



A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF
HIS HOLINESS SHREE 108 SWAMY
RAMDAS KATHIA BABA

WRITTEN IN BENGALI BY HIS DISCIPLE :
HIS HOLINESS SHREE 108 SWAMY SANTADAS

AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION
BY
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Author's Preface : First Edition

My original intention was to make this book available only to my codisciples and intimate friends of discernible religious temper. I suspected that readers in general would be hard put to accept the veracity of the incidents narrated herein. On perusing the manuscript, however, many an astute friend of mine opined that, giving the current ambience, the book is likely to be beneficial to one and all. I am persuaded by their counsel to release this slender volume for unrestricted dissemination. Should it promote, even marginally, a desire in the society to tread the footsteps of our venerable sages, the publication will have achieved its purpose.

Shree Tarakishore Sharma Chowdhury

Nimbarkashram

Holy Vrindavan.

Paush 14, Bengali Year 1322

Foreword

The divine life and biography of Shree 108 Swami Ramdas Kathia Babaji Maharaj, originally written in Bengali by his disciple, our Dada Guruji (Shree 108 Swami Santadas Kathia Babaji Maharaj) is an epic creation in the field of Nimbarka literature.

The wonderful English translation of the above book has surpassed my expectations and is a jewel in religious literature. This book can change the moral order of the day and uplift and purify the souls of all.

I am happy to inform the readers that the translator Mr. Amalendu Roy has donated the entire proceeds of his work to the welfare of Sri Sri Ramdas Kathia Baba Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya.

I thank my dearest Gurubrother, Sri A. Roy for his noble mission and hope that Babaji Maharaj may bless him and prey to Thakurji for his peace and prosperity.

Sukhchar
December 1997

Dr. Brindaban Behari Das
Mohanta
Kathiababar Ashram, Sukhchar

Translator's Note

The Appendix in the original Bengali edition has not been translated ; it happens to be way beyond my reach.

This translation, for whatever it is worth, I dedicate most humbly to the lotus feet of my Sadguru, His Highness Shree 108 Swamy Dhananjaydas Kathia Baba, a fitting successor to the august author of the divine biography.

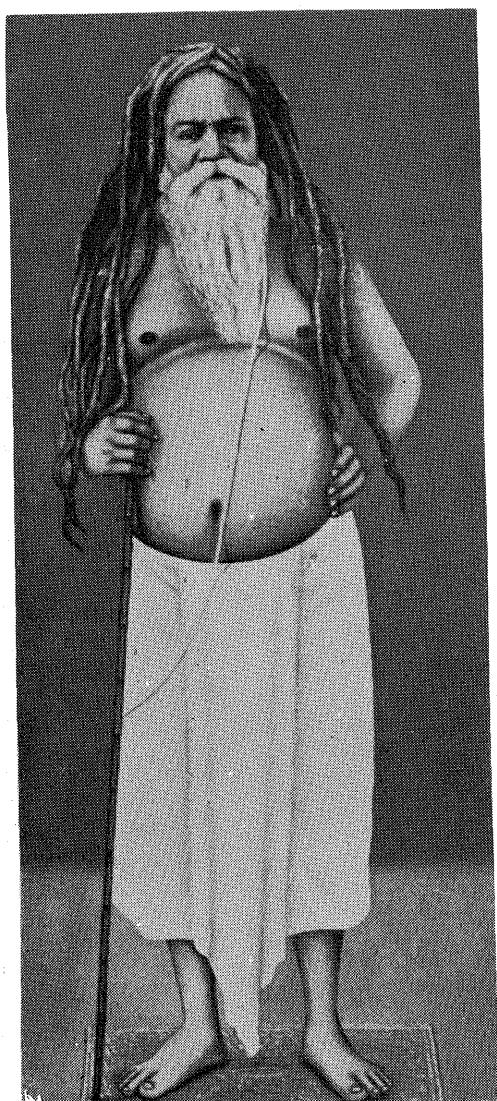
Ever in prostration,
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Hyderabad,
September 1997.



**Shree 108 Swamy
Ramdas Kathia Baba**



**Shree 108 Swamy
Santadas**

Om Hari

This book is dedicated to the

Lotus Feet of

His Holiness

Shree 108 Swamy Ramdas Kathia Baba

in adoration and prostration

by His disciple

Shree Tarakishore Sharma Chowdhury

Om, Thou Art That

Chapter One

CHILDHOOD

From time to time, Guruji Maharaj* (Shree Ramdas Kathia Baba) would narrate some specific incidents from his life. These are reproduced below in his own words.

I was born in a village of name Lonachamari, about 65 kilometers from Amritsar, and was the third son of my father—a highly respected brahmin and a traditional Guru*. He owned three or four buffaloes and was in the habit of drinking 10 litres of milk a day. Indeed, every one of us consumed huge quantities of milk regularly. Of all my mother's offsprings, I was her dearest—the apple of her eyes. Blessed with a golden heart, she lavished loving care on all that sought her hospitality.

Quite close to my father's residence in the village dwelt a saint, of whose abundant love I was a lucky recipient. I used to go and visit him frequently, as did all others from our hamlet. Affluent or otherwise, young or elderly, male or female, everybody used to prostrate before him in reverence. Watching this day in and day out, I developed a profound adoration for this saint who, I perceived, was the loftiest in this wide world. I was four years old when, as I happened one day to be the only one seated near him listening to his tender conversation on sundry matters, I ventured "Sir, you are certainly the most illustrious in this creation; all heads stoop to your feet in veneration. Do please tell me how you became so great, because I wish to emulate your footsteps". The sage smiled, "My child, I have become what I am by unceasingly chanting the holy name of Lord Rama. Apply yourself to do the same inwardly and you will be equally great". "If that is all there

*Unfamiliar non-English words are marked with asteriks and explained in Glossary on pages 119-124.

is to it", I announced, "I will surely embark right away on reciting the Lord's name". That was how and when I took to repeating the Lord's hallowed name silently and ceaselessly and, whenever I called on him, the saint offered me all the buoyancy I would be in need for.

A couple of years later, at the age of five or six, I started taking my father's buffaloes out for grazing, during the day time, to neighbourhood fields. As I reached seven and was tending to the animals one early afternoon, an ascetic suddenly appeared before me. I was fascinated by the glow emanating from his body. Laughing, he came to me and spoke, "My child, will you give me something to eat?" "Yes, of course", I answered promptly, "you please keep an eye on my buffaloes. I will go home and get some food for you. Just make sure that my wards do not stray away". The sadhu replied, "That will be fine. I will take care of your buffaloes while you fetch me some edibles". I hastened home and found that my parents were resting after the midday meal. Not wanting to disturb them, I entered the storeroom by myself, gathered some liberal helpings of ghee*, sugar and white flour, and returned to the holy man. Immensely pleased, he readily accepted the said commodities and granted me a boon, "You are destined to be a Yogiraj*, my child." I was quick to counter, "I have my parents, I have a family home, I have the buffaloes, and I swallow five litres of milk every single day. How can I possibly grow to be a Yogiraj?" The sage however insisted, "You mark my words, my child. I say, you will undoubtedly become a Yogiraj", and vanished into thin air. I perceived rightaway that my worldly bondages lay as under as of that moment; parents, home and buffaloes suddenly ceased to matter. I realized also that I was not to raise a home and a family, but kept my own counsel.

A few days later, I was invested ceremonially with the sacred brahminical thread and sent away by my father to another village to study the scriptures under a renowned Sanskrit scholar (Pandit Guru), who had a son and many other learners as well. As time passed, he grew to be very fond of me and began eventually to demonstrate his fondness so glaringly that the other students by and large became jealous and resentful. I could master the daily lessons without much effort and, once

that was done, I would not join the other boys in their studies or games but would sit quietly with my rosary to recite Lord Rama's name as commended by the saint of my boyhood days. Panditji's* son and the other lads decided that this was as good an excuse as any, approached Guruji and complained thus against me, "You are excessively attached to this boy and are all praise for him. You can however verify yourself that he rarely studies, but tinkers with his rosary all day long". Pandit Guruji had me summoned forthwith and angrily enquired, "Hello there, is it true that you hardly ever apply yourself to your assigned lessons but are always busy turning your prayer beads, as alleged by all these boys?" I folded my palms and submitted, "But I can assure you, Sir, that I have prepared my lessons. It's not true that I have not". Panditji had my books brought over and examined me closely on my homework. As I responded correctly to each question, he was thoroughly delighted—with the result that the compainants had to face his wrath, "You are all plain liars. He is well-versed in his lessons; what is the harm in praying, after the studies are taken care of?"

After that incident, Pandit Guruji was even more liberal with his affections for me. Spurred on by such encouragement, I used to complete my day-to-day lessons within a brief time-interval and then concentrate on my prayers by the rosary. Some eight or nine years rolled by in this manner at Guruji's household while I gained proficiency in Sanskrit Grammar (Saraswat*), Indian Astrology, portions of Smriti*, Vishnu Sahasranama* and other fields of enquiry. As a finale, Pandit Guruji introduced me to Shreemad Bhagavadgita*—which granted me a new surge of life, as it were. Gita* became more precious to me than my own life and I delved into its depth heart and soul day after day. On completion of its study, Guruji bade me return home. My residence with Guruji having thus run its course, I tendered appropriate tributes to him and to the others, fastened all my books (except the Gita) together into a bundle and hoisted it up on my back. So very attached was I to the Shreemad Bhagavadgita that I placed it on my chest and lashed it on to my body with a length of linen. Thus it was that I departed from Guruji's abode and trekked back to my father's household.

Chapter Two

RENUNCIATION

Soon after my return at the conclusion of schooling, father prepared to look for a bride for me. I restrained him, saying, "I do not wish to marry. Kindly do proceed with the matrimony of the other bachelor sons of yours". Accordingly, he negotiated and consummated the wedding of all my younger brothers.

The first item on my spiritual agenda was to propitiate Goddess Gayatri and realize her grace. I dug into the scriptures and mastered the preliminaries prescribed for such a venture, seated myself under a banyan tree at the village periphery—not far from my father's house—and set about invoking the Goddess through single-minded repetition of the Gayatri mantra*. My aim was to execute 125,000 dedicated recitals because that is—I had learnt—what is required to please the Goddess. As I completed 100,000 recitations—25,000 more to go—I was suddenly aware of an oracle from the heavens. It commanded, "Son, go to Jwalamukhi and do the remaining 25,000. You will then have realized my grace and pleasure".

Enormously heartened by the celestial voice, I headed at once for Jwalamukhi—a distance of a hundred odd kilometers—in company with a favourite nephew of mine of my age. As we proceeded, we came upon a hermit seated by the roadside—body aglow with inner spiritual fire and head heavy with matted locks. In less than a moment, attracted as if by an irresistible power, I was before him, making obeisance and standing on my two feet. Smitten by instant adoration and the urge for pressing on to Jwalamukhi having promptly melted away, I prostrated

myself before the noble sage and implored, "Sir, I come of a brahmin family and do hereby surrender to you. Pray, accept me as your disciple." Pleasantly he consented, "Be it so. I shall take you in as a disciple. You may stay on". That very day, I had my head shaved and embraced, by the grace of Guru, a monastic life. All longings fulfilled, all miseries dissolved, it was as though I was riding in an ocean of bliss.

The nephew who had accompanied me was taken aback. Since I paid no attention to his insistent objections against my going in for an ascetic's life, he went back home and apprised my parents of the situation. The inevitable outcome was that, guided by the nephew, my father along with some other kinsmen reached the location where Guruji was camped and set about pressurizing me in a number of ways to get back home. On my refusing to yield, they scolded me severely and even threatened Guruji that they would lodge against him a complaint with the police for having enticed a minor boy away from home. At that point, I said, "I am a minor no longer, I will tell the court that I have shaved my head and taken to monkhood wholly out of my own accord and that Guruji has not coerced or allured me in any manner." That stumped my father, but then he changed tack and decided to lament pathetically. Eventually, he fell at Guruji's feet, sobbing and beseeching, "Please, Sir, let go of my son for once. His mother misses him acutely and is profoundly distressed. Do allow him to go and show himself once to his mummy; he can then come back to you". Touched by the appeal, Guruji spoke thus to me, "All right, my boy, sadhus need to visit their birth-place once. There is no impropriety in doing so, all places are alike. You go with your father and stimulate your native land spiritually." So commanded, I prostrated before him and returned to my native village with my father.

Chapter Three

RETURN TO NATIVE PLACE

On reaching my village of birth with my father, I said, "I happen to have embraced monasticism; it won't be proper for me to live in any household. I shall therefore move outside the village boundary and install my seat under a tree as stipulated for sadhus. Being excessively attached to me, my mother started wailing bitterly. I tried to explain, "It is indeed an auspicious omen that I have taken to asceticism. You ought not to feel sorry and cry over it so. If you do, I can hardly stay on." Thus spoken to, she reluctantly acquiesced in my lodging under a tree. I established my meditation mat under the same banyan tree as had witnessed my earlier austerities with the Gayatri Mantra. Curious, the entire village gathered about me, and proposed that I accept my midday sustenance—to be procured normally by begging—from them, one household a day, in succession. I indicated that I was inclined to do so from every house except my mother's, because she would weep uncontrollably if I went there. Choked with emotion, my mother blubbered, "I promise I won't cry, please do come to our house also for the noontime alms-meal." Because of her assurance, I acceded to her wish. Accordingly, I had the first charity lunch at one of the houses—not my mother's—in the village. As I sat that night, equable in mind, upon my meditation cushion under the banyan tree, Goddess Gayatri emerged suddenly out of the firmament and spoke, "You have my divine pleasure. Further recital of the mantra is unnecessary. You may ask for a boon." I made due obeisance to her and declared, "Heavenly Mother, I have renounced the world and am presently a recluse. I have no desires and, therefore, no need for a boon. Your

pleasure alone is what I seek." The Goddess said, "So be it" and disappeared.

Then, as already agreed upon, I went on accepting the midday charity of victuals from a different house each day. But the day I presented myself at my mother's abode, she set about crying noisily even as she laid the food in front of me. "Mother, this is precisely why I was initially reluctant to come to you for alms," I said, "how I can take the food if you persist in crying in this manner?" Gradually, she calmed down somewhat and I ate, but her tears never really stopped flowing. After the meal, I spoke to her again, "Listen to me, mother. If you insist on acting this way, how can I possibly visit your house? Both of us stand to benefit from the course I have taken to." "All right, my son," she replied, "may God bless you. I shall weep no longer. So, when the turn comes, please do call in and have your food here at my place". I continued for sometime to live thus under the banyan tree, to attend to the daily discipline of worship and prayers, and to accept the noontime charity at one of the houses in rotation.

One day after dusk, a relation of my pre-monastic days— a young and very beautiful sister-in-law— came and sat near me, and engaged in a rather long drawn tete-a-tete before returning home. From then on, she made it a practice to come every evening, as darkness set in, and amuse herself with laughter, frolic and small talk. As this went on for two or three consecutive days, I turned suspicious of her intentions and told her, "I happen to be a hermit and you a woman of incandescent youth. It is inappropriate that you should visit me alone after nightfall. If you have an interest in religious matters, you are welcome to see me during daylight hours, but never after dusk." She giggled, "Why, how is it so improper?" "Improper it surely is, for such is not the way of holy men. No, you must never call on me after sundown. Should you at all wish to see me, it will have to be during daytime only." Smiling mischievously, she took leave of me for that day—only to reappear the very next evening. Thoroughly peeved, I demanded, "Haven't I forbidden you? Why do you then persist in visiting me alone at night-time?" "Why do you think it is so very improper?" she repeated coyly. I lost my temper and hurled a piece of

rock at her. She looked sad, but that persuaded her to leave me alone. It occurred to me then that I had been staying there for a rather long duration and it might turn out to be risky for me to continue to do so much longer, and that I should therefore move out of that place forthwith. I tarried no longer, but bade goodbye to all and moved out of my native village— permanently, as it eventually turned out. That was how I escaped on that occasion from the power of a woman's charm.

I came under the spell of feminine magnetism on another occasion yet. By a collusion of circumstances, I did once come in contact with a young queen of exquisite beauty. She tended to me with such whole-hearted devotion that I was enchanted by her before I realized what was happening. Later, one solitary day, she sought me out and declared in complete surrender, "Widowed since childhood, I have no husband. Captivated as I am by you, I pray that you stay on with me permanently and partake of the pleasures of this kingdom of mine." I had already fostered a soft spot for her and was not therefore entirely displeased by her overture. Promptly, however, I remembered that my mission in life is one of renunciation, not bondage. Silently I reproached myself for the momentary aberration, and spoke out thus, "I am pledged to asceticism. How can I forsake my vow and engage in luxury and sensuality with you? Please, therefore, try and get over your infatuation for me. And I should of course move out elsewhere." So saying, I departed immediately from that place. The fact, however, was that I had been myself infatuated with the damsel without being explicitly aware of it. And, as I moved along the road, memories of her gestures and postures and little mannerisms kept on teasing me from time to time. I would walk some distance, seat myself by the roadside and debate if I should go back to her or not. At long last, by the Grace of God, the spell broke, my self-control came back on rail and I deserted that territory altogether. That, my son, was what taught me how exceedingly difficult it is for a man—specially, a young man—to overcome the power of feminine magic. Ordinary human beings cannot break free of it except through God's intervention.

An altogether different kind of hazard befell me during my teenage days of renunciation and, again, God's mercy came to my rescue. In the course of my peregrinations over the Himalayan foothills near Gangotri, I once came upon an enormous rock-strewn hill of considerable elevation and caught sight of what appeared to me to be a loose boulder cleaving to the hill base. Curious and trying to dislodge it, I applied a shove to the boulder. Whereupon it came readily unstuck and revealed the mouth of a cave. Still inquisitive, I entered the cave and directly espied an ancient ascetic of huge proportions and grey matted hair seated there in contemplation. His two eye-lids had grown abnormally, hung downward like miniature curtains and concealed the eyes completely from view. Cautiously and slowly, I backed out of the cave. But he followed me out and used his fingers to lift the skins dangling over his eyes. Two large eye-balls stared at me, spitting fire. Scared stiff by the sight, I reckoned that he would instantly burn me down to ashes for having disrupted his meditation. The colossus demanded, "Who are you?" Frightened and nervous, I replied, "Sir, I am one of your disciples". "A disciple of mine? Really? Can you do as I ask you to?" he challenged. "Yes, Sir," I blurted out, "by your grace, I will do as you command me to." The dialogue, such as it was, was taking place at the edge of the rocky hill, next to a deep gorge with a sheer fall of at least 50 cubits (23 meters). The young Ganga river was gushing forth briskly, like a mountain spring, along the bottom of that canyon. Provoked by my reply, the ancient giant pointed a finger at the torrential current way down below and dared me, "If you are indeed my disciple, then I would like to see you jump into that rapids." I weighted the situation in my mind: if I do not do his bidding, he will reduce me to ashes; if I do, I will probably perish in the process; that being the choice, let me obey his fiat and be done with it. Musing thus, I took a plunge into the river below and penetrated its water. The current being strong, however, I soon found myself floating on its surface. The stream was narrow and walled on either side by high hills—allowing little illumination at that depth. In that darkness, I continued to drift downstream, rapidly and helplessly, along with the current. That was when his yogic powers became manifest. Still standing where he was

up on the hill, the superman extended his arms to where I was far away in the water, took a grip on my clump of hair, hoisted me clear out of water and deposited me in front of himself. Stunned by the miracle, I fell at his feet. He lifted me tenderly and said, "Son, you are certainly worthy of being a disciple; may you be blessed. But do leave this neighbourhood right away; this is where the sages practise religious austerities. Do not hang around." I prostrated myself and departed from that territory. My child, the Himalayan foothills are liberally dotted with secret dwelling places of hoary saints. Any kind of irreverence towards them can invite trouble.

Chapter Four

AT THE LOTUS FEET OF GURU

Sometime later, I went and reunited with my venerable Guruji. Of lofty build and adorned with long matted hair, he was the preceptor at the Reverend Nagaji chapter of the Nimbarka* sect. Born in the vicinity of Ayodhya and known eventually as Shree* 108 Swamy Devdas, he was a yogi of the highest caliber and had attained spiritual perfection. All heads would spontaneously bow in his presence and he would abide in holy trance (Samadhi*), in one posture on his prayer mat, for six months at a stretch! He never slept, not even outside the trance interval, when he occasionally smoked hemp and hashish. Also, once in a day, he took a quantity of ash from the sacred fire and bade me knead it over a piece of linen. He would then take a fixed measure of that homogenized ash, have me toss the same into an ascetic's bowlful of water, mix it well and then drink that liquid. In a short while, he would disgorge the same ash-laden water into a pot and instruct me to verify if the quantity did not match the original intake. It always did. Ordinarily, that was all the food he consumed, and I used to look upon him as God incarnate.

On rare occasions, he deviated from the above routine. One day he told me, "Son, I don't feel well. If you can let me have some milk, I should be all right." I ran to the village, collected some half a maund (about 20 litres) of milk in a large metal container, placed it in front of him and said with folded hands, "Sir, here is the milk you wished for. Please drink it as and when you like." He was pleased, picked up the huge bowl with his hands and steadily drained

¹ As Babaji Maharaj (Reverend Ramdas Kathia Baba) spoke about the six-month-long samadhi of his Guruji (Reverend Devdasji), I enquired, "Babaji Maharaj, prolonged though it is, this samadhi does terminate after a period of time and is not therefore permanent in nature. Isn't there a state of samadhi that does not dissipate, but endures for a lifetime? Since it evanesces sooner or later, isn't this also a brand of Jad-samadhi?" [Jad=Lifeless, inanimate] A sadhu of name Giridharidas, who was present at that time, was offended by my query. "How is that?" he asked, "Is it a simple matter to dwell in samadhi for six continuous months? Is anyone else capable of the same feat? How can this be Jad-Samadhi? He had most certainly become One with the supreme Lord." Babaji Maharaj explained, "What else is it but Jad-Samadhi? One does appear lifeless in that condition. To be One with the Supreme Lord is something beyond that; once attained, it does not lapse. One that has scaled that height has transcended all stages of Samadhi and stays ever unified with the Creator.

the entire quantity in one go. I was speechless to see him make short work of 20 litres of milk so unceremoniously. But he announced, "Son, I do feel better, but not well enough. Let me have some more milk." Taken aback, I circumambulated him, prostrated and then submitted, "Most Reverend Sir, you are the Supreme Soul, how can any one assuage the fire in your belly? Insignificant as I am, how can I expect to quench your thirst? You have just finished all of 20 litres of milk in one effortless coup and still, you say, you need more. How can I possibly help?" He chuckled and said, "No, no, my child, do fetch me some more milk, Whatever you are able to gather this time will do, I promise." I went back to the settlement and collected some six litres of milk which he drank too and declared, "I am now completely healed, and content." But, unlike the ash-mixed water, he did not regurgitate the milk.

At one time, he installed his seat in a forest which, albeit its proximity to a town, was infested with tigers and other wild animals. We were three or four disciples with Guruji, myself being the youngest. Shortly after one midnight he summoned all of us and said, "One of you proceed to the town right away and get me two rupees worth of hemp." the night was dark and the woods were abundant with ferocious fauna, no other disciple was prepared to undertake that journey. I proffered, "If you so permit, Guruji, I am ready to go." Delighted, he said, "Very well, It's you who will go. Immediately on your arrival at the town, you will come into two rupees; buy and bring me those two rupees' worth of hemp." I had a firm conviction that no danger would befall me while I was out on an errand for Guruji. So, after prostrating before him, I made my way fearlessly across the forest and entered the township, only to find that the shops were all shuttered and everything very quiet.

Walking along the road, I caught sight of a glimmer of light from a house not far away. As I slowly approached its doorway, a man—visibly gratified—stepped out at once, prostrated before me and said, "Sir, this is indeed very gracious of you. I wished to make an offering of two rupees to a sadhu today and have been waiting all this time for one to show up. I am supremely fortunate that you have turned up here at this time. Do please accept these two rupees and let me fulfil my vow." I took the money and remembered Guruji—savouring his glory and paying profound homage. I proceeded then to the hemp-dealer's shop, awakened him and purchased two rupees worth

of the stuff. Being already used to smoking hemp myself, I helped myself to one measure, processed and smoked it— and then went back to Guruji with the balance, placed it before him and prostrated. Promptly, he alleged, "Dear child, is this how you treat your Guru? First you serve yourself and then offer the remainder to him? Is this what you have learnt so far?" I was dumbfounded; the realization quickly dawned on me that Guruji was verily clairvoyant and omniscient, and that distance was no barrier to his vision. Dismayed, I joined palms and confessed, "My Lord, I am indeed guilty. A stupid boy at best, I was unaware of your majesty. Do please grant me your pardon; never shall I act like this again." He was pacified, "Very well, you are a mere youngster, I forgive you this once, on condition that you won't repeat it. Bear in mind that no action nor any thought can be concealed from the Guru." I tweaked my ears and proclaimed to myself, "Guru is omniscient God; I will at no time violate his dignity." And, wise in the knowledge that I was blessed with just such a Guru, I pledged to myself never to forsake the shelter of His Lotus Feet looking for alternatives.

Many a time have I witnessed Guruji's splendour, of which I will narrate only two. On one occasion, accompanied by about a thousand monks, Guruji established camp in the vicinity of Lahore. Among the many merchants from the city who came calling on Guruji and the congregation of holy men, was a very wealthy businessman dealing in shawls. Guruji suggested to him, "Please, you take care of today's food for these sadhus." Pat came his reply, "I cannot provide for so many mouths." Moreover, he betrayed some irreverence towards the holy men.

Guruji was sharp. "Trader," he said, "you suffer from arrogance of wealth. You dare express disdain even for holy men and therefore merit some chastisement. Go back home and, within the day, you will witness the wrath of the Fire God in your collection of shawls." As the businessman departed, Guruji took some water in his palm and offered it to the sacred fire, saying, "Here and now, the bag of shawls catches fire." I was seated by Guruji and, in a short while, beheld the merchant come running breathlessly. Directly on arrival, he dove to the ground in prostration and tears, speaking thus, "Save me, Reverend Sir. Total ruin stares me in the face. My stock of shawls kept inside a chest has come alive with fire. I will furnish food for all the monks for seven days." Guruji was propitiated, "Very well then. Do provide

comestibles to this assembly for a week. The flames on your shawls are hereby dowsed; as a token penalty, however, one shawl—and only one—will stay damaged. Do not ever again indulge in such impoliteness towards sadhus." Precisely at that moment, someone from the merchant's residence came racing and declared, "Sir, we have been able to remove from the safe the one shawl that was the first to be on fire. That one is ruined; the fire however has put itself out." The tradesman then prostrated before Guruji and departed, in order to organise the catering service for the holy gathering.

I was of course thoroughly amazed by all that had just happened, so fast. As the merchant took leave, I prostrated and, palms together, spoke, "Guruji, I am straggled by the turn of events. Should you consider me eligible, do please educate me on its inner message." Graciously he replied, "Do not be surprised. Great Yogis have command over all types of occult power and apply them when necessary. This merchant is essentially a virtuous individual, but—intoxicated by abundance of riches—he was deviating from the right path. Today's jolt will teach him to be humble once again and to engage in various religious activities. This mystic wisdom through which I have disciplined him today for his own welfare is known as Katagni Vidya, which I shall pass on to you in due course, but on your turn you shall keep it a secret and refrain from transferring it to anyone undeserving."

Wandering about at one time, Guruji left us at some distance, went ahead unescorted to the bank of lake Bhupal, seated himself firmly on his prayer rug and blew on his conch very powerfully. A Muslim nawab, who lived on the opposite bank, had forbidden sometime ago—on pain of decapitation—the use of conches and temple-bells anywhere in the vicinity of his palace. As the blast from Guruji's sea-shell hit his eardrums, the nawab directed his followers to ascertain who it was that dared blow a conch in violation of his orders. Instantly, his henchmen rushed to the lakeside, discovered Guruji seated there conch in hand and reported back, "A powerful-looking Hindu ascetic with massive matted hair is the miscreant, Sir, he is the one who trumpeted the conch." The nawab was furious, "Impertinence is his name. The rascal stations himself by the lakeside near my mansion, defies my dictate and blares on a conch. Go at once and behead him, or arrest and produce him before me." Armed with various types of weapons, nawab's men returned to

where Guruji had been, only to discover that there was no live person there but the severed head of the sadhu, the arms, legs and other dismembered organs of his body lay scattered all over. Confronted with such a spectacle, they turned back to advise the nawab that, [even before their arrival at the scene, someone had already chopped his body into bits and pieces. Precisely at the moment, Guruji blasted mightily on his conch. At the reappearance of the sound, the nawab ordered his men back to the spot. But, this time round, they found nobody at the place; even the severed limbs—head, arms, legs etc. which they had observed earlier—had disappeared altogether. Disconcerted, they carried the news back to the nawab. But, hardly had they done so when the same sound rocked the neighbourhood once again. Panicky at the turn of events, the nawab surmised that whoever was blowing the conch was a divine soul of supernormal powers and that it would be ill-advised to antagonize him. In order to placate him so that he may not throw a curse and invite misfortune to the kingdom, the nawab himself along with his councillors appeared at the site and found a yogi of lofty mien and matted hair seated there conch in hand. After tendering due homage and an apology, they offered to do as Guruji wished them to. Guruji replied, "Your edict against the use of conches and temple-bells is quite improper. You are a Moslem and it is only fair that you should act as your religion requires you to. But why then do you obstruct a Hindu from performing what his religion prescribes for him? I suggest you repeal this ordinance. Also, I wish to renovate the old temple near this lake, and ask you not to interfere with that work." The nawab consented, salaamed and trooped back to his palace together with his retinue. Later on, Guruji had the shrine reconstructed and used it as the main center of his spiritual activities.

From under the wings of such an illustrious Guru, I continued to attend on him and to comply with his instructions with contentment and devotion. Guruji's orders were designed to shape me into a genuine ascetic; he was not encumbered at all by common physical affection. For my nightly routine, his injunctions were to light and invoke the sacred fire after dusk, to be seated on the prayer mat close to the fire and to immerse myself in a steady night-long recitation of the Guru-given mantra—association with anyone after nightfall being strictly forbidden. He had given me a piece of linen, a yard and a half long, for my use. Any attempt to lie down at night

was futile because, in the absence of adequate clothing, I would be compelled to get up and squat near the fire in order to escape being frozen. The Himalayan foothills experience snowfall during winter and are bitterly cold, my prayer cushion being lodged below a tree out under the open sky. If I stretched out full length, the piece of cloth would cover either the lower segment of my body below the chest or the upper, above the legs. In either case, I would need to get up and sit chilled and shivering. The rule was to sit facing the sacred fire which would provide warmth to the body frontage. The rear was to be guarded against cold by letting the piece of linen, double-folded, hang down from the shoulders and then spreading the plaits of matted hair over it. Recital of prayers had to continue in that manner throughout the night. Besides, I had also been initiated by prescribed rituals into wearing a wooden loin-cloth and a massive wooden girdle around my waist. For a long time, the girdle used to hurt me if I wished to lie down. Accustomed as I am now to stretching out in spite of this thick waistband, it was initially nothing but an extra impediment against falling asleep. We were permitted to have some sleep after the holy food at noontime (one meal in 24 hours) by digging into a sandy ground and removing the loosened material. With the girdle inserted into the hollow thus made, the body rested on level ground and I could then catch some sleep without any hardship.

Guruji dwelled in a tiny shack, always seated on his prayer mat. I recounted earlier that his food intake was usually nil; he only drank some ash-mixed water once a day and spewed it out promptly. And he would smoke hemp and hashish occasionally. The discipline he enforced was so very rigorous that, by and by, all his other disciples deserted him; only I hung on. Let me narrate one or two episodes to illustrate the severity of his regimen.

One wintry night in the Himalayan foothills, I was engaged as usual in prayers. I was however sluggish and drowsy that night owing to the ascendancy of the lower instincts of my nature. Slowly and effortlessly, I stretched out, slipped out into deep slumber and lost all consciousness for some length of time. It happened to be snowing and, consequently, the holy fire was soon snuffed out. The fire having gone out, my body was in no time permeated through and through with excessive chill, shivering violently and jerking me out of slumber. Trembling, I sat up and found that the fire was dead while it was snowing all around. The choice was limited : either rekindle fire or face certain death. I debated. To leave the prayer mat in order to seek help from someone else—

even Guruji himself—during night-time was prohibited. If I should approach him for fire, he would punish me for sleeping when I should have been praying. Without fire, on the other hand, the body would freeze with cold, causing sure death. Pondering thus, I finally resolved that, whatever the penalty, I must go only to Guruji and Guruji alone; seeking help elsewhere would be deception. I rose and, with leaden steps, walked to the hut where Guruji was seated and stood in front of its door. At once, he called out, "Who stands there?" "It's me, Sir, Ramdas," I let him know. He demanded, "What makes you leave your seat during the night and come here?" I submitted, "Guruji Maharaj, my sacred fire lies extinguished. May I have a piece of burning charcoal?" He shot back, "You must have fallen asleep, otherwise how does the fire die? Was it for sleeping your time away that you forsook home-life, at the cost of landing your parents in great agony? If nights were to be devoted to slumber, you could have very well taken care of that at home. Why was it necessary to torment your parents?" He continued to berate me in this manner. Shivering, I replied, "Sir, I am of course guilty. Sleep suddenly overpowered me; I do beg your pardon, Sir. From now on, I will be particularly cautious." He upbraided thoroughly for some more time and then said, "Keep standing where you are, for one hour. I will not give you the piece of lighted charcoal right away." I was acquainted with Guruji's supremacy; disobeying his order was out of question altogether. I just stood there and shivered with cold. After some time, Guruji took a fragment of smoldering coal from his holy fire, tossed it outside and said, "Take it and leave. This is the last time; mind that there is no repetition ever." I gathered the glowing bit of coal, relighted my holy fire, seated myself on the mat and resumed my prayers.

One day Guruji told me, "My child, I am to go to another place on some business. Can you perhaps remain seated at this point until I return? Mind you, you are not to move from this location for any reason whatever before I come back." "I shall certainly execute your command with my life." He designated a spot, bade me, "You will remain seated here until I return," and departed. I sat down there to await his return. Days came and went, in slow succession, but Guruji was yet to show up. At long last, he reappeared on the eighth day. As I rose and made obeisance, he asked, "My child, were you seated here all along?" "Yes, Sir," I replied with folded hands, "I have been

sitting here since your departure. He queried, "Wouldn't you have gone even to ease nature?" I answered, "No, Sir. By your Grace, I did not feel much of an urgency during this period either to urinate or to defacate." He continued, "Haven't you taken some food?" "No, Sir, I haven't." Delighted, he said, "My son, this is exactly how one must comply with Guru's commands. Leaving home at the cost of pain and tears to parents and relatives becomes worthwhile, and pleasing to God, only if one surrenders to the Guru—as you have done—in word, thought and deed.

This was how I persisted with determination in serving the Guru and fulfilling his mandates. In turn, he was profoundly merciful, and progressively schooled me in Astanga Yoga* along with all the rituals of Hatha Yoga*; he also inducted me into the manifold mystic formulas needed for their practical application. Simultaneously, in order to subdue my anger and conceit, he would from time to time bait me with assorted punishments and castigate me in provocative and grievous language. For next to no reason or even purely fabricated charges, he would abuse me variously as a cobbler, a scavenger or a fake belly-managing sadhus, etc.—as common people sometimes do to denigrate holy men. And he would closely watch if I lose temper or feel hurt at such wild accusations. He would starve me at times or would assemble delicious eatables to ascertain if I succumb to hunger and temptation, and lose spiritual balance. His impersonal love for me was so deep that he never hesitated to administer to me those apparently harsh measures for my own benefit.

Years went by in this manner in Guruji's company. I looked upon him as no different from God Himself, and, not infrequently, was confounded by his power and glory. One day, a considerable number of years later, Guruji suddenly appeared before me in a towering rage and, with the tall sturdy club he was carrying, started to clobber me all over with mighty blows, declaring angrily, "You sister-teaser, all my senior disciples have abandoned me and gone. Why is it that you alone fasten yourself to me like glue? Get away from me, you. I can do without ministrations from anyone." As he spoke, he went on belabouring me so severely that my entire body swelled and I was in grievous pain. I rose unhurriedly and, with palms enfolded, submitted meekly yet firmly, "Sir, do very kindly lend me your ears. You are aware that there was nothing wanting in my parent's house. I have, of my own accord,

renounced them and sought refuge in you. I have since then lived in your shadow and looked upon you as my father, mother, friend and Guru—all merged into one. There is no one else in this wide world whom I can consider to be my own. Where do I go if you should send me away? But if you must get rid of me, take here my throat, slash it open with a knife and let me perish. I cannot bear to part with you while I happen to still alive." Satisfied by my petition, Guruji spoke, "This today was your last test and you have fared well. Your power of discrimination is now mature and firm, and you shall henceforth reside in unbroken beatitude. I am supremely pleased with you and grant you this boon that your desires shall all be fulfilled, that you shall unite with the Lord you adore, that all supranormal powers shall be at your beck and call, that your utterances shall ever be true and valid," and so on. I was speechless with the bounty lavished on me, circumambulated Guruji and prostrated.

Somedays thereafter, Guruji installed his seat at the outskirts of a prosperous town. I also implanted mine at some suitable distance; no one was supposed to position his prayer mat adjacent to that of Guruji. Drawn by his effulgence and yearning for a first-hand view, the townfolk began to visit our camp in large numbers. Some of those visitors had a vision of Guruji, prostrated before him, then came over to me and repeated the performance. One of them deposited four rupee coins in front of me as an offering. Greatly embarrassed, I urged him immediately, "For Heaven's sake, don't do that! My Guruji, the most eminent of yogis, is seated nearby, go and offer your donation to him. While he is around, it is improper to bypass him". The man was adamant, "Sir, it is you who have fired veneration in me and it is therefore you whom I seek to worship. I tender this offering to you alone." I insisted, "This is absurd. Never can I accept a gift and homage in presence of Guruji, my Supreme Master. Please do as I say. Take this offering and place it before him." But the individual was stubborn, left the money where it was and departed. Not wasting a moment, I proceeded to Guruji, deposited the money before him, folded my hands and humbly submitted, "Sir, a devotee has made an offering of these four rupees. Do kindly accept them and oblige." As if annoyed, he demanded, "Indeed! A fine specimen of a disciple, you are! You have already set about accepting obeisance even in front of the Guru!" I pleaded with joined palms, "Sir, I was most vehemently

unwilling to accept this. I strove in vain to persuade that person to bring this offering over to you, but he persisted in leaving it before me and disappeared. Directly after his departure, I have fetched this over to you. I did never appropriate it myself." Guruji had a quiet smile on his face, "My child, you too have now reached the Supreme Goal," and then, as if in soliloquy, "You are presently a Superman also, but then two Supermen cannot abide together."

Two or three days after this incident, Guruji told me, "Son, Dwarka happens to be the principal pilgrimage center for our sect. It is essential for you to pay a visit to that holy land." I replied, "Sir, I look upon you as God Himself. The scriptures too opine that all sacred places inhere in the feet of Guru. I am therefore performing all the pilgrimages even as I behold your holy pair of feet. This is why I do not yearn for pilgrimages separately." Peeved by my statement, Guruji said, "What audacity! You certainly are the wisest; no one—I suppose—was ever as profoundly wise as you happen to be! Your own Guru visited Dwarka, so did his Guru and his Guru in turn. But you are so abundantly enlightened that you don't, you claim, need to go for any pilgrimage. Do get rid of such foolish thoughts. I insist that you pay a visit to sacred Dwarka." I still persisted, "I do not know where Dwarka is or even the direction in which it may lie. How can I travel to Dwarka? I beg of you to let me stay near you; I am blissful waiting on you." Guruji was silent and said nothing in reply. However, on the very next day, two sadhus appeared before him and made obeisance. Guruji asked them, "Where are you headed for?" "We are on our way to divine Dwarka" was their answer. I was close by, so Guruji bade me, "You had complained that you are not aware of the whereabouts of Dwarka. These two monks are both proceeding to that holy city; I suggest you accompany them." Left thus with no alternative, I fell at the feet of Guruji, bade him farewell and set out on the trek to Dwarka along with two ascetics. Guruji blessed me, saying, "Go forth on your pilgrimage to Dwarka and return. You will face no hardship on the way—all necessities will appear before you spontaneously."

As I marched along towards Dwarka, there was indeed no difficulty nor anything wanting on the way. Wherever we broke journey at midday or dusk, the local inhabitants invariably came and presented us with all food stuff, hemp and hashish. They even arranged for us, unasked for, carriages to negotiate the Rajasthan desert. This was how we reached Dwarka and had

a vision of its Presiding Lord. On return to where Guruji was, I noticed with some foreboding that all my senior fellow-disciples had assembled there—looking grief-stricken—while Guruji himself was missing. As I enquired about Guruji, they informed me most pathetically that he had breathed his last three days earlier. The terrible news hit me like a bombshell. I could not believe in what they said because I knew Guruji as a God-united sage beyond disease and death, as God Himself. After a brief silence, I told them, "Guruji was omnipotent God, how can he cease to be? Why do you delude me?" They took pains to explain that it was only in their presence that Guruji had shed his mortal body and that they had themselves cremated the corpse. Totally heart-broken, I lamented, "Alas, is this why he had sent me away? God he is, how can he possibly die? I will immolate myself if I don't see him." I was so overwhelmed with grief that I prepared to uproot with my own hands the long tresses of matted hair on my head. Out of compassion, my codisciples had my head saved. Thoroughly crushed with misery, I began to roll back and forth on the ground and set about starving myself. No amount of consolation brought me any succour and I continued to shed tears incessantly. Finally, on the seventh day, Guruji was gracious enough to reveal himself before me and comfort me thus, "Rise, and grieve no more, and may you be blessed. I have not perished, so compose yourself. I enacted a drama of death only as a divine illusion because I wish to conceal myself for a specific reason. I am presently dwelling incognito on the bank of the Nabada river and that is where I shall be. Do not mourn any more—I shall appear before you from time to time. Arise and adhere to the ways of the illumined. Your aspirations shall all be fulfilled." Having reassured me thus, Guruji vanished from sight. Soothed by the vision of Guruji and his commiseration, I rose, took a bath and had something to eat. My elder codisciples organized the customary holy feast in memory of Guruji and then departed to their respective stations. True to his promise, Guruji would manifest himself occasionally and grace me with his vision.

Chapter Five

CLIMAX : TRYST WITH THE LORD

Up to this point, the life story of Babaji Maharaj (Shree Ramdas Kathia Baba) has been portrayed serially in his own words. He never did narrate to me the type of austerities he underwent after his Guruji faded from the scene. I did not dare ask either. All that he would give voice to was that he had visited all the holy places of India between Manas Sarovar and Kumarika several times over, travelling on foot. The railways were not in existence in those days. Many a time, he had to walk across dense forests. Wild animals aplenty often ran into and stared at him, but did no harm. Once he was at the rear end of a column of sadhus wending their way through a forest infested with savage beasts. Unnerved by the uproar from the wild fauna, the leading hermit was frank enough to declare, "I cannot lead the way; I am badly frightened." Babaji Maharaj offered, "I will go up front, you can come and take my place if you like." Accordingly, the monk moved to the tail end while Babaji Maharaj took up the lead position. Soon afterwards, however, a huge tiger sprang out of the forest, landed on the rear-end hermit and carried him away. But the rest of the party marched safely along the forest path and reached a settlement.

He had toured extensively over the Himalayan foothills. God had once—he told me—come to him disguised as and pretending to be an ascetic, and had lodged with him for nearly a month—without ingesting any food or drink at any time. At last he said to Babaji Maharaj one day, "Let us go out for a walk." The two of them were advancing along a bridge over a river when God—in-sadhu's-attire pointed a finger at the sky and asked, "Look, what do you observe there?" "I see the luminous sky," replied Babaji Maharaj. The sadhu then directed his finger at the river water below the bridge and enquired, "What do you see down there?" "Water," answered Babaji Maharaj. Whereupon the sadhu directed his finger at the firmament again and asked, "Look up there once more, what is it that you see this time?" Babaji Maharaj glanced upward and discovered that the sky was now overcast with thick dark cloud formations. Mildly provoked, Babaji Maharaj remarked, "Magic is what it is, nothing but hocus-pocus." The sadhu said nothing, but

proceeded ahead with Babaji Maharaj in tow. Thereafter, signalling Babaji Maharaj to follow him, the sadhu descended from the bridge into the river and so did Babaji Maharaj. The river was quite deep at that location but, incredible as it was, the two of them walked across it, water never rising above the knee level. Having forded the river silently in this manner, they took to a jungle track, on both sides of which lay, Babaji Maharaj noticed, burning funeral pyres at some places, dead bodies at some others and severed heads yet elsewhere. After walking some distance through that plethora of macabre spectacles, Babaji Maharaj suddenly realized that the sadhu was no longer in sight. Vainly did he go over the area with a fine-tooth-comb. On the way back, he noticed that the blazing pyres, the cadavers etc., that he had seen during the forward journey had disappeared as well—giving over to natural sylvan flora. The realization dawned later that it was veritably God who had played a prank on him in a hermit's garb.

On another occasion, while descending from a prominence near Chandi hill in the vicinity of Hardwar, Babaji Maharaj chanced upon a hermit, three centuries old, at a very secluded spot. The hermit took meticulous care of Babaji Maharaj, offered him sundry fruits and roots to eat and called upon the latter not to disclose anything about himself to others. Babaji Maharaj however did not take that interdiction very seriously, but narrated his encounter to all others in the congregation at Hardwar. And, in order to satisfy their curiosity, he escorted them all back to the site in question. But, this time round, he could not trace the sage on his cavern and all of them had to turn back in disappointment.

During Sepoy Mutiny, Babaji Maharaj was one day walking along a road that hugged the Yamuna river at Agra. Anchored in the river lay a ship laden with white British soldiers, one of whom decided to take a pot shot at Babji Maharaj with his gun. The bullet hissed by his cheek. The white warrior pulled the trigger again, the slug whistling by the other cheek this time. As the tommy raised his gun again for yet another go, Babaji Maharaj said to himself, "This man is not going to leave me alone," and closed his eyes. Instantly, the fire-arm slipped from the soldier's grip and plunged into the river. Wholly non-plussed, groups of white men and women approached Babaji Maharaj—doffing their head gear, salaaming him and abjuring further mischief.

At one time, he embarked upon the mystic rituals of Panchadhuni—five sacred fires—near a village, thereby drawing much reverence and adoration from the villagers. This provoked such intense jealousy in another sadhu—who was with him at that time—that he resolved to eliminate Babaji Maharaj altogether. One day, while Babaji Maharaj sat in deep yogic meditation surrounded by the five sacred fires, the sadhu gathered and marshalled nearly a thousand logs of timber so as to form an unbroken enclosure that was higher than Babaji Maharaj's head and concealed him altogether. As the sadhu ignited the logs, they burnt so furiously that the flames from all sides rose and coalesced into one mighty conflagration. That achieved, the sadhu took to his heels. When the villagers gathered there a little later and espied the raging fire, they were convinced that Babaji Maharaj had certainly been reduced to ashes. In due course, the logs burnt themselves out, the flames subsided and Babaji Maharaj too awoke from his contemplation. He stepped out of the mass of ashes, the fire having had no effect whatever on his body. The village folks were thoroughly stunned by what they witnessed and applauded him in profound veneration. Babaji Maharaj confronted the village chief, "Henceforth; I shall perform Panchadhuni everyday with a thousand logs. You will have to provide the entire lot everyday." The headman cringed, "Sir, how can I lay my hands on such a huge quantity of wood daily?" Babaji Maharaj pressed on, "How then did you manage it today? Were you a part of the plot to burn me down? Look, I am still in one piece, lavish supply of timber notwithstanding. By the mercy of the Fire God, not one hair on my body has come to harm." The chief explained, "Sir, the sadhu who was with you bullied us into supplying all that wood. We never imagined that he was going to employ all that timber for just one layout; we took it for granted that, as on other days, he would use only a small portion. Envious, he must have been planning to liquidate you, otherwise why should he decamp lock, stock and barrel? Why is it that he and his luggage are not to be seen here? If you should permit, Sir, we will go looking for him, bring him back and punish him suitably." Babaji Maharaj restrained them, "No, leave it at that, you don't need to intervene. If he has transgressed, nemesis will catch up with him." As it happened, two days after that incident, the police apprehended him on some other charge and sentenced him to imprisonment for six months.²

Summer was the time when Babaji Maharaj practised the yoga of five sacred fires, whereas winter was when he immersed himself chest-deep in stream water for meditation. It was in the dark and early hours of the morning that

he entered the water, assumed a yogic posture and plunged deep into spiritual contemplation. Several daylight hours later, his monastic attendants carried him out of water and administered heat to his torso until he descended to external consciousness.

Babaji Maharaj had thus performed diverse religious austerities of awesome severity and undertaken numerous pilgrimages. Ultimately, he came to holy Vraja and settled down. This region, he felt, is the most agreeable of all; he had not come across a more suitable territory for sadhus to dwell in and around. He added, "It is true that the Himalayan foothills are also satisfactory for spiritual pursuits, but, for sustenance, one needs to rely mainly on underground tubers. During monsoons, one has to scout around for tuber sprouts and mark the spots for later identification. A good deal of effort is thus diverted for securing nourishment for the body. I was persuaded that holy Vraja is preferable because food here does not require to be stocked in advance. Varieties of nice foodstuff, appropriate for ascetics, are always readily available here. I therefore made up mind to stay on in Vraja".

There is a pool of water in Bharatpur that goes by the name of Soyani ka Kund. Before he came over to holy Vraja for permanent residence, Babaji Maharaj has lived for sometime near that pool. I gather, it was there that he had attained the Ultimate Merger with the Lord and absolute fulfilment of his spiritual goals. The following verse, composed by Babaji Maharaj himself, commemorates that event :

*Soyani Ka Kund was where
Ramdas met his Maker,
Fools may not believe it,
But the wise know better.*

He began accepting disciples from his Bharatpur days. A local orthodox brahim of noble lineage was the first to offer his son for his discipleship under Babaji Maharaj. The son came to be known and renowned as Garibdas. From boyhood till his last breath, he held fast to Babaji Maharaj serving him with utmost care and devotion, and eventually attaining salvation thereby. Pure in character, free of attachment yet steeped in love, he was

² When I asked Babaji Maharaj why fire did not incinerate his body, he said, "While preparing for rituals with sacred fire, one needs first of all to guard his body against damage by fire through mystic invocations that ensure self-protection. Know it for certain that those who are afflicted by fire are inept in yoga and ignorant of occult formulas".

revered by each and every monk. His humility, patience, total disregard for all hardships in his ministrations to the Guru and universal compassion evoked unanimous acclaim from all. So serene was his appearance that, at the very first encounter, he struck me as an extra-ordinary individual—an ocean of bliss as it were. One glimpse at him and the mind would turn still and peaceful.

Bhagvandas, who is no more, was Babaji Maharaj's second disciple. He ministered to Babaji Maharaj for sometime, then practised religious austerity by himself and finally settled down as the religious head of a hermitage very near Bombay (Mumbai).

The name of the third disciple was Thakurdas, who had great erudition. Driven by a deep desire for renunciation, he took to Paramahansavritti* and retired to the Himalayan foothills. He has not been heard of since.

Babaji Maharaj's fourth disciple, Narottamdas, was the offspring of another orthodox brahmin recluse of Bharatpur. While lifting water one day from a well, he accidentally dropped Babaji Maharaj's monastic bowl into the well and, dreading punishment, beat a hasty retreat from the hermitage. He, however, clung fast to the path of spiritual discipline and eventually made a mark for himself all on his own. He always moved about with a huge congregation of followers and invariably received the honour due normally to the chief of an ashram. He is no more either. Once I asked Narottamdasji, "Do you remember, from your boyhood days, having noticed Babaji Maharaj perform any special religious rites?" He replied, "He was already a Realized Soul by that time. I have not seen him in the status of an aspirant. When I lived with him as a boy, he used to occasionally engage in one specific ritual. Once or twice in a month, in company of Garibdas or myself, he would proceed to the woods carrying a large half-a-litre glass and ask us to get that glass filled with clean water. He would suck that water in by the phallus and, a short while later, expel it back into the same glass, as if urinating. Following his prior instructions, we would go prepared with ready-made lamp-wicks like the ones used during ceremonial waving of lights in temples. Babaji Maharaj would have us light those wicks, hold them on to the discharged fluid and observe if they burnt steadily or not. We would do his bidding and watch in amazement as the lighted wicks, sustained by the penial liquid, would continue to burn with non-flickering noiseless flames exactly as they

would if fed by clarified butter. Satisfied with the condition of the flames, he would return to his seat. Except for this one mysterious ritual of his, I have not witnessed any other."

I have listed the names of Babaji Maharaj's first four disciples. Many others came later, mostly from Bengal. Almost all of them are currently living and therefore it is unnecessary to speak about in great detail. Later on, he admitted even a notorious thief of Vrindavan as his disciple. Only his story and my own will in due course be narrated with some thoroughness.

In the course of his wonderings, he once went to Hathras. The local Zemindar, who was very wealthy but had no male issue, waited on Babaji Maharaj with considerable devotion and eventually appealed, "Sir, I have no son. Would you very graciously grant me one? Babaji Maharaj said, "All right, promise that you will erect a temple for me at Vrindavan and you will have a son." The Zemindar readily agreed, "Let a son be born to me and I will certainly have a shrine constructed at Vrindavan." Babaji Maharaj prophesied, "Within a year from this day, you will be blessed with a son. Mind, however, that, if you do not build the temple, your son will not live. I shall return in a year." Immediately afterward, the wife of the landlord conceived and duly gave birth to a male child. As Babaji Maharaj reappeared at the conclusion of one year, the zemindar played an ardent host, expressed joy at the birth of a son, but went back on his pledge to raise a temple at Vrindavan, saying, "Here is my spacious garden house. This is where I shall have the temple come up. Pray, make this your permanent abode." At this turn of events, Babaji Maharaj said, "You had sworn to erect the shrine at Vrindavan. Now that you do have a son, you are presumptuous enough to go back on your commitment. As a consequence, on day three reckoned from today, this son of yours will cease to live." With that, he walked out of the rich man's dwelling and established his prayer cushion at a location nearby. Sure enough, the son perished exactly on the third day. Deeply distressed and crying bitterly, the zemindar's wife ran out of the inner confines of their villa, came to Babaji Maharaj, threw herself on the ground at his feet, and implored, "Sir, kindly do forgive my husband. I was without a child, and it was your grace that granted me one. Misguided in mind, my husband has made light of you and that is why I am childless once again. But I happen to be innocent and seek your commiseration. I will do anything you wish."

Moved to pity by her lamentation, Babaji Maharaj gave in, "Very well, even as you have lost one son, you will beget two more, mark my word. And they will endure. But if you should enter into covenant with a holy soul, do try and abide by it. I wish nothing from you."

Babaji Maharaj then shifted to Vrindavan and lived for sometime in the monastery overlooking Davanal Kund in Kernarvan, which housed many hermits at that time. By way of assistance to the sadhus, he used to regularly cleanse the gigantic cooking vessels, chop over a hundred kilograms of firewood in the forest and carry that load on his head to deliver at the hermitage. Having spent some time in this manner at the monastery, he moved again and stationed himself under a tree looking out on a public bathing site on the Yamuna, facing the lane to Gangaji Ka Kunj. Garibdasji was always in attendance.

Men and women a plenty used to visit that bathing place for their daily dips. Some Vraja-dwellers figured that, since many females happened to be regular bathers at that spot they should verify if Babaji Maharaj was a genuine sadhu or not. Having so resolved, they dispatched a young woman to him during the deep dark hours of a midnight when everybody else was asleep. Babaji Maharaj had stretched out on his mat when that female walked in noiselessly, lay herself down by his side directly on his prayer mat and clung to him in embrace. About ten yards away, Garibdasji was at that time preparing to lie down on his own prayer rug. As the woman fastened herself to Babaji Maharaj, he called out to Garibdasji, "Garibdas, come here with a lamp and find out who has invaded my seat." On Garibdasji lighting a lamp, Babaji Maharaj looked at the woman on his prayer cushion and demanded, "Who are you? Why have you descended upon me at this hour of the night?" She was brazen, "Sir, I am a widow and have no relatives. Consumed by passion, I have come to you for fulfilment." "If you are love-sick," he said, "go and find a householder; there are many." She persisted, "Sir, my mind is set on you. I have been enchanted since I laid my eyes on you. It is your favour that I seek." Babaji Maharaj flew into a rage, "Garibdas, move away a mile, I will teach this harlot what a sadhu's power can be like. She is hell bent upon ruining the morality of an ascetic; I will demonstrate to her what it means to copulate with one. In an one-hour-long ritual, I will extract the very life out of

her; she will then learn how virile a sadhu can be. "So saying, he invited the woman, "Come on now, come over to me." Scared stiff by then, the woman broke into tears, "Sir, please forgive me, I am not at fault. The Vraja-dwellers have sent me to you in order to test you bonafides. That's how I am here. I beg your pardon, Sir." He softened and said, "Get moving then, Do never in future annoy a hermit as you have done tonight. Not all sadhus belong to the same class; some are for real."

After nightfall on another occasion, Babajji Maharaj was seated alone by the bathing stairs when two ravishing Punjabi maidens came and prostrated, offered him some small gifts, set themselves down and engaged in small talk laced with erotic overtones and body gestures. Eventually, after some tete-a-tete one of them all of a sudden took hold of his....., teasing it and giggling all the while. Unfazed, he reacted thus, "Wretched fool! So you have grabbed it. No matter, I could'nt care less. Do have a good, good look!" The two women fondled it variously, but it would not harden. Non-plussed, they gave up and retreated.

Next day, Chhannu Singh of Vrindavan—gautam brahmin by caste, called on Babaji Maharaj and started a conversation. He was wrestler of some fame and used to join Babaji Maharaj frequently in smoking hemp and retail talk. Babaji Maharaj was quite robust himself and practised a healthy camaraderie with Vraja people, mingling with them freely and indulging in banter and leg-pulling as amongst equals. In the course of sundry talks that day, Chhannu Singh taunted, "Babaji, we are now all aware of your manly strength and virility. You are an impotent eunuch. Who says you are man of great prowess?" Babaji Maharaj recalled the happenings of the previous night and promptly realized the inner message of the accusation. "How have you decided that I am impotent? Here, take a look at my hard-on it is tougher than you will ever have," countered he, simultaneously pulling out his huge and letting it stiffen like a steel rod. Chhannu Singh was quick to concede his mistake, prostrated and said, "Babaji, you have indeed conquered lust. Young women having failed to induce an erection on you, we had surmised that you are sexually incapable. But today I have witnessed your majesty; you are Lord Shiva Himself."

As Chhannu Singh of Vraja and Babaji Maharaj sat one day discussing sundry topics, a notorious thief of Vrindavan turned up, prostrated to Babaji Maharaj and took a seat near him in the hope of smoking hemp. Known as Gosaian and born in a brahmin family of Vrindavan, this character was ringleader of a gang of bandits and always engaged in various criminal activities. He

successfully evaded all attempts for his arrest until, finally, an Englishman apprehended him after encircling a whole forest with the help of a British regiment. He was awarded a jail sentence for fourteen years and deported to a faraway island. On completion of that penalty, he reappeared in Vrindavan—hardly chastened by fourteen years of incarceration. Everyone lived in terror of his tyranny. When this individual presented himself to Babaji Maharaj for a share of hemp smoke, Chhannu Singh had an idea, "Babaji Maharaj, why don't you reform this crook? He is a brahmin by birth but excels everybody in Vrindavan in villainy. The village folks are in perpetual horror of his depredations. He has gone through fourteen years of imprisonment and learnt nothing from it. You are a great soul, a liberated Yogi, do please save the villagers from his reign of terror." Babaji listened to the appeal and addressed Gosaian thus, "What do you say, Gosaian? Do you fancy being a sadhu? Will you quit stealing and be my disciple instead?" The words struck Gosaian like a surge of electricity. Silent for a while, he was profoundly touching when he spoke, "Sir, my misdeeds are countless and beyond ordinary measure. Would you still admit me as your disciple?" Babaji Maharaj laughed as he replied, "Yes, Yes, I will indeed. Go to the market this moment and procure a string of tulsi* beads. I will tie that around your throat and initiate you as my disciple this very day." Gosaian lost no time in acquiring a necklace of tiny tulsi beads from the market; Babaji Maharaj blew into a conch, fastened the beads around Gosaian's neck and inducted him as a disciple. From then on, a transformation came about in the very appearance of Gosaian. His urge for stealing persecuting others dissolved and he metamorphosed a loving and tender-hearted hermit. He took up his abode in a secluded garden of holy Vrindavan, on the bank of the Yamuna—normally devoting the entire day in prayers and, once after dusk, presenting himself in front of an eatery in town. Either out of a hangover of past fear or for other reasons, the vendors voluntarily offered him milk, oil-fried wheat cakes, and other items for his daily nourishment. On occasions when he attended any congregation of sadhus, he would furtively disarrange the metal water-pots owned by different sadhus—either out of fun or as a vestigial reminder of his earlier propensities. Everyone knew that this was Gosaian's handiwork and teasingly called him "Gosaian, the poacher". Gosaian accepted the banter sportingly enough and would often embark upon a rather long-drawn-out ballad composed by himself on his exploits as a crook and his prison-life of fourteen years. Thus it was that an inveterate criminal was transmuted into a compassionate monk through Babaji Maharaj's intervention.

RESIDENCE AT GANGAJI'S KUNJ, VRINDAVAN

The public at large used to spontaneously provide Babaji Maharaj with all his necessities, under that tree at the bathing ghat*. Hemp and hashish worth two or three rupees and various foodstuff would turn up daily. Such opulence led the local thieves to conclude that Babaji Maharaj had plenty hoarded money with him and they would for that reason pester him from time to time during the nights. Those that indulged in pilfering at night were verily the ones that masqueraded as gentlemen during daytime—a mixed lot of brahmins, kshatriyas* and other castes. Many among them would show up during daylight hours at Babaji Maharaj's place for smoking tobacco and hemp, and for a bit of gossip. One morning, in the course of a chitchat with Babaji Maharaj, three of those gentlemen thieves—in a moment of defiance—issued a veiled threat, "Babaji you speak as fearlessly as a tiger; don't be surprised if you get paid for it handsomely one of these nights." Babaji Maharaj was not to be cowed down, "I have known all along that you are thieves and scoundrels. Your wickedness has now crossed all limits, you dare intimidate even a holy soul. Very well, I declare that, before the day is over, all three of you will be taken prisoner by the police." The thieves retorted, "What nonsense ! Your occult powers be damned; no one can touch us;" and they left arrogantly. Only a short while later, however, the police picked up all three of them on a charge of thievery and produced them in court on the same day. They were released on bail and a date was specified for the trial. Released from the lawcourt, two out of the three made straight for Babaji Maharaj, dropped at his feet and, with folded hands, begged, "Sir, we are like your children, please do have mercy on us and forgive our misdemeanour. The police had arrested us and taken to court; we happen to be out on bond. We cannot escape except by your grace. Kindly grant us your pardon this time, we will not behave as we did— ever in future." Babaji Maharaj replied, "Swear to me that you will never again harras the sadhus nor indulge in theft." They swore, "Never again shall we engage in such misdeeds." Mollified, Babaji Maharaj granted, "Very well, you two will be acquitted. Go in peace." They prostrated and took leave. Later on, on the day of hearing, those two were absolved of the accusations while

the third man was condemned to four months in prison. His appeal to a higher court was dismissed. He was bound in iron fetters and sent out to dig at the Mathura-Vrindavan road repair site.

One subsequent day, while proceeding from Mathura to Vrindavan along that road, Babaji Maharaj caught sight of the brahmin thief toiling there in excavation work. The culprit also noticed Babaji Maharaj, came up on the road, prostrated and spoke in tears, "Sir, I was innocent this time but have landed in this predicament solely due to your curse. We Vraja-dwellers are like your children and foolish at times. Should you have punished me so severely?" Moved to pity by his suffering and woebegone appeal, Babaji Maharaj said, "Very well, do desist in future from persecuting holy men. You shall be discharged from prison on day three from today." "How is that going to happen, Sir? Even my appeal has been set aside," the man was surprised. Babaji Maharaj replied, "Don't you still have faith in the words of a sage? My utterances can never turn out to be untrue." Thrilled, the man prostrated, and Babaji Maharaj came away. Day three arrived and along with it arrived a government decree requiring that every jail house set three convicts free. As a result of that directive, the man in question regained his freedom, went straight to Babaji Maharaj at Vrindavan, prostrated and sang his glory.

During one Kumbh Mela* at Vrindavan, Babaji Maharaj was installed by the congregated hermits as the Mahant* of holy Vraja. Most or many of the sadhus are in the habit of smoking hemp and hashish, as are quite a few of the householders in Vraja. In order to test the smoking prowess of the monks, a certain indigene of Vraja—gautam by caste—had a huge earthen smoking funnel designed and built at Dauji by special order, and loaded it with an incredibly large dose of over one kilogram of hashish. The due process is to first prime the funnel(chillum) with a measure of normal blended tobacco (chopped tobacco leaves mixed and kneaded with molasses), to place the ball of hashish centrally over the primer and then to top it up with a second layer of blended tobacco. To ignite the system, one needs to deposit a scoop of glowing charcoal bits on the second layer and suck for smoke from the bottom of the funnel system. If one sucks powerfully enough, the top tobacco layer begins to burn and feed abundant heat to the lump of hashish which then bursts into a flame. 'To pop the hashish' is an approximate English rendering of the Hindi word that gives a name to this process. After having

processed the funnel in the above manner for one mammoth shot of over one kilogram of hashish—note that one kilogram of hashish requires at least an equal amount of blended tobacco—the Vraja-dweller used an iron chain to suspend it from the branch of a tree, and threw an open challenge, "Let anyone who has the mettle come and pop this hashish." Many tried, but none could draw even a little smoke out of the funnel. A large number of sadhus then rallied together and approached Babaji Maharaj, "Sir, a native of Vraja has packed over a kilogram of hashish in a smoking funnel and dared the sadhus to pop it. We have all had a go but failed miserably—not even a hint of smoke would emerge. We are counting on you to come and save our reputation." Babaji Maharaj readily agreed, went to the site of confrontation accompanied by Garibdasji and asked the latter to try and draw out some smoke to begin with. Mightily as Garibdasji sucked at the funnel, some little smoke did come out but the charge did not pop. It was then that Babaji Maharaj took over and sucked at the funnel with such awesome power that the entire mass of hashish exploded into an enormous flame that shot up through the tree. Everyone broke into a lusty applause; the indigene was delighted as he paid homage to Babaji Maharaj along with gifts.

I will narrate another notable incident concerning Babaji Maharaj's smoking prowess. He was on his way, along with Garibdasji from Bharatpur to Vrindavan and had nearly two kilograms of hashish with him. During the British reign, it was illegal to be in possession of so much hashish and the police therefore detained and produced him before the European magistrate, who asked, "How is it that you carry so much of hashish? Are you planning to sell some or all of it?" Babaji Maharaj's reply was, "This will last me hardly a day or two." "Really?" the European was surprised. "You are able to consume so much of hashish in just two days? Let us have a demonstration then, I should like to see." Babaji Maharaj instructed Garibdasji to load the smoking funnel in doses of about 125 grams of the drug and then, while the white couple watched, set about smoking with such gusto that flames hissed and danced on the funnel head. Terrified, the lady screamed, "Let him go, let him go." "That's enough," said the magistrate, "Seeta, the missionary will present you with a copper vessel for your hashish. No one will challenge you hereafter." Babaji Maharaj said, "If anyone does, I will

simply mount another demonstration. I do not need a copper pot." The blonde man and his wife laughed and said, "Very well then, goodbye."

During a certain year, Ujjain happened to be the venue for Kumbh Mela, and a massive congregation of Shaivite* monks assembled there several days ahead of schedule. Among them was a celebrated hermit of diverse occult powers. Swayed by the supernatural, the king of Ujjain enlisted as his disciple. Jubilant and emboldened by this turn of events, the Shaivites spread out and occupied the entire terrain earmarked for the festival and vowed not to allow the Vaishnavites* to partake of the religious celebrations. As the latter began to arrive in due course, they were prevented by the Shaivites from moving into the stretch of land reserved for them. Continuing therefore to gather outside the area, they swelled into a confluence of about six thousand sadhus. But the Shaivites were numerically superior still, and arrogant for a good measure by virtue of the king's patronage. The situation being what it was, the Vaishnavites did not dare fight for their rights and decided to retreat en masse. It so coincided that, in pursuance of a tradition that the Mahant of holy Vraja be present in every Kumbh Mela' Babaji Maharaj was at that time on his way to Ujjain together with a few other sadhus. As the two parties met somewhere in between, he enquired of the other Mahants, "How is it that you have already turned back from the festival? The propitious time for the event is still days ahead." They replied, "Although we happen to be 6000 in number, the Shaivites are many more. In addition, they are bolstered by the tutelage of the king who is now their neophyte. They have invaded the space allotted to us and, should we have tried to take possession of it, they were only too eager to start a riot. We were apprehensive and decided to turn back." Unimpressed, Babaji Maharaj said, "I wonder why you have opted for a monastic life. If death scares you so, you should have stayed put at home. It does not behome a sadhu to be frightened of parting with life. If, in order to move into the arena assigned to you, violence was inescapable, what was the harm? Shaivites worship Lord Shiva; they have relied on His Majesty to usurp your ground. You are devotees of Lord Vishnu and depend on His Supremacy. If, armed with such a faith, you proceeded to claim your own territory and it flared into a conflict, you would have died with the name of Lord Vishnu on your lips and ascend Vishnuloka (abode of Lord Vishnu). By the same token, the Shaivites would have perished with their minds anchored in Lord Shiva and thereby risen to Shivaloka. That

would have benefitted both parties. Retreating like cowards was quite improper; it belittles our tutelary deity, Lord Vishnu." That restored the confidence of the entire company of sadhus, who said in one voice, "Sir, we were indeed in error. If you will kindly lead us back, this battalion of six thousand will certainly be behind you." Installed on an elephant that the hermits managed to borrow from some Mahant, Babaji Maharaj spearheaded and the holy band followed. As they reached the fair, the Shaivites were at once charmed and awed by the saintly apparition at the vanguard, voluntarily vacated the site booked for the Vaishnavites and set themselves up within their own sector. The Vaishnav sadhus burst out in exultation, occupied their own domain and some even indulged in persecuting the Shaivites. A particular Vaishnavite, famed for his arrogance, went to the extreme and liquidated one Shaivite. As the news of the man-slaughter unfolded, an European—accompanied by other government personnel—turned up at the site to investigate, approached Babaji Maharaj and asked him to identify the killer. He replied, "Sir, I confine myself to my own seat of prayer and so do the other monks to their own. How am I to know who among them abandoned his station, picked up a quarrel with somebody and committed the murder? Many misdeeds are perpetrated in your own jurisdiction; do you possibly know all the offenders? The hermits are all there in front of you, if your culprit is one among them, you are welcome to look for him." The assassin had in fact gone elsewhere into hiding and therefore, unable to establish his identity, the foreigner gave up and withdrew. Thereafter, the Kumbh festival went off without any further hitch.

Babaji Maharaj was once proceeding somewhere with a large congregation of holy men. When a congregation is on the move, the convention is for everyone to rise very early in the morning while it is yet quite dark, ease nature, finish bath and ablution, and then worship personal deities climaxing with a ceremonial waver of lights. By dawn, all seats of prayer are dismantled and the gathering sets out for its next destination. Around midday, it relocates itself outside some hamlet that offers good potable water and shady trees. In western India, when such a concourse of sadhus makes its appearance, the rural folk gather by and by, absorb the holy scenario and prostrate in reverence. At the same time, they take a rough count of the heads in the assemblage, collectively arrange for the necessary victuals in the form of wheat flour, pulses, salt etc. and deliver them to the

Mahant by the end of the day. Under instructions from the Mahant, a few monks then apportion the foodstuff to the individual sadhus at their own seats. While doing so, it does happen at times that some hermits inflate the number of members in their own groups and claim, say, material for ten when the actual figure should have been five. Occasionally, this develops into a row.

The congregation under the leadership of Babaji Maharaj also had its share of such altercations. Severely peeved by those bickerings, an ancient saint—of another sect but travelling with that throng—complained to Babaji Maharaj one day, "The spirit of renunciation is altogether missing in your sect. The stomach is all important; they spend the day in squabbles over the bread-basket." Disturbed by those harsh words of condemnation on the entire denomination of Vaishnav anchorites, Babaji Maharaj promptly folded his palms and spoke very meekly, "Sir, do kindly honour me with your views on self-denial; I will certainly follow your advice from this day." Quite pleased, and fancying himself in the role of guru, the saint held forth, "My child, if anybody makes an offering to you, accept only what you need; that is renunciation. One has to be happy with whatever appears before him spontaneously. If nothing comes, be at peace with nothing. Do never ask for anything from anyone and be ever rooted in contentment." Babaji Maharaj said, "Sir, my seat will be next to yours from today and I shall verily act exactly as you have spoken, no matter what the others do." He then summoned all the group leaders and told them in confidence, "After this day, the supernatural will be unmanifest and your daily provisions will not turn up automatically at the congregation. I suggest that, for several days hence, you go to the village, seek charity and manage quietly somehow. The saint needs a lesson or two." The foodstuff had already been distributed for that day. That was cooked, offered in worship to personal godheads and partaken of as holy food. Next morning, the convention of sadhus struck camp as usual at dawn and reached another village by noontime, but the villagers did not bring any groceries for the monks on that day. It was the sadhus who subsequently walked to the village, solicited—one to a house—for food, ate surreptitiously and came back. Babaji Maharaj and the saint did not leave their seats and went without food. While the former consumed hemp, hasish and cannabis (bhang), the latter—not being used to narcotics—drank only water. On the morrow, the gathering moved to a new village where, again, the inhabitants

did not come forward with any food supply. Consequently, both the saint and Babaji Maharaj had nothing to eat. As on the previous day, the rest of the company resorted to covert begging in order to quench their hunger. This routine went on for days together and the saint became progressively weaker. Eventually, by the eighth day, the saint became too weak even to move and totally disabled, he cried out piteously, "Father, I am thoroughly exhausted due to lack of food and am just about ready to perish." Plams together, Babaji Maharaj asked, "Revered Saint, why do you whimper so? You have only to tell me what needs be done." The saint groaned, "Father, I am dying of starvation. I can hardly open my mouth to speak. Please do go to the village, beg for some food and bring it to me. Otherwise, I cannot keep my body and soul together." Babaji Maharaj folded his hands again and questioned, "Sir, what then is 'renunciation'? It was you who taught me that begging or asking for anything from anyone violates the code of renunciation. How is it then you yourself wish me to beg?" The saint came to his senses; he realized that he had committed a serious offence by belittling the Vaishnav anchorites. Palms enjoined, he readily conceded, "Yes, yes that was a sad indiscretion on my part. Please forgive me, I am ignorant. I was unaware of the sublime ramifications of Vaishnav renuciation. I seek your pardon for my mistake, and I twitch my own ears." Babaji Maharaj was mollified, "Don't you worry at all, Sir. Any time now, the villagers will be here before you with provisions. Vaishnavites should not be talked of derogatory terms; they are an intriguing lot. Their glory can baffle comprehension; they are ever playful and frolicsome. Not everyone can perceive the inner nature of an individual." Even as he spoke, the villagers appeared on the horizon with basket-loads of provision on their heads. In no time, they reached Babaji Maharaj and placed before him foodstuff for the whole congregation. The saint had his lesson in humility.

The annual circumambulation of holy Vraja*—covering a distance of about 270 kilometers—gets under way two lunar days after Janmastarni. Since this ritual is customarily led by the Mahanta of holy Vraja, Babaji Maharaj used to participate in it every year along with very many other sadhus. The cicumambulation takes off from the temple of Bhuteshwar Mahadev* in Mathura, requires about 45 days to complete and winds up at the shrine of Gokarna Mahadev* (also in Mathura). The congregation rests there for a few days before dispersing. During the few days of halt at Gokarna Mahadev, the

citizens of Mathura usually provide food for the monks. On one such finale, Babaji Maharaj and his congregation came and installed themselves around Gokarna Mahadev. Some of the hermits, this time round, were of violent temper and, while looting milk from the householders of the town, indulged in widespread misbehaviour. The townspeople retaliated by withholding food supply on the first day and, consequently many of the sadhus had to do without food. The sadhus believe that, by virtue of Nagaji's boon, looting of milk is their prerogative. Be that as it may, edibles for sadhus did not turn up on that first day in Mathura. On the day after, several Mathurites came along to have a look at the holy gathering. Among them were some self-styled tops who walked directly, with their shoes on, to the sacred fire of Babaji Maharaj and engaged in sundry conversation. Babaji Maharaj had not noticed the shoes, but another sadhu did, and he protested, "Hello there, how is it that you keep your shoes on and come directly to the sacred fire of a noble soul?" One of the visitors reacted impertinently, "So what? We Vraja-dwellers are like sadhus ourselves. What's this big noise about our shoes?" The monk lost his temper and used an abusive word or two. The visitors reciprocated with equal vehemence and said, "You and your stomach-centered renunciation! We know all about that. Self-appointed super Mahants come here and starve!" As those awful words of derision were given voice to, Babaji Maharaj articulated not even a single syllable but threw one and only one-sharp glance at the offender. With that penetrating glance, the man—who was standing on his two feet—promptly collapsed onto the ground and began to writhe about in pain. The other citizens who had gathered there to witness the concourse ministered to him, but he perished in no time. The dead body was removed amidst loud lamentations. But the residents came back later to seek forgiveness and to offer their services. However, because of some misunderstanding also with the Mahanta of Gokarna Mahadev, Babaji Maharaj declared, "I shall never again set up my seat of prayer at this location," and thereafter discontinued the practice of using that site for post-circumambulation camping.

Many years subsequently, some few sadhus would individually install their seats at some neighbouring spot, but regular congregations of holy men have come to a halt.

Kumbh Melas, which are celebrated at specified times at Hardwar and other

places, require the presence of the Mahanta of Holy Vraja. Babaji Maharaj would accordingly leave Vrindavan on those occasions to attend those festivals. In addition, he would every year participate in the circumambulation of the Vraja region. At other times, he was usually to be found—as mentioned earlier—at the bathing ghat on the Yamuna river. Many of the Vraja-dwellers, the Gautam brahmins in particular, were especially fascinated by him. Some of the laeders among Gautam brahmins—such as, Chhannu Singh, Nona Singh and others—jointly owned an orchard in the Kemarvan sector, hugging in the railway line. They submitted a proposal to Babaji Maharaj that he might consider shifting and installing himself at that property, where the local youth used to assemble to practise wrestling. His reaction was, "I am agreeable provided that you make an outright bequest of that estate to me. Otherwise, I am content to live here by the Yamuna." They consented with a condition, "It will belong to you as long as you, your disciple, your grand disciple, or any of your successive disciples continue to live there. If and when that sequence is broken, the property will revert to our descendants." Subject to that stipulation, they handed the garden over to Babaji Maharaj. That was 23 years ago, the year of Kumbh Mela in the month of Magh (Bengali year*) at Prayag (Allahabad). Babaji Maharaj migrated from the bank of the Yamuna to the orchard, installed his sacred fire in a thatched hut and continued thereafter to lodge in that place. Soon it was Kumbh Mela time and Babaji Maharaj, entrusting the ashram to Garibdasji, left for and arrived at the festival site in holy Prayag accompanied by his disciple Premdas, an exceedingly darkskinned low-caste Shree-sect sadhu of name Kalyandas and a large heifer responding to the call of Ganga.

Let us at this stage digress for a while and speak about Premdasji. Son of Vraja brahmin, he was born in a village near Dauji. When he was a mere boy, he was initiated and named Premdas by a senior codisciple of Babaji Maharaj. Later on, the Guru handed him over to Babaji Maharaj, saying, "This disciple of mine will abide with and wait on you. Look upon him as your own." Adhering to Babaji Maharaj since then, he had a fair measure of schooling and, true to his name, a loving nature. He had a profound liking for perusing 'Sursagar'* and listening to the recitals of mythological literature as frequently executed by sanskrit scholars at numerous points in Vrindavan. Repeated exposures to these recitals and commentaries gradually engendered a persuasion in his mind that it is quite unnecessary to wear the

necklace of basil beads and the sacred thread and to observe the traditional Vaishnav canons on food, that Paramahansavritti is the most appropriate course for a Vaishnav anchorite, and that God inheres in everyone and all matters are basically equivalent. He began to flaunt those concepts openly even within the ashram precincts. As this state of affairs came to Babaji Maharaj's knowledge, he simply said, "This man has lost his sanity. How can I take him seriously?" Hardly had these words been spoken when symptoms of insanity became manifest in Premdasji and he began to act like a lunatic. Both eyes reddened and dilated, he got hold of a pair of tongs and deserted the hermitage forthwith. Heedless to the surroundings, he began frantically and incoherently to wander about faraway places like Varsana. He neither ate nor drank nor slept, whichever way he looked, he beheld only Babaji Maharaj. After five such days of fevered peregrination, body lacerated by thickets and thorns, he reappeared in Vrindavan. Garibdasji ran into him and, deeply touched by his sorry plight, dragged him forcibly to the hermitage and to Babaji Maharaj, appealing with folded hands, "Babaji Maharaj, Premdas is only a boy, your Bala Gopal*. Have mercy on him, he is totally deranged, and oblivious to the outside world. By your Grace, do bring him back to his senses." Babaji Maharaj said, "What can I do? Am I a physician?" And then, as Garibdasji persisted in his supplications, he added, "All right, you may let him have some of the consecrated food. Even if he is a non-believer, let him verify the divine efficacy that is latent in holy food." Garibdasji took one tortilla from the sacred remains of Babaji Maharaj's meal, gave it to Premdasji and commanded him to eat it. Premdasji tore a piece and put it into his mouth but it tasted to him as bitter as poison. Prevailed upon by Garibdasji, he swallowed that piece somehow but was quite unable to repeat the performance for a second time. It was then that Babaji Maharaj himself urged, "Oh, come on, try it once more and see how it tastes this time." So dictated, Premdasji plucked another piece out of the tortilla, deposited it in his mouth and discovered at once that it was now as delectable as nectar. Never before, he felt, had he taken anything as delicious. Slowly, he consumed the entire tortilla savouring its exquisite ambrosia-like flavour. Even as he finished eating, his dementia vanished forthwith. He returned to his senses and prostrated before Babaji Maharaj, who said, "How do you feel now? Didn't you assert that all substances are essentially the same? You have just borne witness to the abounding glory of consecrated food. This is why Vaishnavs observe certain rules of purity and offer to God food prepared only

from immaculate items. Food so consecrated excels; its glory and potency defy description." Premdasji prostrated once again and said, "Babaji Maharaj, I was bewitched by the oratory of the scholars and carried away into believing that the duality of the pure and the impure is but an illusion. Your mercy has now purged me of that misconception." From then on, Premdasji was once again entrusted with the assignment of waiting upon Babaji Maharaj. However, although he was quite compassionate intrinsically, excessive indulgence in hemp and hashish made him somewhat hot-headed—prone to recurring loss of temper and altercation with people. Babaji Maharaj noticed this and called him to say, "You have a very short temper and are much too liable to flare up easily with people. You will therefore go into a vow of silence from this day and speak with no one for the next twelve years. To quote Mouniji himself as he narrated this incident many years later, "Hardly had Babaji Maharaj pronounced those words when I felt as if someone had sealed my tongue with a pair of lock and key. There was no way I could speak; I was in fact compelled to observe silence." Premdasji remained voiceless for twelve long years and was consequently nick-named "Mouni"—the silent one. Bitten once by a poisonous snake, no sound whatever—even an 'ah'—could escape from his throat even as he collapsed to the ground in grievous pain. Babaji Maharaj took out a burning piece of coal from his sacred fire and deposited it on the wound; raw flesh began to smoulder and yet Mouni was unable to articulate even a monosyllabic distress signal. At the end of twelve such years of uninterrupted speechlessness, Babaji Maharaj solemnized the conclusion of Mouni's pledge of silence by launching a sadhu-feeding fete. The assembled monks suggested to Mouni, "Your vow stands consummated. You can speak now." Still unable to do so, Mouni pointed on Babaji Maharaj and let it be known by gestures that he could speak only on Babaji Maharaj unfastening the lock. It was then that Babaji Maharaj addressed Mouni directly, "Mouni, you can now resume speaking." Mouni had the sensation of his tongue being freed from the fetters. Thrilled, he uttered, "Shreeji"*—his first word—and set about greeting others.

Mouniji himself recounted that, during a circumambulation of holy Vraja when he was yet under the oath of silence, he had once walked out on Babaji Maharaj in a fit of pique. Soon, however, he was worried sick about Babaji Maharaj not being looked after properly during his absence. Deeply

repentant, he reappeared before Babaji Maharaj on the day when the congregation reached Radha Kund. Babaji Maharaj was at that moment stretched out on his seat, relaxing. Shedding tears, Mouni squatted at his feet massaging his legs. Babaji Maharaj spoke unhurriedly, "I am now full of years, why should you still abide with me? You will return to the ashram only after I pass away uncared for." Mouni went on massaging the legs, weeping quietly. Presently, though, he woke up to the fact that his palms were no longer making contact with Babaji Maharaj's legs but were landing directly on the latter's prayer mat; in fact, Babaji Maharaj seemed to have dissolved into nothing. Speechless and bewildered at the turn of events, he broke down completely and went on shedding copious tears. Frantic as he became, Mouniji suddenly discovered that Babaji Maharaj was back again, reclining as previously on his prayer cushion. As Mouni heaved a sigh of relief, Babaji Maharaj said, "If it pleases you to have me go away, do tell me, and I will be gone at once. If you should forsake an old-timer, who else will come forward to care for him?" He spoke with such helpless abandon that Mouni was overwhelmed with compassion. Overflowing with tears, he arose and circumambulated Babaji Maharaj three times over, prostrated and stood before him in attendance, palms held together. Babaji Maharaj bade him sit down and continue with massaging, and said, "Do not let yourself be provoked once again into leaving this old man to himself."

Garibdasji breathed his last six months after the Kumbh Mela at Prayag, referred to earlier. Thereafter, Mouniji devoted himself heart and soul for many years in the service of Babaji Maharaj. He prepared food, attended to the daily worship of the tutelary deity, scrubbed the utensils, fetched from afar many pitcherful of water and kept the hermitage spick and span. In addition, he used to prepare fodder for the cows, fashion cowdung cakes, cleave firewood, minister to Babaji Maharaj's legs and take care of all other retail work as they arose. As a rule, he looked after the entire gamut of daily chores all by himself, others assisting only occasionally. He was a superb cook, turning out savoury dishes. In the matter of service to others, I have not come across anyone as capable and tolerant as Mouniji. I happen to be a witness myself to all that I have recorded here about Mouniji.

I have documented earlier that Babaji Maharaj had gone to participate in the Kumbh Mela at Prayag, accompanied by Mouniji, Kalyandas and a heifer

named Ganga. It was there that I laid my fortunate eyes on Babaji Maharaj for the first time. With Mouniji by his side, he used to be seated under an enormous umbrella. Yet under the vow for silence, Mouniji would not communicate with anyone but remain seated at one place throughout the day. With tears cascading silently down from the two eyes and the face suffused with crimson, his appearance invited reverence from every passing spectator. On the day of the holy dip, a joint procession of all the Vaishnav sects had Babaji Maharaj ride an elephant and lead them for bathing at Triveni, the confluence of three rivers. The festival extended over the entire month of Magh and terminated in Falgun when Babaji Maharaj returned to his hermitage in Vrindavan. Thereafter, he resided permanently at the ashram, except during the annual circumambulation of holy Vraja in the month of Bhadra and one other occasion in December 1903 (Paus, Bengali year * 1310). That was when he had most mercifully come and lodged for nearly a month in my house at Bose Para, Baghbazar, Calcutta. After that sojourn, he went back to the retreat at Vrindavan and dwelt there continuously till Magh 8 of the Bengali year 1316.

I have spoken already on the Kumbh Mela at Prayag during the Bengali month of Magh. It was in the month of Shravana of the following year that Garibdasji discarded his mortal body at the Vrindavan ashram. Babaji Maharaj averred that Garibdasji had evolved into an ascetic of immaculate status, with no residual imperfection whatever. Garibdasji happened to be deeply devoted to the form of Lord Anantadev*, whose icon—acquired from the south—he worshipped regularly. That is why, wishing to relieve him altogether from the miseries of carrying a human frame and to transport him to His own celestial abode, Lord Anantadev assumed the figure of a snake and stung Garibdasji. The latter, however, was a person of such incredible equanimity that he never let anyone guess—by a spoken word or gesture—that he was suffering any discomfort arising out of the snakebite. Fatally jabbed by a deadly reptile, he casually hinted at having been bitten by an insect, took his regular bath at the appointed hour early in the morning, sat down for his daily prayer and slowly collapsed. Like one overcome with sleep, he lay down near his Guru—his features serene and peaceful as usual. Finally, as the heart beats ceased, Babaji Maharaj consigned the body away to the Yamuna, perceiving intuitively that the soul of Garibdasji had departed for the Supreme Abode. The body floated downstream with the

powerful monsoon current in the Yamuna. But, in order to demonstrate—as it were—its love for holy Vraja and to let everyone have a last view, that immense cadaver complete with its massive matted locks paused for three days at Vishram Ghat* in Mathura. It was as if his favourite Vishram Ghat, longing for his ascetic company, generated a whirlpool and detained the body next to itself. He was a friend of everyone in Mathura; batches of them came pouring in for a last view and for a final wavering of lights in adoration and farewell. Overwhelmed with grief, they sang hymns on the matchless attributes of his character. After three days of that extra-ordinary spectacle, the body drifted away and disappeared from sight.

With Garibdasji's demise, Mouniji took full charge of the daily duties and occupied himself in their performance with total dedication for the next twelve years. He was quite liberal with his affections for me and, twice during that period, graced my residence at Calcutta for a few days each time. He enchanted everyone with his loving disposition. Weakened by persistent headache and asthma, he finally shifted from the ashram to Keshi Ghat, where eventually he breathed his last.