions are realized easily here.'

During the nineteenth century, Sri Caitanya and Sri Nityananda reappeared in the form of Sri Ramakrishna. Almost every year, for more than two decades, the Master visited Panihati and renewed and revived Sri Caitanya's religion of love. The power and efficacy of chanting the name of the Lord was embodied in Sri Ramakrishna. And like Caitanya, his life also verified the different stages of divine consciousness—the normal state of external consciousness, the semi-conscious state, and the inmost state when all consciousness of the external world is gone. The Master's manifestation of divine fervour removed whatever impurities had accumulated at the holy place and made the blessed mart of God's name living and vibrant again. Moreover, as Sri Ramakrishna was the embodiment of all religions, his association with Panihati made it a shrine for all religions.

Today also, the compassionate Mother Ganga, the great purifier of all, continues to flow gently past Panihati's Ramchand ghat, Gauranga ghat, and Sen's ghat. And on the banks of the river, the soft breeze of love and devotion, the manifestation of God's grace, still blows, uplifting the hearts of thousands and thousands of people. And the ancient banyan tree still bears testimony to the extraordinary events that have happened there over the years. O banyan tree, how fortunate you are!



Notes and References

1. Binoy Ghosh, *Paschimbanger Sanskriti* (1957), 637.
2. Ashok Mitra *Paschimbanger Puja, Parban o Mela* (Delhi: Manager of Publ., 1963), III:102. See also, W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (Delhi: D.K. Publ. House, 1973), I:34 & 170.
3. Kamal Chowdhury, *Uttar Chabbish Parganar Itibritta* (1897), 138.
4. Sisir Kumar Ghosh, *Sri Amiya Nimai Carit* (Calcutta: Viswabani Prakashani, 1983), vol. I, Introduction.
5. Krishnadas Kaviraj, *Sri Sri Caitanya Caritamrita, Adi Lila*, chapter 10.
6. *Sri Gaurganoddesadipika*, 116.
7. Details of Raghav's bag are given in the *Sri Sri Caitanya Caritamrita, Antya Lila*, chapter 10. There it is mentioned, 'Raghav set out [for Puri] with his bag filled up with snacks [for Caitanya] supplied by Damayanti.'
8. Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyaya, *Caitanyadeva* (Calcutta: D.M. Library, 1984), 10.
9. Paramananda Sena *Kavikarnapura, Sri Caitanya Candrodaya*, trans. by Manindranath Guha (1378 B.S.), 358.
10. *Caitanya Caritamrita, Madhya Lila*, chapter 16. Kumarhatta is currently known as Halisahar.
11. Vrindavan Das, *Sri Sri Caitanya Bhagavata, Antya Lila*, chapter 5. The present spelling is Panihati, but in old Vaishnava books the spelling Panihati is also found.
12. Amulyadhan Roy, *Srimat Raghavpundit o Sripat Panihati Mahatmya*. (*Sahitya Parishad Patrika*, 1322), 280.
13. *Caitanyadeva*, 56-58.
14. *Sri Sri Caitanya Bhagavata, Antya Lila*, chapter 5.
15. *Caitanya Caritamrita, Antya Lila*, ed. by Radhagovinda Nath (3rd ed.), 274.
16. Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Brihat Banga* (Calcutta: Calcutta Univ., 1341 B.S.), II:723. According to Dr. Sen, Raghunath met Sri Caitanya only once at Shantipur.
17. Prabhu Nityananda is said to have been Balaram, Krishna's elder brother, in his previous life.
18. Ramchandra Datta, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadever Jivanvrittanta*, 68-69.
19. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981), 253.
20. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. by Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2nd rev. ed. 1956), 166.
21. *Ibid.*
22. According to Gurudas Burman's source, Vaishnavcharan went to Panihati from Dakshineswar by steamer.
23. *Great Master*, 307.
24. The original home of the Sen family was at Adisaptagram. They were suvarnavaniks by caste and had an export-import business. Manimohan's father, Gurucharan Sen, lived in the Tulapatti area of Calcutta, and Jadu Mallick was Mani Sen's brother-in-law. Due to family problems, Mani Sen settled in Panihati. Navadvip Goswami's family of Khardah was the Sen's family guru. On his guru's advice, Gurucharan Sen built temples at several places—Ekchakra, Navadvip, Vrindavan, Pandua (South), Panihati, and Agarpara. These facts have been obtained from Laxminarayan Sen, Mani Sen's great-grandson.
25. *Great Master*, 822.
26. *Gospel*, 254.
27. Chandrasekhar Chattopadhyaya, *Sri Sri Latu Maharajer Smritikatha* (Calcutta, Udbodhan Office, 3rd ed.), 97-98.
28. *Gospel*, 255, & *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (Calcutta: Udbodhan Karyalay, 1998), 225-26.
29. *Gospel*, 255-56.
30. *Sri Sri Latu Maharajer Smritikatha*.
31. In the *Ramakrishna Kathamrita* it is said, 'They [the Sen family] now organize festivals every year.' Inquiries reveal that the Sen family used to organize only the part of the festival which was related to their family deity Radha-Krishna. They did not organize the festival held at the Mahotsavtala. To date Mani Sen's family continues that tradition.
32. Besides the day of the festival, Sri Ramakrishna also went to Panihati on other days. For instance, he once went

there on the day of the Rathayatra (the Chariot Festival) with Girindra and Latu. (See Sri Sri Latu Maharajer Smritikatha)

[33.](#) Great Master, 822.

[34.](#) We find in the Gospel (p. 783) that on Saturday, June 13, 1885, Sri Ramakrishna was requesting the devotees to go to Panihati for the festival. As M. was somewhat afraid of travelling by boat, the Master reassured him, saying: 'We shall engage a big boat; then it won't toss about. Will Girish Ghosh be there?'

[35.](#) Among the women devotees were Yogin Ma and Golap Ma, while the men devotees included, among others, Narendranath, Saratchandra, Kaliprasad, Latu, Balaram, Girish, Ram, and M.

[36.](#) Great Master, 823.

[37.](#) Ibid., 824.

[38.](#) Ibid., 825.

[39.](#) Girishchandra Ghosh, Thakur Sri Ramakrishna o Swami Vivekananda, ed. by Sankari Prasad Basu and Bimalkumar Ghosh (1389 B.S.), 108-09.

[40.](#) Translation of song from the Gospel, 341.

[41.](#) A few days later Sri Ramakrishna told someone: 'Yes, just see, there was water above, water below, rain in the sky and mud on the roads and Ram took me there and made me dance the whole day before we returned!' Great Master, 831.

[42.](#) Ibid., 825.

[43.](#) Akshay Kumar Sen, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi (Calcutta: Udbodhan), 4.31.

[44.](#) Sri Sri Latu Maharajer Smritikatha, 98.

[45.](#) Caitanya Caritamrita, Antya Lila, chapter 2.

[46.](#) Sahitya Parishad Patrika, 1322, p. 257.

THE RATHAYATRA AND SRI RAMAKRISHNA

Throughout India, the ancient call of the rishis continues to resonate: 'O my children, know your true identity. You are pure Consciousness. Realize this Consciousness within yourself.' But it is in places of pilgrimage where this call is more clearly heard, and that is why people feel such an irresistible attraction for these holy places. Pilgrimages help people direct their minds towards God and create an urge in them to realize their true nature. To further attract people, festivals are held at pilgrimage places at different times. One of the most popular festivals of India is the Rathayatra (Journey by Chariot), or Rathotsava (Chariot Festival). There are different Rathayatras at different places of India. Some have also been described in the Puranas, such as Surya's Rathayatra (the Rathayatra of the Sun god), Sri Krishna's Rathayatra, Shiva's Rathayatra, and Jagannath's Rathayatra.

But of all these, Jagannath's Rathayatra at Puri is the most popular and has the strongest emotional appeal for people throughout India, from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari. It has been highly praised by the Skanda Purana, which says: 'The blessed sight of Purushottama [Jagannath], Balabhadra, and Subhadra installed majestically in their chariots on their excursion will certainly redeem human beings.'

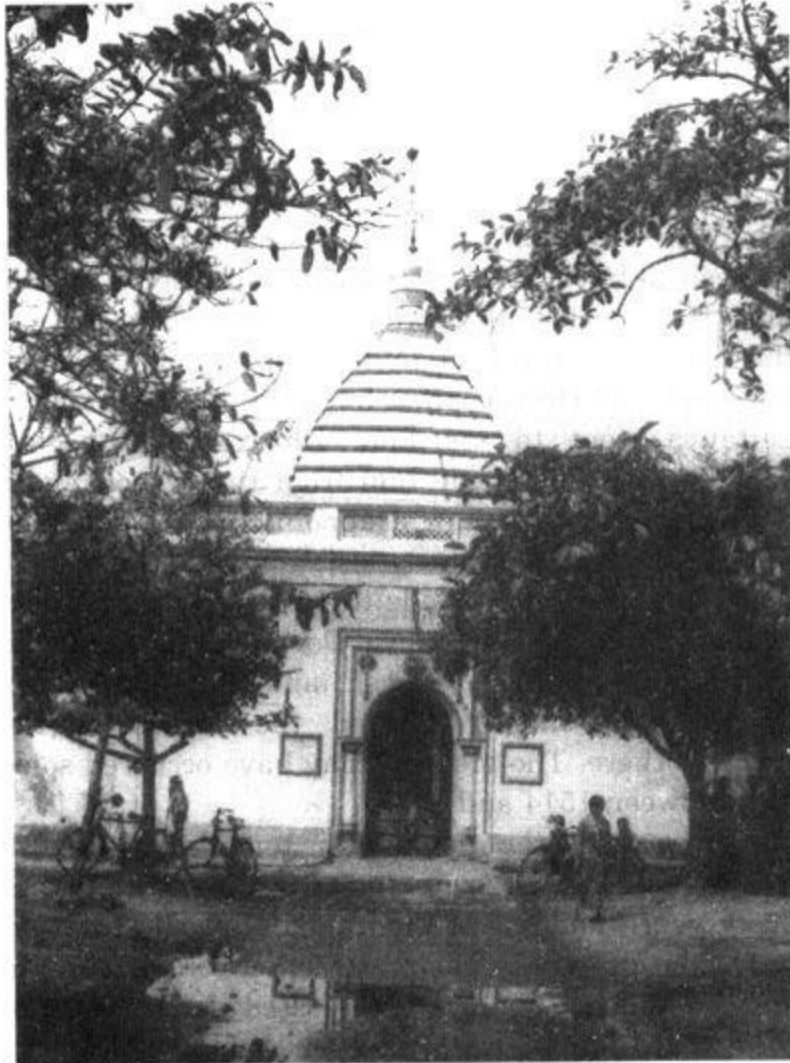
Having a glimpse of Jagannath seated on his chariot is considered very sanctifying, and great importance is attached to it. Its principal goal is to enable one to realize in the core of one's heart the eternal, pure, blissful Supreme Self within. Clear indications in support of this are given by the authors of the Upanishads. They compare the intellect to a charioteer and the sense organs to the horses. Well-controlled horses alone are capable of reaching the destination, which is the Supreme Self. The realization of the soul abiding within the body-chariot is the purpose of the festival. It is through such festivals that human beings set out on their divine journey.

Outside of the one at Puri, the next largest Rathayatra of Jagannath is held at Mahesh, in the Hooghly district of West Bengal. For the last several centuries, hundreds of thousands of people from different parts of India have been gathering at Mahesh year after year to join in the celebration. Many tales and legends have been passed down from generation to generation about the temple and the festival.¹

It is said that once Jagannath came to Mahesh from Puri to have a bath in the Ganga, and after taking his bath, he rested there for a while. To commemorate that incident, a temple was built and images made and consecrated. People then started frequenting the place. According to another story, the all-renouncing saint Dhruvananda once went to Puri for a pilgrimage. When he arrived, he had an intense desire to cook rice and offer it to Lord Jagannath, but his desire could not be fulfilled. Instead, he received only abuses and insults from the temple priests. Dhruvananda was extremely hurt, and at last he decided to put an end to his life. That night, however, Jagannath appeared to him in a dream and advised him to go to Mahesh, make some wooden images, and worship Him there. Dhruvananda was overjoyed.

On reaching Mahesh, Dhruvananda found a neem log lying on the bank of the Ganga. Understanding it was Lord Jagannath's will, he made three images out of that log. He then installed those images at his place of residence with formal ceremonies and started his worship and spiritual disciplines. Later the images were transferred to a temple, popularly known as Purana Mandir (the Old Temple), at Jagannath Ghat, near the bank of the Ganga. This temple had been built in 1140 A.D., but in course of time it had fallen into ruins.² Through the sincere desire and earnest efforts of the devotees, however, it could be renovated.

The present temple was built by 'Suvarnavanik' Nemai Churn Mallick in 1755 A.D. (1265 B.S.) and is a replica of the Jagannath temple at Puri. The height of the temple including the pinnacle is 70 ft. It is said that when the construction work of the temple was completed, the deities could not be installed because of resistance from the priests. Many years passed, and Nemai Churn's desire remained unfulfilled. At last, in 1807 the temple was consecrated and the three deities were installed. Fortunately, Nemai Churn was still alive then.



Jagannath temple, Mahesh

According to one story, when Sri Caitanya was on his way to Puri after renouncing the world, he took a bath in the Ganga at Vaidyavati and then came to Mahesh to have

darshan of Jagannath there. At that time Brahmachari Dhruvananda was about to die. His body was worn out and he was unable even to raise himself. He was then living at the temple, and Caitanya went to see him. Dhruvananda begged him piteously to relieve him from the responsibility of the temple, so Caitanya appointed his companion Kamalakar Piplai³ as the priest. Kamalakar's sincere devotion and worship made the temple deities living. It is also said that Caitanya Deva once participated in the Rathayatra of Mahesh, and that his ecstatic dancing and singing flooded the hearts of the devotees there. The incident may have occurred some time between 1514 and 1518.

Eventually the Jagannath temple at Mahesh became famous all over India for its Rathayatra. Every year hundreds of thousands of people from far and wide, drawn by their attraction for Jagannath, rush to Mahesh to have the blessed darshan of the Lord, and they return with their hearts full of joy. The Rathayatra at Mahesh is considered to be one of the outstanding festivals of India. According to a news report in the Samachar Darpan for 16th June 1821, three hundred thousand people participated that year in the Rathayatra there.



Jagannath, Balaram, and Subhadra, Jagannath temple, Mahesh

Every year on Shukla Dvitiya Tithi (the second day of the bright fortnight) of the month of Ashad (June-July), Jagannath leaves his temple with his brother Balaram and sister Subhadra and ascends the chariot. From there he blesses the innumerable devotees who gather around him. In the afternoon he reaches his aunt's house, the Gundicha temple,⁴ where he spends eight joyous days, and returns to the main temple on Shukla Dasami Tithi (the tenth day of the bright fortnight). The return journey from the Gundicha temple is known as Ulto Ratha (the Return Chariot Journey).

The chariot now in use at Mahesh was donated by the descendants of the late Krishna Chandra Basu of Shyambazar. It was built by M/s. Martin Burn & Co. out of iron and steel, and it weighs 125 tonnes. Adorned with nine pinnacles like navaratnas,⁵ it is fifty feet tall and has four stories. On the ground floor of the chariot stands an image of Sri Caitanya

Mahaprabhu, on the first floor Sri Krishna, on the second floor Sri Ramachandra, and on the third floor Jagannath, Balaram, and Subhadra. Two horses made of copper are mounted on the front of the chariot, one blue and the other white. The charioteer is made of wood and is the height of an average Bengali. This chariot was consecrated on Tuesday, 14th July 1885 (1292 B.S.). Previously a wooden chariot was in use which was built and donated by a person named Modak of Vaidyavati. It is said that to avoid the recurrent problem of the wooden chariot catching fire, an iron one was made. The wooden chariot no longer exists. Only the iron one is used now.

Sri Caitanya was not the only great soul to participate in the Mahesh Rathayatra. A few centuries later Sri Ramakrishna also came there, filling the hearts of the devotees with joy. Sri Ramakrishna was then living on the eastern bank of the Ganga at Dakshineswar, continuously absorbed in ecstatic communion with his Divine Mother Bhavatarini. But Sri Ramakrishna wanted others to share that joy with him. His loving invitations eventually brought many devotees to the Mother's playground, two of whom were Manomohan Mitra and Girindranath Mitra of Konnagar. Once, accompanied by the two of them, Sri Ramakrishna came to Mahesh. Seeing the image of Jagannath there, he passed into deep ecstasy. Afterwards they went to see the deity of the Radhavallabhji temple, just north of Mahesh. According to Akshay Kumar Sen, the author of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi, Sri Ramakrishna participated in the Mahesh Rathayatra every year thereafter.⁶



Iron chariot used for the Rathayatra, Mahesh

When Sri Caitanya came to Mahesh, he flooded the area with his divine love of God. Hardly had the waves of his ecstatic joy subsided than Sri Ramakrishna appeared, losing himself in the name of God. Amazed, the devotees wondered if Sri Caitanya had once again come on this earth. Nimai and Gadai (i.e., Sri Caitanya and Sri Ramakrishna), it seemed to them, were the same person. By their participation in the Mahesh Rathayatra, Sri Caitanya and Sri Ramakrishna greatly glorified the festival, and that is why year after year scores of people continue to come. Sri Ramakrishna's visits to Mahesh, his total absorption in the bliss of God, the stir created in the hearts of the devotees—everything he did—contributed to the spiritual welfare of all and added a new dimension to the festival. His last participation in the Rathayatra, however, was an especially memorable event. It was the day of the Ulto Ratha, the Return Festival, on 21st July 1885.



Radhavallabhji temple, Mahesh

The previous month, on 25th June (Shukla Tryodasi Tithi—i.e., the thirteenth lunar day of the bright fortnight—in the month of Ashad), Sri Ramakrishna had gone to Panihati for the Danda Mahotsav. There also the flood of divine emotion overwhelmed the devotees, who tasted its bliss to their heart's content. Then on 14th July Sri Ramakrishna attended the Rathayatra at Balaram Bose's house in Calcutta, where his God-intoxication was at its height. Referring to this, M. wrote in the Gospel: 'He [Sri Ramakrishna] stood in front of the car and pulled it by the rope. He began to sing and dance with the devotees in front of the car.

'The Master sang:

Behold, the two brothers have come,
who weep, while chanting Hari's name. . . .

'He sang again:

See how all Nadia is shaking
Under the waves of Gauranga's love! . . .

'The music and dancing went on in the verandah as the car was pulled to and fro. A large crowd entered the house on hearing the loud music and the beating of the drums. Sri Ramakrishna was completely intoxicated with divine love. The devotees felt its contagion and danced with the Master in an ecstasy of love.'⁷

When the pulling of the chariot was over, the Master went to the drawing-room and a similar scene followed. Devotional songs and dancing continued there, filling the hearts of the devotees with great joy. They lost all sense of time. It was 11:00 at night when the devotees took leave of the Master. At 9:00 the next morning the Master took a boat from Annapurna ghat and returned to Dakshineswar.

Ulto Ratha falls eight days after the Rathayatra. The Master also joined the celebration of Ulto Ratha, but not at Balaram's house. He went to Mahesh. The festival at Balaram's house was primarily a household affair, whereas the festival at Mahesh was for the public. There Sri Ramakrishna mingled with the vast throng of people. The people's Thakur lost himself in the people.

Sri Ramakrishna seemed to have a great attraction for the Ratha festival, and that is why he came that year, in spite of his failing health. Just before this he had participated in the festivals at Panihati and at Balaram Bose's house, and he was thoroughly exhausted. The pain from the sore in his throat, which was later diagnosed as cancer, had intensified, and his body could hardly support him any longer. But all this could not stop him. He was eager to join the festival at Mahesh. On the day of the Ulto Ratha he came to Mahesh by boat from Dakshineswar with a group of devotees that included, among others, Yajneswar, Haripada (Black), and Golap-Ma.

A three-storied house near the Jagannath temple was reserved for the Master's rest. Within a short time Golap-Ma cooked khichuri (rice and lentils cooked together), but Sri Ramakrishna could not enjoy the food. According to the Punthi: 'On that day the Lord did not enjoy his meal because of the severe pain in his throat. The devotees were depressed and began serving him carefully.'⁸ The devotees were in a dilemma also. The Master was ill, and in such a state, if he were to join the festival his illness would surely increase. They were unable to come to any decision.

As this was the first year that the iron chariot was being used, the influx of devotees was larger than ever before. The chariot had been decorated with flowers and leaves for its return journey to the Jagannath temple. The crowds were milling about here, there, and everywhere. It looked like a sea of humanity, and in the midst of it stood the elegant new chariot with Jagannath, Balaram, and Subhadra seated on the topmost level. God's divine sport in four eras was represented on the four levels of the chariot. The assembled people waited with great anticipation, and at last the music started, signalling that Jagannath would begin his journey. The large gathering filled the air with victory shouts, and then they began to sing. Songs, music, and victory shouts reverberated through the air. The hearts of the devotees were centred on the Lord alone, and their mouths did not chant anything other than his holy name. The entire sky, as well as the hearts of the

devotees, was saturated with sweetness.

At last the music reached the ears of Sri Ramakrishna, who was then taking rest. He could no longer stay in bed, nor could his ailing body hold him back. He quickly came down to the first floor verandah and saw the Ratha from there. The next moment he ran out of the house. The devotees also ran after him, but before they could catch him he was in the midst of the crowd, immersed in mahabhava (the most intense form of divine ecstasy) and totally unconscious of the external world. It was as if the Lord of the Universe were lost within Himself. His face was radiant, like the moon illumined by its own rays.

What alarmed the devotees most, however, was that the Master was standing directly in front of the moving wheels of the chariot. He was in imminent danger, but they were helpless as they could not get through the crowd. Moments passed, and their hearts beat furiously. What would happen? Then suddenly about fifty hefty men of the milkmen caste left the rope of the chariot and surrounded the Master, forming a protective ring around him. As the author of the Punthi described it: 'They anxiously shouted, "Look, our gracious Thakur is here!"' Saying this, they stood surrounding him lest any danger befall him. When the chariot stopped moving, people started enquiring about the reason. Word soon spread about the Master, and people came rushing over to see him, pushing and jostling each other. People in front, in back—in fact, on all sides—tried to have his darshan. All the while Thakur stood there quietly, completely absorbed within himself.⁹

In the Ratha sat Jagannath, while on the ground stood Sri Ramakrishna in ecstasy. The attention of the crowd completely changed now. Everyone became mad to have a glimpse of Sri Ramakrishna. They felt that Lord Jagannath and Sri Ramakrishna were one, that the Lord had completely possessed Sri Ramakrishna. To have the sight of Sri Ramakrishna was to have the vision of the Lord. As the scriptures say, 'Rathe tu vamanam dristva punarjanma na vidyate—If one sees the Lord in the chariot, one is not reborn.' This same thought was echoed by the author of the Punthi: 'Lord Jagannath is manifested in the Master. To have a glimpse of the Master in that state is to be freed from the cycle of births and deaths.'¹⁰

The milkmen tried their best to bring him out of the crowd, but it was extremely difficult. No one wanted him to leave, and the emotionally-charged crowd continued to follow him. But at last the Master was rescued and brought to the temple. He was still in a state of ecstasy. As the Punthi nicely describes it: 'On his way [to the temple] the Master, still deeply absorbed in divine ecstasy, frequently halts and stands like an inert image. In those moments the crowd could see his face radiant with an indescribable beauty.'¹¹

Sri Ramakrishna engaged in this divine play for the benefit of human beings. Even in his ailing body he came to join the festival. And, in order to inundate the minds of the people with divine love, he mingled with the crowd, oblivious of his own physical suffering. As it is said in the Punthi, 'To turn people towards God, the Master played this divine Rathayatra sport slowly, on the pretext of having the darshan of Lord Jagannath.'¹² But Sri Ramakrishna's play at Mahesh was the cause of much distress. The pain in his throat greatly increased, and so did his suffering. By the time he returned to

Dakshineswar his condition had become worse. He could hardly rise from his bed, and the wound in his throat started bleeding. The devotees were terribly frightened. On hearing the news, other devotees rushed to Dakshineswar in great anxiety.

But those pious men and women who were able to see the Master in his deep ecstatic state were blessed, and divine love was enkindled within them. The memory of that sight became a sacred treasure stored carefully in their hearts. But it is not that Sri Ramakrishna's divine play at the temple garden of Mahesh ended that day. It is an eternal play—an eternally flowing stream of divine bliss ever seeking pure receptacles.

One such receptacle was Aghoremani, or Gopaler-Ma, a brahmin woman of Kamarhati who had been specially blessed by Sri Ramakrishna. A saint of a very high order, she looked upon the Master as her Gopal, or baby Krishna. A few years after Sri Ramakrishna's death she also went to see the Rathayatra at Mahesh, and there she had the vision of her Gopal everywhere and in everyone. Wherever she looked she saw Gopal. The entire world was nothing but myriad forms of her Gopal. Narrating her experience later, she said: 'At that time I was not myself; I danced and laughed—created a second Kurukshetra [i.e., a battle scene].'¹³

Through the divine play of Sri Ramakrishna and his devotees, Mahesh and its festival of the Rathayatra have been sanctified. Sri Ramakrishna's participation in it added a new and glorious chapter to its history, the memory of which continues to inspire the devotees to this day.



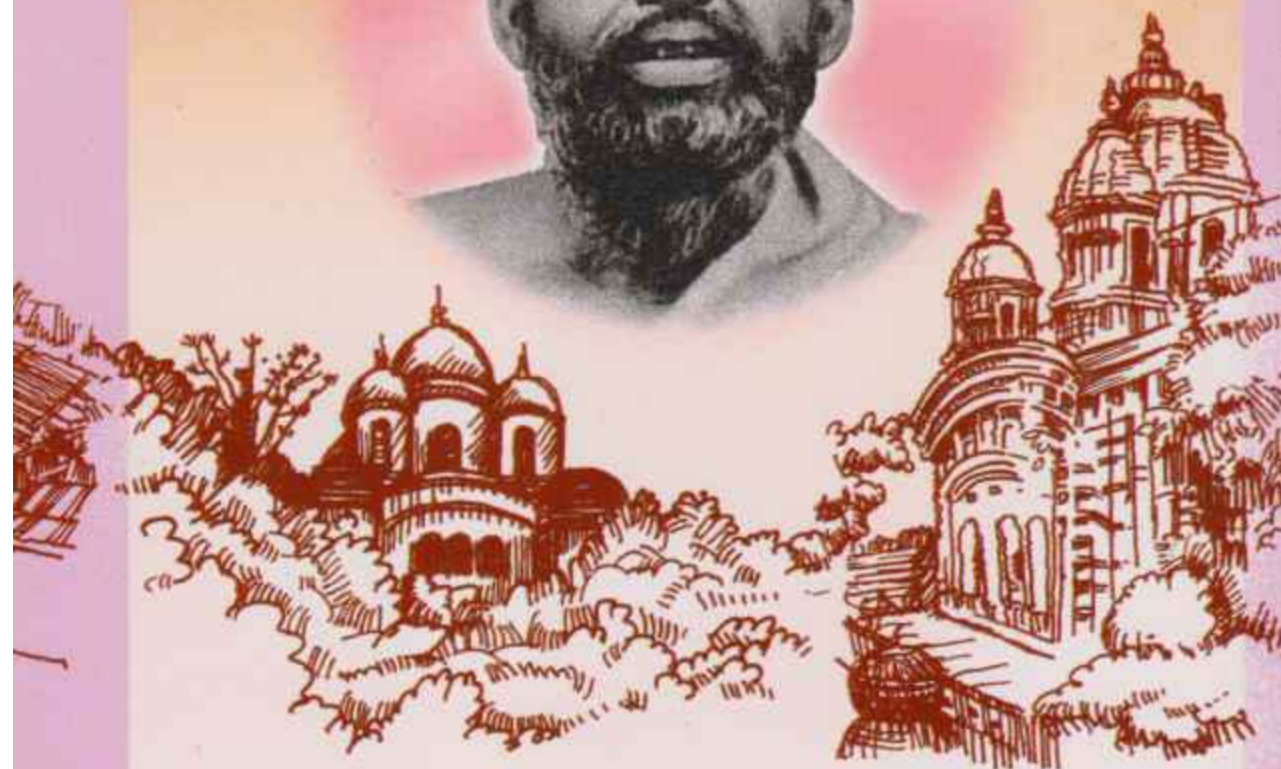
Notes and References

- ¹. In 1640 Nawab Khane Ali Khan, encountering a severe storm on the Ganga, took shelter in the temple. The temple priests did their utmost to serve him and his associates, and the pleased Nawab remitted the rent of Jagannathpur at Mahesh.
- ². The Ganga changed its course. The old temple was destroyed and it became imperative to relocate it. (Amiya Kumar Banerjee, West Bengal District Gazetteer [Hooghly, 1972], 721)
- ³. Kamalakar was from the village of Khalijuli near Hijli. An associate of Sri Caitanya, he was also said to be one of the twelve Gopals (twelve Vaishnava saints) and one of the sixty-four Mahantas, or abbots, of the Vaishnava monasteries. He lived at Mahesh, but he passed away in Vrindavan. He was on his way to Puri with Sri Caitanya when he was asked by Caitanya to take up the service of Jagannath at Mahesh. Every year at the time of the Rathayatra, the other eleven Gopals would come from different directions and meet Kamalakar, the twelfth, at Mahesh. Then for eight days they would continuously chant the name of Hari. It became famous as the Gopaler Mela. Currently it is a large fair.
- ⁴. About a quarter of a mile from the Jagannathpur temple stands the Gundicha temple to which Jagannath was taken at the time of the Rathayatra. It was built by Ranagamoyee Dasi, wife of Narayan Chandra Das. Later she installed the image of Radharaman there. (Haridas Das, Sri Sri Gauriya-Vaishnav Tirtha va Sripat Viharani [Nabadwip, (publ. by author), n.d.], 95) In 1850 there arose some misunderstanding between the sevaits, or caretakers, at Mahesh and those at Ballavpur for which a separate Gundicha temple was built near Mahesh. (West Bengal District Gazetteer, 721)
- ⁵. Sudhir Kumar Mitra, Hooghly Jelar Dev Deul (Calcutta: Anandadhara Prakashan, 1971), 71-74.
- ⁶. This is not correct. In 1884 Sri Ramakrishna participated in both the Ratha and the Ulto Ratha at Balaram Bose's house.
- ⁷. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981), 807.
- ⁸. Akshay Kumar Sen, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi, (Calcutta: Udbodhan Office), 4.32.
- ⁹. Ibid.
- ¹⁰. Ibid.
- ¹¹. Ibid.
- ¹². Ibid.

[13](#). Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master, trans. by Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2nd rev. ed., 1956), 661.



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Swami Prabhananda