

Preface

ONE DAY IN 1969, a small group of disciples got together with the idea of writing a biography of their guru, Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, whom they affectionately called Baba.¹ When they sat down and started writing, however, they realized how little they really knew about his life. So they decided to approach him and request him to write his autobiography. At first Baba refused, protesting that he had no time for such things. But after repeated supplications, he finally acquiesced to their pleas. The next day, at the regular Sunday gathering, the same disciples were surprised when Baba announced that he had finished his autobiography. “Do you want to see it?” he asked. His curious devotees looked at one another, wondering how he could have possibly finished it so quickly, even at the tremendous speed with which the master customarily worked. Baba called them over to his cot and handed them a sheet of paper. On it they found a single sentence written out in longhand: “I was a mystery, I am a mystery, and I shall always remain a mystery.”

This was typical of Anandamurti, who throughout his life insisted on staying out of the public eye so that he could concentrate on his work—the establishment of a global mission for spiritual elevation and social change. In his earlier years, he would often say that he did not want a cult of personality but rather a cult of ideology; true to his word, he took great pains to deflect the attention of his followers from the guru worship that had become so deeply rooted over more than seventy centuries of Indian cultural history. Indeed, he was a spiritual master unlike any who had gone before him on the Indian subcontinent, as much a social revolutionary as a spiritual guru. He did not allow his disciples to simply enjoy his company while they practiced meditation in a search for spiritual enlightenment. He entrusted to them a social mission, and he would not allow anything to distract them from that mission, not even their understandable fascination with his own person.

How then does one begin to reveal the mystery of who he was, when he went to such pains to conceal himself? The obvious answer is that one does not. Anandamurti left no testament of his inner experience, no hints at what lay behind the gaze that so enchanted his disciples, no real way of knowing who he was, other than through discovering who we ourselves truly are. What he did leave, however, was his imprint on the lives of so many thousands of people,

the impact of which still continues to reverberate throughout our planet. This biography, then, is the story of Anandamurti as seen through the eyes of those who knew him—his disciples, family, friends, and colleagues—in the hope that through that open window the reader may be able to catch a glimpse of the man standing behind it.

In one of his messages to his disciples, Anandamurti said, “I have merged myself in my mission; if you wish to know me, then serve my mission.” Indeed, it is in many ways impossible to separate Anandamurti from his missionary endeavors and the ideology he left behind. His life was a reflection of his ideology, and there is no better teaching of the ideological principles meant to guide human beings in their lives than the life of the spiritual master who embodied those principles. I would go so far as to claim that the inverse of his oft-repeated message is equally true: If you want to know the mission, then try to know the life of the master who embodied its spirit with every breath he took.

A note of thanks:

The information contained in this book was primarily drawn from the oral histories of Anandamurti’s colleagues, friends, family, and disciples, as well as from various written sources published during and after his lifetime. Most of it has been recast in narrative form, interspersed here and there with passages quoted directly from the interviews. I would like to thank all of the several thousand people, too numerous to thank individually, who sat patiently for these interviews and shared their reminiscences. Some of what they shared was personal and for that reason was kept out of this book. Other material was left out for lack of space, but all of it has been faithfully preserved for future generations. I hope they are aware of the incalculable value of their contribution and how much it is appreciated.

PART ONE

I

An Old Soul

The future of humanity is not dark. I have this faith. Human beings will seek and one day realize that inextinguishable flame that remains ever-burning behind the veil of darkness.¹

I am in my mother's womb. From there itself I can see my mother; I recognize her so well. I see my father, my sister, and my other relations. How well I know them; I know their names also.

I am born. Normally children weep at birth. I don't. I am all smiles. In fact, I am happy to be born. I want to address the people around me by their names because I know them so well. But alas, how incapacitated I am! My vocal cords do not permit me to speak yet. They want to feed me. They have put a piece of cotton in a cup containing milk. Drop by drop, they drop milk from the cotton into my mouth. How silly of these people! Am I a child, to be fed in this manner? I shall drink from the cup, not the cotton. I protest and raise my hand to hold the cup. They are taken aback at what I have done. I realize that I have done much to perplex them, and I return to being a newborn child.

—Anandamurti's earliest memories, as recounted to
Amitananda in the winter of 1969 in Ranchi.

OUTSIDE THE HOUSE of Lakshmi Narayana Sarkar and his wife, Abharani Devi, the small town of Jamalpur was springing to life at the beginning of a hot summer day—May 11, 1922.² Temperatures were expected to reach forty degrees Celsius in the shade; hence, most of the town's inhabitants were already busy, taking advantage of the cool morning air to accomplish as much as they could before walking through the dry, scorching streets became a chore best avoided. Here and there, the town's few Buddhists were busy with their worship on this, the most important day of their year, the full moon in the month of Vaishak,³ commemorating the birth of the Buddha. A few hundred kilometers away in the town of Bodh Gaya, site of the Buddha's enlightenment, pilgrims from

around the world were burning incense and chanting mantras to celebrate the birth of the enlightened one with the rising of the sun.

Inside the modest three-room house, tucked into a small plot on a side street off the main Keshavpur road, the family of Bengali immigrants, together with visiting relatives, had been busy for hours, preparing for the birth of the couple's fourth child. They were all hoping for a son, most of all Lakshmi Narayana. Several days earlier, he had had a vision that his wife would finally give birth to the male heir he had long hoped for, so important in the Hindu tradition, and he was sure that his vision had been a true foretelling. His family had already endured its share of sorrowful births. His second daughter had died when she was two and a half. His third child, a boy, had died in childbirth. Only his oldest daughter, Hiraprabha, had survived, a gentle, quick-witted seven-year-old who was already showing the talent for music that would give her parents many hours of happiness in the years to come. This birth, the vision had promised, would be different. He would have a son who would survive him and make him proud, and he was eager to see his wish come true.

Abharani Devi's contractions had begun late in the evening, light but steady. As the first rays of dawn began to appear through the open windows, the female members of the family gathered around her bed in anticipation, just as thousands of pilgrims in distant Bodh Gaya began to blow on conch shells and place offerings before images of the Buddha. At seven minutes past six, with the two elderly matriarchs of the family assisting, the grandmothers Indumati Mitra and Vinapani Sarkar, a ruddy-cheeked infant boy was born, the scarlet rays of the rising sun reflecting on his body through the open windows. In keeping with the family tradition, Indumati held a silver cup with fresh milk. She dipped some cotton into it and began to feed the baby drop by drop. To the surprise of everyone, the newborn infant reached out his hand and grabbed the cup, as if trying to drink directly from it. Vinapani gasped and exclaimed, "He's not a baby, he's a *burha*, an old soul." From then on, whenever she saw her favorite grandchild, she would call him "Burha," fondly recalling that unusual moment.

Later that morning, Lakshmi Narayana, a devout Hindu who would frequently host religious discussions in his house with the local pundits and visiting holy men, invited some astrologers to his home to prepare the boy's horoscope. By common consent, they named the child Prabhat Rainjan,⁴ after the rising sun with which he was born and in keeping with the horoscope, which foretold an illustrious future for the newborn infant. The reading they gave for the family members, however, was contradictory and puzzling. The chart foretold that the boy's name would become known throughout the world, bringing great fame to his father and family, but it also showed that he would have little to do with them. He would have the qualities of a king, but he would pass his life like a sadhu, a spiritual renunciant, spending all his time with monks and yogis.

The astrologers' reading greatly disturbed Lakshmi Narayana. There was a

troubling history in his father's family of male members renouncing the world to become wandering ascetics, and he did not wish to see his eldest son and heir become a monk. After due thought, he decided to burn the horoscope. He banned any discussion of it among his family and friends, despite the fact that he could read the portents in the boy's chart almost as ably as the astrologers could and had always trusted the accuracy of this ancient Hindu art. Still, he would not fan the flames of an unwelcome future if he could help it. The family would heed his wishes until well after his death, when it became clear that the astrologers had correctly foretold the boy's future. The incident with the cup, however, passed into family lore. The elders of the family never tired of recalling how the infant Prabhat had tried to drink directly from the cup only moments after his birth.

Other unusual experiences would soon be added to the list of favorite family stories. During his first year, Prabhat was painfully conscious of not being able to walk, his unresponsive body forcing him to crawl in order to move around, his elbows and knees full of aches and pains. Yet, whenever he became dejected, wondering how much longer he would be forced to suffer such indignities, he would hear a voice speaking clearly into his ears, consoling him, "Some days more, just a few days more; I know you are in trouble, but just a few days more." He would look around, wondering who was talking to him, but there was never anyone to be seen. As he learned to walk and became more comfortable with his body, the voice became less frequent and finally disappeared, but he never forgot the comfort it gave him.

Late one night, when the two-year-old Prabhat was sleeping by his mother's side, he woke up to find the space around him filled with a sweet and soothing effulgence. A sense of rapture carried him away until he lost all sense of where he was. A few nights later, he woke up again and saw a multitude of different creatures streaming out of his left ear. The fascinated boy sat up on the bed and watched as they danced about the room. But when they crowded next to his other ear and started entering back in, it seemed so fearsome that he gave a shout and grabbed hold of his mother. As she rubbed her confused and sleepy eyes, he began describing the host of creatures he had witnessed coming out of his ear: reptiles, mammals, birds, insects, human beings. Abharani consoled him that it was only a dream and told him to go back to sleep. But the same dream repeated itself over and over again in the days and weeks that followed. Sometimes the boy would wake his mother up and warn her to beware of the creatures, as if he were still seeing them dancing around him in the room.

Abharani marveled at the scope of her son's overactive imagination. She wondered if the child might have seen pictures of those creatures, though there was no such book in the house. At other times, he would see stars, planets, and galaxies streaming out of his ear instead of living creatures. As the dreams continued, they gave her cause for concern. Sometimes she would complain to her husband and other relatives and friends that her boy was a weakling

who was frightened by nightmares; at other times, she would joke with them that it seemed like the whole universe was coming out of one ear and into the other. But as time went on, she started searching for other explanations. She even took him to several Tantrics to see if they could use their occult arts to tell her what was going on with her son, but none of their explanations were enough to satisfy her.

Other strange dreams followed. One morning, Prabhat told his mother that during the night he had seen a far-off village on fire and a group of sannyasis running away from it. When the news reached her of the fire and the sannyasis a couple of days later, she realized that what her son had seen had not been a mere dream but a vision. This helped to fuel her growing conviction that the boy she had given birth to was no ordinary child.

One day she got in an argument with her mother-in-law, Vinapani Sarkar, over something that had happened a few years earlier. The argument stalled briefly while both of them struggled to recall exactly what had taken place that day. Prabhat helped to jog their memory. "I remember that incident," he told them matter-of-factly. He then reminded them of the details they had forgotten.

"How do you know that?" his astonished grandmother asked him. "You were not even born then."

"I know, that's all," was his laconic reply.

Abharani simply smiled. In the years to come, whenever one of her other children would ask her a question she could not answer, she would say, "Ask Bubu.⁵ He knows everything. Whatever I don't know, he knows."

By this time, Prabhat was already becoming quite independent, despite his tender age. As a toddler he had been rather mischievous, sometimes exasperating his mother to the point that she would run after him, intent on spanking him to teach him a lesson. The light-footed Prabhat invariably scampered away and stayed out of his somewhat portly mother's reach until she calmed down. Then he would snuggle up to her and she would take him on her lap, all forgiven. But as he grew older, his restless nature gradually settled. He began to spend most of his time outside, exploring the neighborhood or playing with friends. He had, by then, developed an attraction for the stories of Shiva, father of the yogis, that he would hear from his parents and relatives. He especially loved the colorful descriptions of the great god's magnanimity and detachment. Though he knew little of religion and rituals, he obtained a Shiva lingam, and each morning before breakfast he would bathe it while reciting whatever mantras he had heard his elders using and then place it on a brass plate.⁶ Once he got the lingam straight, he would consider it a sign that Shiva had accepted his worship.

From time to time, Prabhat would sit and watch a group of mendicants who gathered regularly on a nearby hillock to chant devotional hymns in a circle around a holy fire. Many townspeople, with the natural reverence for wandering monks that was common in those days, would also join in the chanting.

While Prabhat enjoyed listening to the mendicant's hymns in praise of Shiva, he found the mendicants themselves less than appealing. He disliked their habit of smoking hemp in pipes. With the quick eyes of a child, he noticed how their minds seemed to be more on the delicious foods the pious townsfolk would bring for them than on their meditation. One day, to test them, he stole up to the edge of their circle while they were meditating and silently snatched some sweets that an old woman had left for them. Several of them jumped up from their meditation and started to give chase, but Prabhat had already mapped out his escape: up a nearby alley and down behind some public latrines where he knew the caste-conscious monks would never follow. After that, he lost whatever illusions about the monks he might have had and would annoy them whenever he had a chance.

Around this time, another recurring dream began. One night he dreamt that he was in the midst of a powerful storm. The storm lifted him up and carried him through the air until it dropped him rudely on a wide sandbank by the edge of the river Ganges, filling his eyes and mouth with sand. He wiped the sand out of his eyes, and when he opened them, he saw a mendicant standing in front of him with a trident in his hand. The mendicant began reciting a long mantra; then he asked Prabhat to repeat the mantra after him.

"No!" Prabhat shouted.

"Recite it, my son," the mendicant insisted. "It will be good for you."

"No, under no circumstances shall I recite it."

The mendicant lifted his trident. "You will have to recite it."

"No, never! I will never recite it!"

At that moment the storm arose again and lifted him up into the air. It carried him away and dropped him back onto his own bed, at which point he awoke. He realized then that it had been just a dream, but the incident remained fresh in his mind for the rest of the morning.

For twenty consecutive nights Prabhat had the same dream; soon he had memorized the mantra, not because he had made any effort to do so but simply because he had heard it so often. In the meantime, however, the boy began to feel a sense of desperation. He considered it a matter of disgrace that every night the mendicant scared him by menacing him with his trident, and yet he had done nothing about it. Finally, he resolved that if he had the same dream again that night, he would put an end to the charade. The dream unfolded again, exactly as it had the previous twenty nights, but this time, when the mendicant brandished his trident and warned the boy that he would have to recite the mantra, Prabhat snatched the trident and threw it at him. He heard a loud thwack. When he looked, the mendicant was gone; in his place stood a stone statue of Shiva. The sound he had heard had been the sound of the trident rebounding off the statue. There was a smile etched on the statue's face and Prabhat felt that Shiva was smiling joyfully at him. At that moment the dream broke and Prabhat found himself in his bed, perspiring. The dream did not return again.

Prabhat told the story to his sister, who as usual was fascinated by her brother's colorful dreams. By this time, it was only a few days until Shiva Chaturdasi, the foremost Shiva festival in the Hindu calendar. Unmarried Hindu girls traditionally fast on this day, in the hope that their fast will induce Shiva to find them a noble bridegroom. Hiraprabha, by then nearly twelve, also decided to fast in keeping with the tradition. Remembering her brother's dream, she suggested that he fast as well, and he happily agreed. That evening the family visited the nearby Shiva temple to perform their traditional worship. When it was Prabhat's turn, he stood in front of the idol and poured water over the Shiva lingam as prescribed in the ritual. As he did, he started reciting loudly the mantra he had heard in his dream.

*Dhyáyennityam mahesham rajatagirinibham cárucandrátamsam
Ratnákalpojvalámgam parashu-mrga-varábhíitihastam prasannam
Padmásiinam semantic stutamamaraganaerivyághraktim asana
Vishvádyam vishvabíijam nikhilabhayaharam paincavaktram trinetrám⁷*

One should meditate constantly on Maheshvara, radiant like a silver mountain adorned with the lovely moon/Whose limbs are bright like the splendor of jewels, axe in hand, protector of animals, bestower of boons, the ever-blissful one/Seated in lotus posture, wearing a tiger skin, worshipped by the gods/The seed and cause of the universe, who removes the boundless fears, the one with five faces and three eyes.

The local priest was astonished. He went up to Lakshmi Narayana and congratulated him enthusiastically. "You must be commended for teaching your son such a difficult and important mantra. I could scarcely believe my ears to hear such a young child reciting the *dhyana* mantra of Shiva."⁸ An equally surprised Lakshmi Narayana had to profess ignorance. It was only when he asked Prabhat about it that he discovered how he had learned the mantra. Due to this incident, Prabhat's parents became convinced that there was a special bond between their boy and the god Shiva. For the next few years, they made sure that Prabhat observed the traditional Shivaratri worship, including the recitation of the sacred mantra that he had learned in his dream. The story of Prabhat reciting that difficult and little-known mantra as a child was another that would pass into family lore, often repeated by his neighbors during the coming years whenever anyone would ask them about the Sarkars' unusual son.

II

School Days

You must have a flaming moral purpose so that greed, oppression and exploitation shrivel before the fire in you.¹

BY THE TIME Prabhat turned five, he'd begun his lifelong practice of sitting for meditation early in the morning and again in the evening. No one in the family knew when he had started this practice or how he had learned it, nor would he say, but by then the family had learned to leave the independent-minded young boy alone about such matters.

Nearly as unusual was his refusal to eat any non-vegetarian food, despite the fact that his family was not strictly vegetarian. Like most Bengali families, the Sarkars ate fish and on infrequent occasions other non-vegetarian items. When Prabhat was still a toddler, he used to weep quietly whenever his grandmother brought live fish from the market and began preparing it. When they first noticed this, they thought something was wrong with the boy, but when they saw that he only reacted this way when they brought live fish to the kitchen, they stopped doing so.

The Sarkar family followed the Indian tradition of feeding their children a vegetarian diet until they reach the age of four or five, in accordance with the popular belief that the delicate digestive system of a young child is not ready for meat, fish, or eggs. When Prabhat reached the socially approved age for eating non-vegetarian food, they attempted to feed him fish but he refused to eat it. His parents didn't mind all that much. A large section of the society was vegetarian, for both religious and health reasons, and as good Hindus they conceded the value of a vegetarian diet. Indeed, his mother rarely ate any non-vegetarian food.

Prabhat's grandmother, however, had quite a different reaction. For centuries, people in Bengal have believed that fish promotes the growth of the brain and stimulates intelligence, a tradition that Bengali grandmothers have carried on proudly through the ages. Vinapani grew increasingly exasperated with her favorite grandchild, who refused to eat what he was served. She tried cajoling the boy, telling him how important fish was for the brain. "You don't want to grow up to be stupid, do you, just because you won't eat fish?" None of her

entreaties, however, were able to move her intransigent grandson. Finally one day at dinner, fed up with Prabhat's stubbornness, Vinapani forcibly shoved a piece of fish into his mouth. Prabhat spit it out on the dining table. "You foolish boy!" his grandmother said. "Do you want to be a dolt all your life?" Prabhat got up from his chair and told his grandmother that if she or anyone else ever tried to force him to eat non-vegetarian food again, it would be the last time he would sit at the family table for a meal. Then he turned around and went to his room, shutting the door behind him. Neither his grandmother nor his mother ever brought up the subject again. Prabhat would live the rest of his life without ever once swallowing a morsel of non-vegetarian food.

It was at this age that Prabhat started attending the Bengali primary school, where he soon earned the nickname "encyclopedia" for his prodigious memory and his seeming ability to answer any question the other boys put to him. During the four years he spent there, his personality underwent a slow, almost imperceptible metamorphosis from a gifted, fun-loving child into a quiet, far-seeing youth whose hidden depths set him apart from the rest of the boys in ways that often took more than a second glance to notice. Bihar in those days was the most caste-conscious state in India, a place where going against the deeply ingrained mores and behavioral rites of Hindu society was practically unthinkable, especially in a small town such as Jamalpur where failure to observe caste proscriptions was certain to bring immediate reprobation. Prabhat's family followed the orthodox practices, just as every Hindu family did, but Prabhat in his quiet way gradually made it clear that he shared none of their caste consciousness.

One day he invited a scheduled-caste boy to his room and they sat together on his bed. Abharani didn't say anything while the boy was there, but once he left, she rebuked her son and complained to him that she would have to wash the bedsheet and pillowcase as enjoined by the scriptures, since they were now polluted. Prabhat listened to her without saying a word. After she had removed the sheet and the pillowcase, he grabbed the mattress and the pillow, took them outside to the washbasin, and started immersing them in water.

"What on earth are you doing?" Abharani shouted.

"Since you say that everything is polluted," Prabhat replied, "then these are also polluted. I am washing them as well."

His exasperated mother tried to make him understand his foolishness. "That is not necessary," she told him. "We have to wash the pillowcase and the bedsheet because the boy touched them, but we only need to sprinkle some Ganges water on the mattress and the pillow.

"No," Prabhat replied, continuing to wash the mattress and pillow, "if you say that the bedsheet and the pillowcase are polluted, then everything is polluted."

His mother tried to argue with him, but she had no success. Finally she threw up her hands and exclaimed, "It is very difficult to convince you of anything!"

On another occasion, Prabhat was sitting on the porch in front of his house. There was an empty platform across the road where people from the neighborhood would often gather to chat or play cards. A member of the so-called untouchable class, who was walking along the road, stopped and asked Prabhat if he had seen a certain person or knew where he might find him. He addressed Prabhat as “Khokha Babu,” (little gentleman). Prabhat was surprised to see that the man stood on one leg while he asked his question and remained in that posture while he waited for his reply.

“I know who he is,” Prabhat said, “but I don’t know where he might be at this moment. Please come and sit on the bench. You can wait for him here if you like.”

“Khokha Babu,” the man replied, “I cannot do that. There is a rule that a low-caste person has to remain in this position whenever he goes to a big man’s house.”

Prabhat requested him several times, but the man would not sit or put down his leg. The injustice of the custom angered Prabhat, but he knew the futility of saying anything more at that moment, so he held his tongue. When the man left, however, he swore to himself that he would fight this ugly tradition and help to put an end to it one day.

Throughout Prabhat’s childhood, the family paid frequent visits to Lakshmi Narayana’s native village of Bamunpara, especially during the hot summer vacation when the abundant vegetation and open spaces provided a cooling respite from the unremitting heat of Jamalpur. Summer was mango season and Bamunpara was full of mango trees, as well as papaya, banana, jackfruit, guava, and many other delights that made the Sarkar children look forward all year long to their Bamunpara vacation. Like most Indian children, they adored sitting in the cool canopied shade of those huge arching trees, sipping the sweet, juicy flesh of its tree-ripened fruit. Afterwards, they would run off to play with the village children and roam the fields that ringed the village. Prabhat also loved mangos, but while his siblings were playing, he would often seek out the shade of those same trees for long sessions of silent meditation or go for long, solitary walks through the fields or to the neighboring villages.

At other times, he would spend hours reclining on a cot with his eyes open, staring off into space. On one of those visits, his sister Hiraprabha, then fourteen and a sensible young woman, asked her seven-year-old brother what he was doing lying down all day. “I’m reviewing the history of the universe,” Prabhat told her, an answer that did little to please his sister. The next day she asked him again. This time he replied, “I am watching what is going to happen on this planet after a thousand years.” Finally, Hiraprabha got fed up with her lazy younger brother. She started taunting him for his idleness. “There you are, wasting your time doing nothing; you still haven’t even learned how to write your own name in your mother tongue.” Prabhat looked at her for a few

moments with his typical silent smile. Then he went to a drawer, pulled out a piece of paper and a pen, and wrote out his name in ten different scripts, including English, Arabic, and a number of different Indian scripts. His sister was so startled when she saw this that she flew away like a frightened bird and avoided her brother for the remainder of their vacation.

Years later, while giving dictation to one of his disciples, Vijayananda, Prabhat reminisced about that vacation in Bamunpara. He told him that while he was lying on his cot, supposedly idling away his hours, he was busy planning out his life's work, which would include his fight against the caste system and other social evils. It was during that vacation, Prabhat said, that he devised the coming structure of Ananda Marga, the socio-spiritual organization that he would found in 1955, more than twenty-five years later. Then he went to his desk and pulled from a drawer a yellowed piece of paper that he smoothed out on the desktop in front of his disciple. The faded writing, still clearly visible, contained an outline of the organization he would later create.

In 1930, Prabhat was admitted into the East India Railway High School, where he would continue his studies through matriculation. The boy that entered the railway high school was now very different than the boy who had entered primary school a few years earlier. While the rest of the boys were, on the whole, boisterous and restless, Prabhat's quiet demeanor and thoughtful way of speaking set him apart. When one word would do, he would never use two. He was friendly with everyone but did not take part in the typical merriment during free time and recess. He kept to himself, either sitting under the large pipal tree in the courtyard with a book or on the veranda, although whenever any skirmishes broke out or the boys used uncouth language, he was quick to get up and intervene. From time to time, other boys would approach him to discuss one topic or another, often concerning problems they were having with their schoolwork, but mostly they respected his love of solitude.

Prabhat's reputation for being able to answer anyone's questions followed him from primary school; here also, it became a common practice among the other students to send him anyone who had questions no one else could answer. One afternoon, he and his classmates were sitting around a table during recess looking at a new geography book that had just arrived. Prabhat flipped through the pages along with everyone else. Then he closed the book and challenged them to ask him any question from any page. The other boys jumped to the challenge. They opened the book so that he couldn't see it and started asking questions. One by one, he answered them all correctly. They were impressed but they had seen this before. Vimalendu Chatterjee, however, who had recently moved to Jamalpur from a small village in the Silhet district of East Bengal, had not. When he expressed his surprise, Prabhat asked him the name of his village and then proceeded to describe it in minute detail, right down to the division of the rice fields and the placement of the wells. The more Prabhat

went on, the more astonished Vimalendu became. Everything was exactly as Prabhat described it. "But how can you know all that?" he finally burst out. Prabhat gave a little grunt, as if in disgust. "You people don't study," he said. "That's why you don't know these things." It was only some years later that Vimalendu realized that the information Prabhat had described so accurately wasn't found in any book.

After school, Prabhat would accompany the other boys to the fields outside of town, but instead of participating in their games, he would disappear into the nearby hills, generally reappearing before dusk to accompany his classmates back to town. In those days, the Kharagpur Hills were the gateway to a wilderness that few townspeople dared enter. It was two miles from the edge of town to the beginning of the stony ascent into the chiseled granite hills that had served for centuries as the natural southern defense for Monghyr, seven kilometers to the north, the ancient capital of the kingdom of Anga. Between the town and the hills lay many acres of spacious meadows and shady trees, as well as a natural reservoir that ran along the foot of the hills for several kilometers. Adults would go there to walk and children to play, except for the expansive areas to the east that belonged to the Railway Institute, off-limits to Indians in those days.

Beyond the reservoir, a long, narrow valley jutted into the mountain range, a forested area named Death Valley by local inhabitants in memory of a fierce battle fought centuries before in which over a thousand warriors had died and been left as carrion for the many wild animals that lived there. In those days, Death Valley and the Kharagpur Hills were a subject for whispered conversations. Wild animals lived there, tigers had been spotted, and, according to some, the ghosts of the dead warriors still roamed the woods, unable to find peace and haunting the footsteps of anyone who dared enter their forbidden domain. On the opposite side of the reservoir from Death Valley, hundreds of stone steps had been carved into the mountainside. At the top of the twenty-minute ascent, in the shadow of the forest, stood two old temples: a Kali temple, from which the hill got its name of Kalipahar; and a Shiva temple, a couple of hundred meters further on, beyond which nobody dared go. The ascent to the Kali temple was breathtaking. Halfway up, one could see all of Jamalpur. From the top, on a clear day, it was possible to see past Monghyr, on the banks of the Ganges, to the Gangetic plains beyond. On weekends and religious holidays, pious pilgrims from Jamalpur and Monghyr would climb to the Kali temple to worship before the image of the Divine Mother and tie ribbons on the branches of the ancient, gnarled bel tree behind the temple. It was said that Mother Kali would grant the wishes of those who left ribbons for her on her favorite tree, and every pious-hearted mother of Jamalpur had a son or a daughter who needed the Divine Mother's favor. But once the sun started dipping towards the tree line in late afternoon, Kalipahar would become deserted, for it was well known that Kali would not promise

safe passage out of that wilderness to anyone foolish enough to remain there once dusk set in.

Kalipahar, Death Valley, and the Kharagpur Hills became young Prabhat's private retreat, a vast wilderness that he had practically all to himself. He would sometimes be seen climbing into the hills at the same time that the last of the pilgrims were coming down from the temples. On more than one occasion, well-wishing neighbors who recognized the boy let his father know that they had seen his son wandering in those dangerous hills at an hour when no right-minded person would dare think of going there. When his father questioned him about it, however, Prabhat assured him that the neighbors were exaggerating. He simply liked to walk where it was quiet, so he could think. It was more or less the same answer he gave the other boys when they asked him what he did when he went there, though by then many of them were aware of his habit of searching out solitary places to meditate. Sometimes he would bring a bamboo flute with him and spend hours sitting in the hills exploring the different scales and variations of Indian music. Sometimes it was a friend's esraj. On the rare occasions that a friend or two accompanied him on his walks, he would talk of God and ask them to sit and sing the praises of the Divine. One of his friends told him once, "If you keep this up, Prabhat, you're going to become a sannyasi." Many of those who knew him assumed he would.

One afternoon, when Prabhat was eleven, Sachindranath Marik, who lived a few houses away from him and was two years his junior, could no longer contain his curiosity. Together with a couple of friends, Sachin decided to follow Prabhat into the hills. Excited by the prospect of spying on their mysterious elder classmate, the three boys were careful to stay out of sight as they followed Prabhat up a rarely used path that wound precariously up the hill and into the forest. Young boys as they were, they soon became scared, having heard stories about the tigers and other wild animals that supposedly roamed those forested slopes. At the top of the ascent, the path dipped again and disappeared into the trees. No longer able to see or hear Prabhat, none of them dared go any further; they decided to wait for him to come back. Some forty minutes passed. Then Sachin saw something that made him shake his head and stare. He shouted to his two companions and pointed: Downwards from where they were standing, in a clearing among the trees, they saw Prabhat riding at a gentle pace on the back of a tiger. They watched dumbfounded as he got down from the tiger's back, patted it a few times, and watched it stroll off and disappear into the woods.

When Prabhat made it back to where they were waiting, the three of them accosted him at once with questions about the amazing sight they had witnessed. Prabhat immediately denied it. "Are you mad?" he said. "Me, riding a tiger? Nonsense! You had better not repeat such a thing."

Sachin refused to pay heed to Prabhat's adamant denials. When Prabhat

still would not admit it, he threatened to tell his mother, a threat that only made Prabhat laugh. "Do you honestly think anyone will believe you?" he said. Sachin didn't listen. When he got back to town, he told both his own mother and Prabhat's mother what he had seen. Naturally, neither of them believed him. Abharani did take the trouble to question her son about it, but Prabhat's indignant reply satisfied her. "Please, mother, do you honestly think I can ride a tiger? They are just making up stories." Sachindranath and his friends were scolded for lying. When Prabhat saw them the next day in school, he rebuked them for telling tall tales. "Whatever scolding you received, you deserved it." After that he avoided them. When they got a chance to ask him why he was avoiding them, Prabhat rebuked them for spreading gossip. "If you talk like that, what will people think of me? Am I an animal that I ride on a tiger's back? As long as you go around saying things like this, I will have nothing to do with you." From then on, they said nothing more about this or any of the other unusual things they noticed about Prabhat, and he gradually resumed his easy friendship with them.

A few years later Sachindranath heard a story about a lady Tantric said to be living in the forest of the Kharagpur Hills. People claimed that she had caught and tamed a tiger with her occult powers. He remembered the incident with Prabhat and realized that he might have been going to the forest to visit her.

Despite Prabhat's denials, his careful reserve, and his marked dislike of drawing any attention to himself, his reputation in Jamalpur, especially among his fellow students, grew steadily. In the winter, when temperatures could drop to three or four degrees Celsius once the sun went down, Prabhat continued to wear shorts and a light shirt, while the rest of the boys wore woolen clothes. When they asked him if he felt the cold, he said, "No. You wrap your bodies with warm clothes, but what about your mind? Do you also cover your mind?"

"But we don't feel cold in our mind."

"Well, the mind is made of the same material as the body. That's the reason I don't feel cold."

Some of the younger boys started following Prabhat around after school hours, accompanying him to the fields and waiting for him to return from the hills so they could walk with him back to town. The parents of one boy, annoyed because their child was coming home late each evening, scolded him for following Prabhat around and asked him to stop. When he complained, they demanded to know what the attraction was.

"I feel good whenever I am near him," he said. "Once, when I saw Prabhat stop on the road, I saw that he was surrounded by a brilliant aura. Anyone who is surrounded by an aura like that cannot be an ordinary human being, can he?"

His parents had no reply to this. After that they made no further objections.

Manoranjan Banerjee, who was several years junior to Prabhat, had often seen him sitting for long hours in the Shiva temple in Keshavpur with his eyes closed, a sight that never ceased to impress him. One day he saw something that amazed him even more:

One day, when I was studying in class six, a group of four or five bulls started chasing me down a narrow lane. I dropped my books and ran for my life. As I was running, I saw Bubu-da standing at the end of the street. When I reached him, he shielded me from the bulls. Just before they reached him, they suddenly stopped and became as still as statues. I was amazed. Then he asked me to go and pick up my schoolbooks. I was frightened to do so, because in order to reach the books, I had to cross where the bulls were standing. But Bubu-da repeatedly assured me that I had nothing to worry about. They would not harm me. I hesitated, but finally I walked past them and picked up my books. Then I went back to Bubu-da. The bulls didn't move an inch the entire time. After I came back with the books, Bubu-da waved his hand in the direction of the bulls. Only then did they move; they turned around and walked away. This incident made me realize that Bubu-da had some special powers.

Incidents like this and Prabhat's obvious spiritual inclinations lent to his growing reputation among his peers and neighbors as a spiritually elevated young man doted with unusual powers. In the West, people might not have known what to make of him. Most people would have distrusted the stories they heard. But in India, with its long history of yogis and saints, Prabhat was looked upon as another spiritually minded youth following in the footsteps of his illustrious forefathers. His family and most other families in the neighborhood were aware that he was not an ordinary boy. His mother would later say that she secretly considered her young son to be a spiritual genius, but she never brought up the subject, nor did anyone else in the neighborhood. For thousands of years their culture had taught them to respect the privacy of those whose minds were turned towards God, and in a small town in Bihar during the 1930s that tradition was still very much alive.

It was while he was attending the railway high school, that Prabhat had the definitive spiritual experience of his boyhood. He described it for Amitananda years later on that unusual winter evening in Ranchi.

I have gone to the Jamalpur hills to do meditation. I am sitting at a particular place when I hear a voice whisper in my ear, "Come with me. I will show you a better place to meditate. Follow me." I see no one, but I follow the voice whose presence I feel so clearly. The voice leads me to a particular spot and asks me to meditate. I begin

to meditate. After a while I hear it say, “Are you mad? How long do you want to remain under the spell of maya? Who do you think you are—P. R. Sarkar? Look, see who you are!” In that moment a reel of my past lives flashes before my eyes and I realize who I am.

In the afternoon of January 15, 1934, a terrible earthquake struck Northern India with its epicenter on the border between Nepal and Bihar, some three hundred kilometers from Jamalpur. It measured 8.1 on the Richter scale and left thirty thousand people dead. Monghyr was practically reduced to rubble; Jamalpur, though not nearly as badly affected, suffered extensive damage. The Sarkar house partially collapsed. On the morning of the earthquake, Lakshmi Narayana had left for Calcutta to fix the date of Hiraprabha’s upcoming marriage. When he returned the next morning at five o’clock, the entire family was waiting for him in the train station, wrapped in blankets after a night when the temperature had reached a record low. That day he took his eldest boys around with him to survey the devastation. What he saw left him shocked. Despite the damage to his own house, he plunged immediately into full-scale relief efforts, taking leave from his job as an accountant in the Jamalpur railway workshop to treat patients and collect and distribute relief materials.

Prabhat’s father was an accomplished homeopathic doctor who for years had spent weekends and holidays in his dispensary attending to long lines of patients—British as well as Indian—many of them dependent on him to keep their families healthy when they could not afford the expensive Western medicines that were slowly replacing traditional Indian healing practices. Now his skill as a doctor was put to the test, with the numbers of sick and injured far too much for the local medical community to handle. Not only did he treat patients, he also collected food, blankets, clothing, and medicine for distribution. Prabhat organized a group of his friends and joined in by his father’s side. What was left of the Sarkar house became a storage center for relief materials. In the weeks that followed, the entire family assisted Lakshmi Narayana in his efforts to relieve the tremendous suffering that surrounded them. In recognition of his efforts, the Bihar Government soon put Prabhat’s father in charge of the distribution of relief materials for Monghyr District.

After this period of arduous work and little sleep, Lakshmi Narayana’s health gradually began to deteriorate. No one was able to diagnose the exact malady, and a trail of different doctors and different medicines began that met with little success. He passed away on February 12, 1936. Prabhat was studying in class nine when his father died, the oldest son but still too young to support the family. His mother received her husband’s provident fund from the railways to go along with their savings,² but there was no pension for Indian employees at that time and the change in their financial fortunes was drastic. Until then they had been relatively well off by Indian standards. None of them had ever faced any financial hardship, least of all Prabhat’s mother, Abharani, who had grown

up as the daughter of a well-to-do doctor from the Hooghly district of Bengal and then married into a middle-class family. Once the period of mourning was over, however, she took stock of the situation and instituted the necessary changes in the household so that the family could survive on its drastically curtailed income. The generous spending to which they were accustomed was no longer possible, but she made sure that the children did not want for any of the necessities of life. Neighbors who had been the recipients of Lakshmi Narayana's generosity and kindness came forward to help. His brother, Nirmal Chandra, visited every Sunday to make sure Abharani had what she needed to keep the family going. When Prabhat graduated from high school, he tried to convince his mother to let him find a job, but Abharani would not hear of it. It had been her dream to see Prabhat go to college, and nothing he could say or do could convince her otherwise. Thus it was that in the fall of 1939 the family put Prabhat on a train to Calcutta, where he had been admitted into Vidyasagar College.



Kalikananda

Krishna has rightly said: "If even a diehard criminal comes under my shelter, I will save him or her from all sins; I will see to it that the person attains liberation or salvation. Hence no one, no spiritual aspirant—however black or despicable one's past life might be—should be worried about anything."¹

WHEN PRABHAT ARRIVED in Calcutta at the house of his maternal uncle, Sarat Chandra Bose, to take up his studies in the summer of 1939, the former capital of India was alive with the fervor of independence and the uncertainty of war. Student activism was at its apogee, with most students favoring the radical freedom-at-all-costs stance of Subhash Chandra Bose, President of the Congress Party, while others sided with Gandhi and Nehru's policy of wartime cooperation with the British. Wherever one's sympathies lay, the talk of independence and war was impossible to escape, whether in the classroom, the dining room, or on the street.

Around the time Prabhat arrived in the turbulent metropolis, he began corresponding with various revolutionary leaders in Bengal, such as the radical humanist, M. N. Roy; Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, founder of India's first Hindu nationalist party; Arun Chandra Guha, General Secretary of the Bengal Congress; and Subhash Chandra Bose, who was a distant relative on his mother's side. Prabhat's letters attracted their attention due to his astute analysis of the political situation and the provocative suggestions he made regarding what actions would best serve the nation's interests at that time. When they discovered that P. R. Sarkar was a seventeen-year-old student, some of them were taken aback, but Prabhat was soon invited to closed sessions at M. N. Roy's house with him and other revolutionaries of the time who would help decide the fortunes of the soon-to-be-born nation.²

Despite Prabhat's involvement with some of India's radical revolutionary leaders, he did not join any political party or student organization. As in high school, he mostly kept to himself, spending his time outside the classroom either alone or in the company of a few close companions, to whom he made no mention of his relationship with Subhash, M. N. Roy, and others. Among these were his cousin Ajit Biswas, the future actor Rabin Mazumdar, and the

future football standout Anil Kumar Dey. Apart from his letters to political leaders, Prabhat wrote articles, poetry, and short fiction under various pen names and saw them published in different newspapers and magazines,³ such as the *Statesman* and the *Searchlight*. His articles dealt primarily with social issues such as the caste system, capitalism, and the dowry system, and contained many of the radical ideas that would later appear in his Prout philosophy. He enjoyed the affection of his unmarried uncle, a disciplined Tantric, and used to pay regular visits to his aunt in north Calcutta who later became famous as Lady Goranga, a Vaeshnava saint. He also worked part time as a sub-editor in a Calcutta newspaper and tutored students to meet his expenses. Above all, he continued searching out solitary places to pursue his meditation.

In Calcutta, Prabhat kept up his habit of taking long evening walks. He often walked by the banks of the river Ganges, a route that took him through an area dotted with burning ghats, some still smoldering with the remains of cremated bodies. It was a solitary area that the townspeople avoided, rumored to be unsafe after dark. On the evening of the full moon in August, shortly after his arrival in Calcutta, Prabhat's evening walk took him through the Kashimitra burning ghat. The bright moon of Shravan cast enough light to illumine his path through the cremation ground.⁴ He stopped at one point and found a place to sit near the riverbank. A short while later, he heard footsteps behind him. Without bothering to turn around, he asked his unknown visitor to sit down. Rather than sit, the burly, imposing man who appeared by his side whipped out a large dagger and demanded that Prabhat hand over his money and his valuables; otherwise, he would not hesitate to take his life.

"Are you short of money?" Prabhat asked, seemingly unaware of the dagger glistening in the moonlight, a few inches from his face. When his surprised assailant repeated his threat, Prabhat answered him in the same fearless tone of voice. "So, have you made it a habit then of robbing people, even poor, defenseless students like myself?" Again the thief tried to frighten the young man, but Prabhat answered in the same unperturbed manner. "I will give you my money, don't worry, but I have something much more valuable than money. Would you not like to know what that is?"

The thief began to feel unnerved by the eerie calm and strange smile of the slightly built teenager sitting in front of him. After a moment's hesitation, he asked Prabhat what he meant.

"First, tell me one thing," Prabhat said. "If your material requirements were fulfilled, would you keep on stealing?"

The thief, whose name was Kalicharan Bannerjee, hesitated again, and then told him that if it were possible to quit, he would.

"Good," Prabhat said. "Now if you wish to have what I can give you, throw away your knife. Go to the river and take a bath. When you are done, come back and sit here. I will wait."

Kalicharan suddenly felt humbled in front of the boy that he had pulled a dagger on only a scant minute or two before. Tears appeared in his eyes. He walked down to the edge of the river, threw the dagger into the water, and immersed himself. When he returned, the water still dripping from his bare shoulders, Prabhat initiated him into Tantric meditation and in the process accepted Kalicharan as his first disciple. Kalicharan could barely contain his tears. He agreed to give up his life of crime and listened carefully to Prabhat's instructions about how to conduct his life. When he expressed his remorse and tried to explain what had led him to such a path, Prabhat told him to forget his past. "From today you begin a new life. The old Kalicharan no longer exists."

Afterwards, Kalicharan insisted on walking Prabhat back home. "The city is full of cutthroats," he said, "who won't hesitate to murder someone over a few coins." When they reached his uncle's house, Prabhat gave him some final instructions and told him when to come back and see him.

When Kalicharan returned to the house a few days later, Prabhat was practicing meditation. Kalicharan waited outside the door until Prabhat was finished. When Prabhat opened the door, he stretched out a hand to his new disciple and handed him his watch and a one-anna coin. "Had you robbed me, this is all you would have gotten," he said. When Kalicharan began to weep, Prabhat extracted from him a promise to take the same energy he had dedicated to robbery and to use it to serve the creation.

Later, Kalicharan would take *kapalik* initiation from Prabhat and receive the monastic name Kalikananda.

In late April 1940, Prabhat caught a night train to a village in Bankura District, some two hundred kilometers from Calcutta, to attend the wedding of a friend. As the sun was going down, he set out with the groom and several friends for the bride's house, but since the astrologically ordained time for solemnizing the marriage was late in the night, he decided to go for a long walk in the surrounding countryside. After several kilometers, he came to a vast, uneven stretch of land dotted by thickets, far from the nearest habitation. It was exactly the kind of place Prabhat favored for his evening walks. Here and there, he noticed a few jackals roaming about. He could hear the call of the bhutum owl among the trees, punctuating the silence. The only light came from the vast panorama of stars and the occasional beam of his flashlight. Soon he came to an area that seemed to be both a cremation ground and a dumping ground for animal carcasses. He could see several skulls strewn around and other bones that had been picked bare by carrion eaters. Attracted by the poignant beauty, he located a clear, clean place with his flashlight and sat down to relax and practice his meditation.

After a short while, he noticed a shadowy figure coming slowly in his direction. He greeted him from a distance, but instead of answering him, the man took up the following refrain in a melodious voice: "The play of life has ended,

brother; the festival of the world has disbanded. Return, O man of this world, return.”

When the man drew closer, Prabhat asked him who he was and where he was from.

“Babu,” the man said, “the road is my home.” Then he added the refrain of another song: “Traveler I am, dwelling on the path; going is as coming to me, coming is as going.

“Well, Babu,” he continued, “I don’t want to put on airs, so when I have to introduce myself, I tell people I’m from the Candil area.”

“What’s your name, my friend?”

“Now you want to know my name also? People say that my name is Kamalakanta Mahapatra.”

“Well, Kamalakanta, please sit. Sing me another song.”

Kamalakanta sang several mystical songs, each one more beautiful than the one before it. Then he asked Prabhat where he was coming from and Prabhat told him.

“That’s quite a distance,” he said. “You must be dead tired. Why don’t you lie down for a bit and let me massage your feet a little. After all, you still have to walk back.”

“You must be just as tired as I am,” Prabhat protested.

“No, Babu, I don’t feel any discomfort. I told you, the path is my home. Lie down; you’re just a young boy.”

“However tired I may be, I don’t think it appropriate for an older person to massage my feet.”

“Then put your head on my lap and lie down and stretch your legs.”

Prabhat soon fell asleep in the heart of the cremation ground with his head in the stranger’s lap. When he woke up, it was the early hours of the morning. He felt a sharp pain in his feet and opened his eyes to find Kamalakanta clutching them with both hands. His head was no longer in Kamalakanta’s lap. Instead, Kamalakanta had placed three human skulls under his head to serve as a pillow.

Prabhat called out to Kamalakanta, but the man gave no reply. He sat up and pushed him. A little shove was all it took for Kamalakanta’s body to fall over. Prabhat felt for the man’s wrist and found no signs of life. His body was already growing cold. The man whose home was the path had moved on to an unknown destination.

Prabhat got up and started back. Dawn was breaking when he reached the wedding place, where his anxious friends had been waiting for it to grow light so they could go out and search for him. He told them what had happened and asked them to accompany him back to the cremation ground to complete Kamalakanta’s last rites. But when they reached the spot, Kamalakanta’s body was nowhere to be seen, though the skulls that had served as Prabhat’s pillow were still there where he had left them. “Are you sure you weren’t drinking

bhang?”⁵ his friends chided him good-naturedly, but Prabhat shook his head. “The man was a great yogi,” he told them. “He chose that time to leave his body. There is a mystery here, but my imagination has nothing to do with it.”

Prabhat continued to initiate a few select disciples, all of them in secret. Apart from a couple of exceptions, however, these early initiates were not known to his later disciples.

In the summer of 1940, Prabhat returned to Jamalpur for summer vacation. Both M. N. Roy and Subhash Bose came to see him there, and he took them for a late night walk to the fields near Kalipahar. They stopped at the tiger’s grave, a local landmark that would later become Prabhat’s favorite halting place during his evening walks. A heated discussion ensued. Subhash argued the cause of political freedom at all costs. Roy insisted that India should first pursue economic freedom and only later focus on political freedom. Though the details of that conversation are not known, we do know that Prabhat agreed in principle with M. N. Roy. History, however, tells us that it was an argument Subhash won, with unfortunate consequences for the nation. That night, Prabhat taught both Roy and Subhash Tantric meditation. On July 3, Subhash was arrested by the British in an effort to halt the rapidly growing influence of his newly formed Forward Bloc, the radical opposition to the Gandhi wing, feared by the British for the open ultimatum it had delivered to them to quit India. The revolutionary leader used his time in jail to practice meditation, which would ultimately have a profound effect on the man whose charismatic personality would play a decisive role in the events leading up to India’s independence.

Prabhat returned again to Jamalpur for the winter vacation. One day, he was sitting on the veranda warming himself in the midday sun. A couple of women from the neighborhood approached and left a plate of sweets for him. They retreated back into the street and stood there watching. Prabhat called them to come back but they hesitated. He continued to insist and finally they approached. “Young master,” they told him, “we belong to a low caste. How can we come near you?”

Prabhat caught their hands and made them sit next to him on the veranda. He took the plate and ate the sweets, which made them visibly happy. After inquiring about their health and their family, he said, “Ladies, the caste system is evil. You should never think of yourself as inferior to anyone. If you ever need any financial help for the education of your children, do not hesitate to come to me. I will help you.”

In the meantime, his mother stepped out onto the veranda and saw him talking to the two women, who were well known to her. She went back into the house without saying anything, but when they were gone, she grabbed Prabhat by the ear and pulled him into the bathroom. There she filled a bucket with water and added to it a bottle of Ganges water. She insisted that Prabhat

wash himself with the so-called sacred water and then went out to the veranda to purify the place where they had sat by cleaning it with cow dung. Prabhat silently obeyed his mother but when she called him for lunch he refused to eat. When his mother asked him why, he expressed his dislike of her caste prejudice. After some discussion, he told her of his intention to do all he could to remove casteism from the society.

“That is impossible,” Abharani protested. “The caste system is an injunction from God. Many great people have come to this earth and none of them were able to remove the caste system.”

“The caste system has been created by men. It is a social evil, and sooner or later it will disappear. You will see.”

Years later, the family priest’s son, who by tradition was supposed to be Prabhat’s priest, took initiation from Prabhat; instead of becoming his priest, he became his disciple. One day, the young man requested Prabhat to allow him to eat the food left over on his plate, which he considered prasad, food made holy by the touch of the guru. When Prabhat pointed out afterward to his mother with a smile that a high-caste Brahmin had eaten food from his plate, a blasphemy in traditional Hinduism, he asked her if she remembered their discussion many years earlier.

His mother smiled. “Yes, Bubu, I remember. You were right about the caste system; it’s on its way out.”

After completing the spring semester in 1941 and passing his ISc examination with honors,⁶ Prabhat returned home once again for the summer vacation. The family’s financial difficulties by then had grown quite serious. Despite the urging of his mother to continue his studies, Prabhat decided that the time had come for him, as the eldest son, to shoulder the family’s financial burdens. He submitted his application for employment to the accounts department of the railway workshop. His application was accepted. In August of that year, he began work as an accounts clerk in the same office where his father had worked.

IV

Accounts Department: 1941–1947

The entire humanity of this universe constitutes one singular people. All humanity is bound together in fraternity: those who remain oblivious to this very simple truth, those who distort it, are the deadliest enemies of humanity. Today's humanity should identify these foes and build a healthy human society overcoming all obstacles and difficulties. It must be borne in mind that as long as a magnificent, healthy and universalistic human society is not well established, humanity's entire culture and civilization, its sacrifice, service and spiritual endeavor, will not be of any worth whatsoever.¹

IN 1862 THE British established India's first railway workshop in Jamalpur. By the turn of the century it had become Asia's largest, home to the sub-continent's principal training facility for railway engineers, later known as the Indian Railways Institute of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering. With the growth of the workshop, Jamalpur soon became famous for its comfortable Anglo-Indian social life and its relaxed, small-town ambiance. At the time of Prabhat's birth, it employed more than twelve thousand people. About one thousand of these were British and Anglo-Indians who enjoyed a social life that rivaled that of Calcutta and other urban centers in the Empire but in a far more appealing setting: several thousand sprawling acres of wide, tree-lined boulevards and spacious meadows that reached to the edge of the Kharkhanian Hills. Railway employees could take long, picturesque walks and enjoy the charms of nature, or else entertain themselves with a full schedule of social pastimes. The Institute had its own movie theatre, a six-lane swimming pool, four tennis courts, two billiard rooms, and a bowling lawn. Its dances were renowned, so much so that railway personnel and their families came from all over Eastern India to attend. There was little more that an Indian railway employee could ask for—that is, as long as he was British. As with most of British India, the posh residential suburbs and recreational facilities were off-limits to Indians. They were literally on the other side of the tracks, the railway lines neatly dividing the township from the institute. Indians comprised over ninety percent of the workforce, but they enjoyed little of the privileges that made Jamalpur such a desirable appointment for railway personnel. Still,

Prabhat would say years later that when he was young it was the best town in all India.

Lakshmi Narayana had joined the railway accounts department as a clerk in 1911, having emigrated from his native Bengal following the death of his father at the age of forty-four (a fate that he would also share). His son was nineteen when he began working in the same office, which consisted of a suite of spacious halls filled with bare-topped desks in the British bureaucratic style. Here employees would spend their days poring over paperwork and penning entries into the hundreds of ledgers that piled up on shelves and in cabinets and in some cases directly on the floor beside their desks. Prabhat signed on as a lower-division clerk with a salary of thirty-three rupees per month, a slightly built teenager with thick black glasses whose short stature and quiet, sober demeanor would not ordinarily attract a second glance. Most of the men he was now working with had worked with his father; many of them had been beneficiaries of Lakshmi Narayana's homeopathic remedies, and they were happy to welcome the son who showed many of the same traits that had endeared them to the father. Like his father, Prabhat was methodical in his work habits, visibly sincere, and uncommonly punctual. He would enter the office exactly on the hour each morning, generally finishing the work assigned to him ahead of time, and leave exactly at five each afternoon.

When Prabhat joined his office service, World War II was in full swing. Despite its distance from the principal battlefields, India was feeling the effects. Prices skyrocketed on everything from rice to clothes. Many items became nearly impossible to obtain. Blackouts and curfews were instituted as fears rose over a possible Japanese invasion, and these fears were confirmed when the Japanese advanced on Burma in January of 1942. In February, Singapore fell. By mid-summer Japanese troops were nearing India's eastern border. Soon afterwards, the first air attacks on Calcutta by Japanese bombers began and the city underwent a massive evacuation. In Jamalpur, only 280 kilometers from Calcutta and home to the empire's largest railway workshop, tensions were high. A curfew was instituted. At night people were afraid to light a fire for fear of showing Japanese bombers the way to their town. Though the rapid entrance of the Americans into the Pacific after Pearl Harbor would help to divert Japanese attention away from India, tensions over a possible invasion would continue until the war neared its close.

As might be expected, the war was foremost on everybody's mind. During lunch hour and break time, employees would gather together to discuss the progress of the conflict, catching up on the latest news from the battlefield and wondering aloud how the war would impact India's future. When Prabhat joined the conversation, his colleagues noticed that he would often narrate recent events from the battlefield or the political front in vivid detail, almost as if he had witnessed those scenes with his own eyes. News of these events would not appear in the local papers or on the radio until several days afterward due

to a three-day news blackout on war-related incidents. When they asked him how he had come by news that had proven to be up-to-the-minute, he would simply smile or change the subject.

Prabhat's astute analysis of the political ramifications of the war and his extensive knowledge about military procedure, strategy, and history seemed incongruent with his tender age and apparent lack of worldly experience. He was never at a want for answers to the questions they put to him, and oftentimes he would steer the conversation into realms his other colleagues rarely visited—classical literature, linguistics, applied sciences, mysticism, philosophy—often by asking them questions that he would then answer. Soon his desk became a meeting point during the lunch hour and break time. Prabhat never left the office to eat in the workshop canteen. He brought a light meal with him from home in an aluminum tiffin carrier and would nibble at his food and talk with his colleagues until it was time to go back to work.

During the course of these discussions, his colleagues discovered that Prabhat was an accomplished palmist.² In fact, they found that he was well versed in all aspects of Hindu astrology, of which palmistry is a part. With the natural regard they felt for practitioners of this ancient Hindu art, they began seeking his advice from time to time. Impressed by the accuracy of his readings, they also began bringing their friends.

Jiten Mandal had a friend, Vishvakarma, who was growing desperate because he had been unable to find a job. One day Jiten asked him to come to the office to see Prabhat during the lunch hour. When Vishvakarma asked Prabhat if he would be willing to look at his palm to see when he might find a job, Prabhat told him that he did not need to see his palm. All he needed to see were the lines on his forehead. Prabhat looked at him fixedly for a few moments. Then he told Vishvakarma that he would find employment on such and such a date. Vishvakarma forgot about the forecast. But when he received his appointment on the exact date that Prabhat had foretold, he remembered the prediction and rushed to Jiten to inform him that it had proved true.

On another occasion, one of Prabhat's colleagues told a friend of his, Mritunjay Sanyal, about Prabhat's prowess in the astrological arts. He assured him that if anyone could help him it would be Prabhat. Mritunjay, a head clerk in a different department, was nearing retirement age. Despite his best efforts, he had not been able to find a husband for one of his daughters, and he had grown deeply worried about it. He was a Barendra Brahmin and proud of his caste, but in his desperation he agreed to humble himself and ask for Prabhat's help. Prabhat's reply was short and to the point. "This is a simple matter," he said. "The groom is sitting just in front of you in this office." Prabhat pointed to a young clerk, Maitra Babu, who was sitting at a desk in a different part of the room, attending to his work. "Approach his guardian and your desire will be fulfilled." Mritunjay did as Prabhat suggested. He found that the family was of the same caste and had just begun searching

for a bride. The negotiations presented no difficulty and the marriage was soon solemnized.

As time passed, the scope of Prabhat's counseling activities increased. One day, on his way into the office, he noticed that a coolie was sitting idle with a pained expression on his face. Prabhat asked him if he were not feeling well. "I want to work, sir," the coolie told him, "but I can't. I think I need to go home and get some treatment, or else, if you have something you can give me for the pain, I would be obliged."

"I am not a doctor," Prabhat said, but when the coolie repeated his request, he went and plucked a plant from the workshop grounds and instructed him how to make a simple medicinal preparation from its leaves. The next day the coolie was back at work, fully recovered. He told his fellow laborers that Prabhat knew many medicines. After that, other coolies started seeking Prabhat's help when they fell sick. Though Prabhat was not a homeopath like his father, his office colleagues also started seeking his advice for their medical problems, and he often prescribed herbal or naturopathic treatments as part of that advice.

One of Prabhat's colleagues was Gunadhar Patra, who was also a practicing homeopath and a student of natural remedies. He took advantage of his close proximity to Prabhat in the office to question him about the remedies to different diseases, many of which he began using in his own practice.³ One day he asked Prabhat to take him into the hills near the Kali temple to show him some of the medicinal plants that he recommended. As they were walking back, they passed a crowd of women gathered outside a house.

He asked me why those people were gathered there, so I went and inquired. They told me that a boy of that house was sick. He was fainting and vomiting and having fits that they were worried might be epilepsy. When I went back and told him, he said he wanted to see the boy. He went into the house and asked the family to describe the boy's symptoms to him in detail. He listened to what they had to say and then waved his hand over the boy's body. Then he told everyone that they could leave. He assured them that the boy would be all right. I was a doctor and I was thinking, How was it possible that the boy could be cured without any medicine or treatment? The next morning I went again to that area. I used to go to the spring near there to collect drinking water. I went to that house and inquired how the boy was. The family told me that he was fine. They said that a man with glasses had gone there the previous day and waved his hand over the boy and after that he was cured. I suspected he must have used some kind of mantra to cure the boy and I wanted to learn, so I went and asked him how he had done it. He appeared surprised at my question and didn't seem to remember the incident. Then I reminded him that it was when we

were coming down from the Kali hills. He remembered and told me that there was no mantra, nothing like that. These things can be done by touch also, he said. I had trouble believing it, but he assured me it was true. I was a doctor, he said, and I would also be able to cure patients by touch. Then I requested him to let me take the dust of his feet.

On another occasion, one of Prabhat's colleagues was deeply worried about his wife, who had fallen seriously ill and failed to respond to any of the medicines that the doctors had prescribed. He approached Prabhat and asked for his help. Prabhat closed his eyes for a few moments. Then he told him to bring him a certain red flower. The man brought the flower, but instead of prescribing some medicine to be made from its petals, as he had assumed he would do, Prabhat intoned some mantras and told him to keep the flower by his wife's bed. He promised that she would recover within forty-eight hours. When his wife recovered as Prabhat had predicted, his colleague spread the story around the office, adding to Prabhat's growing reputation.

Such incidents inspired confidence in his colleagues. They even began to approach Prabhat for advice about matters that required little or no knowledge of astrology or palmistry. Mr. Jha, for instance, was unable to afford the costly funeral rites for his father, who had recently died. As per Hindu tradition, a Brahmin priest was needed to conduct the necessary rituals to send his father's soul to heaven. Unfortunately, the priest was charging fifty gold sovereigns for his services, far beyond Mr. Jha's means, and his mother and other family members were putting tremendous pressure on him to pay it.

"Even if you spend a hundred times that amount," Prabhat told him, "it still wouldn't do any good. You still won't be able to send your father's soul to heaven because heaven and hell don't exist, other than the heaven and hell we create for ourselves in this world through the consequences of our good or bad actions. Heaven and hell are just dogmas created by certain religious people to exploit the gullible and play upon their fears."

"But Prabhat-da," Jha said, "even if it is just a dogma, I won't be able to convince my mother or my relatives of that. They'll never give me any peace if I don't perform the rites according to the scriptures."

Prabhat nodded. "Of course. I understand. But do one thing. Ask the priest how far he can send your father's soul if he reduces his fee."

The next day Jha told Prabhat that the priest had agreed to reduce his fee to thirty gold sovereigns. For that sum, he could take his father up to the gates of heaven. But he would have to open the heavy gates himself to be able to go in.

"I see," Prabhat said, smiling. "Go back to the priest and ask him how far he can bring your father if you pay him in silver."

The next day Jha told Prabhat that the priest had made a lengthy recalculation.

For one hundred silver coins he could take his father to the steps of heaven. From there he would have to climb the long, winding steps himself to reach the gate.

“Can you afford one hundred silver coins?” Prabhat asked.

“No, Prabhat-da. I have a very large family. I don’t want them to suffer unnecessarily.”

“How much can you afford then?”

“I suppose I could afford thirty silver coins,” Jha said.

“Very well. Go back and talk to the priest. Ask him how far he can bring your father for thirty silver coins.”

The next day Jha showed up at the office in a happy mood. When he had a chance to talk with Prabhat, he told him that at first the priest had been quite annoyed. Finally though, he had made a long calculation and told him that for that sum he could send his father three miles from heaven.

Prabhat laughed. “Very good. Tell the priest that your father was a healthy man who used to walk four or five miles every morning. If the priest can send him three miles from heaven, then he can cover the rest of the distance during his morning walk.”

The office was not the only place where people came to Prabhat for advice or to have their palms read. People from the neighborhood would occasionally stop by the Sarkar house to seek his help with one difficulty or another. Sometimes the advice he gave was purely practical. One time a distraught young woman from the neighborhood approached Prabhat’s mother and asked Abharani if she might be willing to ask her son’s advice for a problem that she was having with her mother-in-law. That evening, when Prabhat came home from work, his mother explained to him the difficulty that the young woman was facing: She was new to the neighborhood, having married a local boy, and her mother-in-law was making her life miserable, a common complaint in traditional Indian society. As in most Indian households where the daughter goes to live with the son’s family, she was expected to do the bulk of the cooking and cleaning. The mother-in-law would wait till the girl had finished cooking the noon meal. Then she would lock the kitchen with a padlock and go out to visit friends where she would generally take tea and snacks. The famished girl would have to wait for hours, until the mother-in-law returned, before she could eat. Prabhat counseled the girl to put her own padlock on the door after the mother-in-law went out and then make sure she was not there when the mother-in-law returned. She should only unlock the kitchen if the mother-in-law promised never to lock it again, no matter what threats the mother-in-law might make. A couple of days later the girl returned to offer her heartfelt thanks. Her mother-in-law had agreed not to lock the kitchen anymore.

On occasion, Prabhat’s help took a more supernatural bent. Once a rumor went around the neighborhood that Prabhat had a magic mirror in which

he could show the souls of the deceased and what people in distant places were doing. In actuality, it was not a mirror but a pane of glass that Prabhat had asked his brother Manas to paint black on one side, giving it a reflective quality. It was Manas's duty to fetch the mirror and set it up whenever Prabhat needed to use it.

One day the wife of Pundit Ramchandra Jha, Prabhat's high school Sanskrit teacher, came to visit Abharani. Mrs. Jha had not been present at her mother's death and had come to share the sorrow she was feeling. Prabhat overheard the conversation and later told his mother that if the old lady wished he could show her her deceased mother, as long as she promised not to be afraid and not to tell anyone about the incident. Mrs. Jha agreed. She came over a couple of days later. Manas set up the glass and set a candle burning before it. Prabhat instructed her to concentrate on the candle. The old lady quickly slipped into a semi trance state. While in that state, she saw her mother sitting in a boat. Afterwards, she thanked Prabhat and told him that now she could rest easy, knowing that her mother was safe and continuing on her journey.

On another occasion, another old lady from the neighborhood was worried about her son and came to Prabhat to ask for his help. Her son had gone abroad, and she had not received a letter from him for some weeks. Prabhat agreed to help and asked Manas to bring the glass and light a candle. The lady slipped into a trance and had a vision of her son going into a shop to buy food in the country he was visiting. The vision was enough to allay her fears.

After a few months, Abharani became worried that such séances would affect her son's health, and, in fact, he did fall sick after one such session. Prabhat, who always showed the utmost respect and consideration for his mother, retired the glass and never used it again.

This was typical of the relationship he had with Abharani. Each evening before bed, he would massage his mother's feet. Whenever he wanted to go anywhere, he would ask her permission, even in later years when he became preceptor to a multitude of disciples. Each month he handed his salary over to her; she would then give him a small allowance for his personal expenses. Abharani was a devout woman who kept a small altar in her house where she would perform her daily Hindu worship in front of a small image of Krishna. Prabhat made it a regular habit to bring her flowers for her worship. Once, for a stretch of several days, whenever she placed a garland around the image of Krishna, she saw an image of her son sitting there in place of the idol. She rubbed her eyes and started her worship again, but it kept happening. Finally, she went to her son and complained that he was bothering her worship. "It is because you love me so much," Prabhat told her, "that you keep seeing me."

The rest of the family was well aware of Prabhat's unusual abilities, but for his younger siblings it was simply a normal part of their lives. One day the Sarkar children were gathered at the dining table. Prabhat was eating his morning

meal before leaving for the office. Suddenly the family cat jumped on the table. "Do you want to see some magic?" Prabhat asked his younger brothers and younger sister. He made a small motion with his hand and the cat froze, as if it had been turned into a living statue. The children crowded forward to have a closer look. They touched it, oohing and ahing. At that moment, Prabhat's mother came into the room; when she saw what was happening, she rebuked her son. "Leave the cat alone, Prabhat, otherwise it might die." Prabhat made another small motion with his hand, and the cat started breathing again. It jumped off the table and ran away. His mother returned to her morning chores, mildly annoyed, but otherwise going about her day as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

The other children were convinced that their elder brother knew everything, as their mother often told them. One day in early 1948, Himanshu broached the subject. "Dada, you know everything.⁴ Can you teach me how you do it? I would love to be able to know everything also." Prabhat frowned. "It is not good to know everything," he said, "not good at all. You would not like it. There is a reason why Providence does not allow this."

A couple of days later, Prabhat was sitting at the dining table with his cousin Ajit Biswas, who was spending the holidays at the Sarkar house. While Prabhat's younger sister, Bijli Prabha, was serving them a snack, Abharani began scolding her for her lack of skill in household matters. "You are going to be married soon and you still haven't learned how to serve a table properly, what to speak of cooking! What will your husband think?" Prabhat started defending Bijli Prabha, until Abharani fell quiet and left her daughter in peace.

"There is no need for her to master such domestic chores," Prabhat told Ajit, once they were alone again at the table. "The marriage that my mother is busy arranging for my sister will never take place."

"Prabhat, it must be wonderful to be able to know what is going to happen in the future," Ajit exclaimed, shaking his head and marveling at his cousin's unique abilities.

"Not at all," Prabhat told him. "It is not a blessing; if anything, it is a curse. You see, my sister is destined for a short life. She will not live to see her marriage day. That is why I wish that she be left in peace, so that she does not face any unnecessary troubles in her final days. Think about it. Whenever I see her, I am reminded that her death is fast approaching. You see a healthy young woman; I see her death. Just imagine how difficult it would be for someone to act naturally or be at ease with their friends or family if they knew that someone close to them was about to die. There is good reason why Providence has arranged that human beings should not know what is to happen in the future."

The next day, Prabhat asked Himanshu to accompany him to Calcutta for a few days. When the two brothers arrived back in Jamalpur some four or five days later, they found the family in a state of mourning. Their carefree sister

Bijli Prabha had died the previous day of black fever, a disease that had shown no signs of its immanent arrival when they had set off for Calcutta a few days earlier.

Prabhat's family continued to pay visits to Bamunpara, where everyone still called him by his nickname, Bubu. Anil Ghosh recalled what those visits were like:

Even though Bubu was a younger relative, I still showed him much deference. We would visit him as soon as we heard of his arrival. One day we saw that Bubu was doing something inside his room. His grandmother was my sister-in-law. On inquiry, she replied, "Bubu is sitting in meditation. He practices meditation and contemplation for long periods. The last time when he was here and was meditating for a long time, I curiously peeped inside the room through the window. I saw him levitating. His body was floating a little above the ground. I got frightened and closed the window. It is better not to disturb him while he is practicing meditation. But now it has already been some time and he is about to get up." Sure enough, after a while Bubu came out. Seeing me, he happily embraced me. Bubu always was an effusive person and had a pure nature. He would mix freely with us all.

It is difficult to describe the joy he gave us by raising various topics for discussion. At that time in our village, there were two very educated gentlemen: Sachidulal Mitra and Gopikrishna Mitra, who was a chartered accountant. Both were older than Bubu. It was fascinating to watch them in any discussion or argument, be it deep philosophy, literature, ethics, sociology, or other topics. Bubu's knowledge of so many different subjects churned everyone's mind. He would lucidly explain any subject by quoting various Sanskrit verses to support his contentions. It appeared as if he had crammed all the Vedas, Vedanta, the social codes, Puranas, and Tantras into his brain. Whatever subject others asked him about, Bubu gave clear, precise replies with the requisite illustrations from various sources. Everyone would be completely satisfied with his replies.

Naresh Ghosh, who was five years younger than Prabhat, had formed a habit during his childhood of following him around whenever he got the chance. He also recalled those visits:

When he came to Bamunpara, Bubu-da would speak elaborately on various subjects, including linguistics, history, Bengali literature, philosophy, and spirituality. I noticed that Bubu-da spoke effortlessly

on the gradual development of Bengali literature. I most enjoyed his descriptions of the step-by-step evolution of the various Prakrita languages derived from Sanskrit. I particularly enjoyed listening about how original Sanskrit words became transformed over the ages and how they have come into modern Bengali. He could speak many languages fluently. He would explain various philosophical topics, quoting profusely from the Vedas and Upanishads. We were delighted to watch his extraordinary memory in action and his deep knowledge on different subjects. Occasionally, he spoke on different schools of philosophy, like Shaiva, Shakta, Vaeshnava, Saora, and Ganapatya. He would speak on so many things at a time that we would simply lose the trail.

People said Bubu-da could read palms very well. I say that he never read a palm. I have watched him; he would ask the person to stand erect and simply look sharply at him from head to foot. It was as if he were taking an X-ray. Then he would speak rapidly without any hesitation about the person. It is difficult for me to understand how he could enter a person's body and mind.

Once, my elder brother, Narayana, developed a brain disorder. The family decided to commit him to a mental hospital. My father wrote to Bubu-da, seeking his advice before taking any action. Bubu-da respected my father very much. In reply, Bubu-da advised against sending my brother to the hospital. He prescribed some medicines, asked that he practice some yoga asanas, and gave dietary instructions. Because of that letter, there was no need to send my brother to the hospital.

Nares'h's brother Suresh also recalled his impressions of Prabhat at that time:

When I was studying in college, we often discussed Bubu-da among ourselves. One day, I plucked up my courage and said to Bubu-da, "Why don't you read my palm?" Though he loved us all very much, we were in some ways afraid of him.

He said, "Tell me what you want to know."

"Up to what level will I study?"

"How far do you want to study?" he asked.

"Up to MA."

"Of course," he said, "you will pass your MA, but it won't be easy and you will have to struggle hard. You won't pass it at one go."

I then wanted to know about my future financial situation. After thinking a while, he said, "Money will come to you, but from early on you will be burdened with debts." Then I wanted to know about my future reputation. Bubu-da said, "Well, you will have a good

reputation, but your unpopularity will be no less. And the most interesting thing will be that friends unrelated to you will praise you, whereas your own people will criticize you.”

“What about my longevity?”

“You will live a long life, but you will have several accidents.” Then Bubu consoled me. “Whatever be your fate, an invisible power will follow you like a shadow and help you whenever necessary.”

Suresh then detailed how each of Prabhat’s prophecies came true: the eighteen years it took him to pass his MA, and the eighteen accidents, one of which left him in a coma for seven days. “If I go on telling,” he said, “how many times and in how many ways Bubu-da saved me and my family from difficulties and catastrophes, it would become an epic. The grace and blessings of Bubu-da have always shielded me.”

On one of these visits to Bamunpara, Prabhat was sitting with Gopi Babu, when Gopi started telling him about a yogi named Bamakhyapa from the Birbhum district of West Bengal; Gopi was convinced that he had great spiritual powers.

“Once the ticket collector put him off the train because he didn’t have a ticket. As soon as he was off the train, the whistle blew and the driver started the engine, but the train wouldn’t move. One of the passengers told the guard that the person they had taken off the train was a great yogi. The train would not move until he was allowed back on. They tested this by allowing him back on the train. As soon as they did so, the train started moving.”

“One needs some kind of spiritual power to do this, no doubt,” Prabhat said, “but it is not a very high class of spiritual power. This, by itself, doesn’t mean he is a great yogi.”

Gopi Babu raised a suspicious eyebrow. “Could you do it?” he asked.

Rather than answer him, Prabhat smiled and changed the subject. “When are you going back to Kolkata?”

“I’m going back tomorrow,” Gopi said.

“Good. I am also going tomorrow. We can go together.”

The next day Gopi Babu stopped at the Sarkar house on his way to the station.

“I’m not quite ready yet,” Prabhat said when he saw him. “Anyhow we have time. There’s no hurry.”

“Prabhat-da, I have urgent work in Kolkata. I can’t afford to miss the train.”

“Then you go ahead. I will be along presently.”

Gopi Babu hurried to the station and proceeded to the platform after buying his ticket. The train was standing on the platform and the passengers had already boarded. Then Gopi saw Prabhat in the distance, approaching the station at a leisurely pace. He shouted for him to hurry, the train was about to leave, but Prabhat didn’t quicken his pace. The train blew its whistle, but

Prabhat continued to stroll calmly towards the station, as if he had all the time in the world. Finally, he entered the station and went up to the counter to buy his ticket. The whistle blew again but the train still failed to move. Only when Prabhat got into the train and took his seat next to Gopi Babu did it start to move. Gopi looked at him distrustfully but didn't say anything. When the train arrived at Bandel, where it was scheduled for a long stoppage, Gopi got up with the other passengers and started towards the platform to take a cup of tea.

"Better not get out of the train," Prabhat said. "Today it will only stop here for a couple of minutes."

"Nonsense," Gopi said. "It always stops in Bandel for at least twenty minutes."

Gopi had barely ordered his tea when the signal sounded and the train started to move. He rushed back to his compartment and asked Prabhat in a vexed tone of voice how it was that he knew the train would only stop there for a couple of minutes.

Prabhat smiled. "The train is late; it was delayed in Shaktigarh. Now it is making up the gap."

Soon after Prabhat joined the office, the British government announced the creation of the Indian Engineers Force, a voluntary adjunct to the Indian Territorial Army,⁵ designed to train young Indian engineers to assist in the defense of their country. Those who enlisted would be required to devote a certain number of hours on weekends and after work. They would also be sent for periodic short training stints to different parts of India, including West Bengal, Assam, and the North-West Frontier Province. In return, they would be paid a stipend of eight annas per day.⁶ With his family in need of the money, Prabhat added his name to the list. He was quickly promoted to corporal and put in charge of a small platoon of Indian cadets who soon developed a strong sense of loyalty for their young Bengali platoon leader. On one training excursion, a British officer came for inspection while Prabhat was absent; he went ahead with the inspection without waiting for Prabhat to return. When Prabhat returned, he rebuked the officer for having conducted the inspection in his absence. One of Prabhat's men heard the altercation from the barracks and came out with a loaded gun. He saluted Prabhat and asked him in which direction he wanted him to shoot. The officer beat an immediate retreat.

On another occasion, several of Prabhat's men complained to him about one of their comrades who kept a locked chest under his cot with biscuits and other delicacies that he never shared with his fellow cadets. Prabhat listened to their complaints and promised to deal with it.

"Let us do one thing. I will get him out of the tent tonight on some excuse. When I give the signal, sneak into the tent from the back and make some sounds like an animal might make. Leave when I give the signal again."

That night, Prabhat invited the greedy cadet to go for a walk. As they were walking he gave the signal, a loud cough. Within moments, they heard strange sounds coming from the empty tent.

His companion halted suddenly. “Prabhat-da, did you hear that?”

“Yes. It sounds like a wild animal has gotten into the tent. It must be sniffing around. Do you keep any food in your tent, biscuits or any such thing?”

“Well, yes . . .”

“That is the problem then. It must be trying to get at the food.”

Baba coughed again and the sounds ceased. “I don’t hear anything now,” he said. “Let’s go take a look.”

Cautiously the two men entered the tent. They saw signs of a disturbance around the cot.

“Just as I feared,” Prabhat said. “It was trying to get into your chest.”

“Oh no, what’ll I do? What happens if it comes back while I’m sleeping?”

“I suggest you leave some of your food outside at night for the animal. He’ll eat it and go away. Otherwise, who knows what might happen.”

The cadet followed Prabhat’s advice and that evening his comrades were able to enjoy his unplanned generosity.

It is not known to what extent Prabhat continued initiating disciples during the years leading up to Independence, but he would occasionally be seen in the company of wandering mendicants, such as were seen from time to time in any Indian town. Townspeople would sometimes spot him in their company during his evening walks in the solitary areas near Kalipahar and Death Valley.

One afternoon in 1944, Rameshvar Baita, a neighbor and a classmate of Manas Sarkar, was passing by the Sarkar house in Keshavpur along with his friend Ganesh. He noticed Prabhat sitting on the porch reading his newspaper, as Prabhat often did after arriving home from work. On the small platform across the street, a group of men from the neighborhood were playing cards, a common sight there in the afternoons. A man dressed in tattered clothes was sitting on one side of the platform, laughing to himself and speaking to no one in particular. Obviously some kind of a madman, Rameshvar thought. It was nothing new. He had often seen beggars and crazy-looking people sitting there in the late afternoons and early evenings—he had always assumed it was a good place to beg—and he had seen this particular fellow there for the past several days. This time, Ganesh wanted to stop and watch the card game. Rameshvar told him that he was in a hurry to get home, but he obliged his insistent friend for a few minutes.

As they were standing there, they heard the madman laugh and exclaim, “They call me mad. The Lord of the Universe has come to Jamalpur and is working in the railway workshop, and still they sit around and waste their lives playing cards. Fools! And they call *me* mad?”

The men playing cards winked at the two boys and shook their heads, laughing

uproariously. “Sure thing, *pagal* (madman), the Lord of the Universe is in Jamalpur.” They added a few more derisive comments before returning to their game.

Rameshvar and Ganesh joined in their laughter and then continued on their way. Rameshvar thought nothing more of it until years later when he took initiation and started hearing stories about Prabhat’s earliest disciples. Then he remembered how Prabhat would sit out on the veranda for a short time after work to read the paper or enjoy the cool evening air. Rameshvar would often say hello to him as he accompanied Prabhat’s brother Manas in or out of the house. From time to time, he would notice strange people sitting on the platform whom he mistook for beggars or crazy people. Later, it dawned on him that they had actually been mendicants and yogis who would sit there to catch a glimpse of the master.

Prabhat continued to write letters to Indian politicians. As the date for independence approached, he corresponded with Shyamaprasad Mukherjee, president of the Hindu Mahasabha, in regards to the demarcation of the borders between the future states of Pakistan and independent India.⁷ The British representative responsible for border demarcation was Sir Ratcliff, who was working together with two Indian ICS officers: Chaudhuri Mahomed Ali, representing the future Pakistan; and H. M. Patel, representing India. Patel was not so familiar with the Punjab and Bengal, the two large Indian states that were being carved up in the formation of East and West Pakistan; as a result, areas were being awarded to Pakistan that would severely compromise India’s access to Kashmir and the northeast areas of Assam and Tripura, as well as contributing to various other problems. Shyamaprasad raised these points on the floor of the provisional Indian Parliament. When Nehru and Vallabhai Patel questioned him as to where he had come by this information, he told them that it had come from one P. R. Sarkar, an employee of the Jamalpur railway workshop. This was the first time that the name P. R. Sarkar came to the attention of Nehru.⁸

After independence, Nehru, now Prime Minister of the world’s newest and largest democracy, kept a secret but watchful eye on the man who had been the source behind Shyamaprasad’s provocative comments on the floor of parliament. Years later, after Nehru had died and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, had turned the Prime Ministership into a dictatorship, Nehru’s chief of intelligence, B. N. Mullick, confided that after independence Nehru had asked him to keep an eye on two organizations—the radical RSS and the Muslim League—and one man, P. R. Sarkar. By this time the watchful and secret eye of Nehru had morphed into a very public distrust and antagonism on the part of his daughter towards the former railway employee, who was by then the guru of India’s largest and most controversial spiritual movement.⁹

Some of Prabhat’s suggestions were acted upon and some were not, but by the time of the partition much harm had already been committed that could

not be undone. Later on, those political leaders involved in the partition would receive caustic criticism from Prabhat in his analysis of the events that led to the dismemberment of the country and the genocide it occasioned, criticism that would not endear him to Indira, whose father had been one of the principle architects of independence.

According to Prabhat, in the 1930s the British government had begun implementing a systematic program to encourage communal divisions, such as religious and caste differences, in order to undermine the cause of Indian independence. The principle failure of India's leaders at the time, he pointed out, was their failure to adequately combat these divisions. Some political parties were openly based on communal sentiments; they gave their support to the British policies in exchange for favorable considerations from the outgoing rulers. Other unscrupulous leaders took advantage of the scope afforded by The Government of India Act to secure ministerships for themselves and provincial autonomy for their regions, to the detriment of the nation. They committed severe blunders, practiced appeasement in the face of communal demands, and turned a blind eye to political errors for which the nation would later suffer. In Prabhat's opinion, the reforms introduced by the British in the 1930s and 1940s, such as the Montague-Chelmsford Report, the Communal Award of Ramsay Macdonald, and the Government of India Act 1935, did incalculable damage to the unity of the nation and led directly to the partition of the country.

As Prabhat later explained to his disciples:

Factually, as per the Government of India Plan at the time, India was trifurcated while Bengal, the Punjab, and Assam were bifurcated. Sindhu and the North-West Frontier Provinces went out of India. This was the result of the Communal Award, and unfortunately, the great patriots of India supported the Communal Award. They failed to learn the lessons of history . . . At that time there was no mutual faith; there was want of mutual understanding. That is why the country was divided. Otherwise, the British could not have divided the country. There was both physical disintegration and psychic, or rather psychosocial disintegration for want of proper political education.¹⁰

On the morning of August 15, 1947, following the stroke of midnight, India attained its independence. In the weeks that immediately preceded and followed, an estimated half million people were slaughtered by communal death squads while trying to cross the borders into India or Pakistan, one of the greatest genocides in modern history and a direct result of the willingness of India's leaders to allow the division of their country. For better or for worse, the bloodshed that accompanied India's independence and the creation of West and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) ushered in a new era for the subcontinent,

home to the planet's oldest civilization and its newest democracy. It also marked the end of one era in Prabhat's life and the beginning of another. The quiet, mysterious youth, who had steadfastly kept his spiritual depths hidden from the eyes of all but a few, was about to begin the concrete materialization of his life's work: a mission that would leave a mark not only on India but on the entire world in a way that the politicians who read his letters and either accepted or spurned his advice in the years leading up to independence could never have foreseen.