

My Maharaj

A Remembrance of Maharaj in memoirs since 1972

By Dr. (Prof.) Arindam Chakrabarty

Professor, Ashoka University, Haryana

(The renowned academician, researcher, philosopher & speaker, recalls his long association with Maharaj since 1972)

1987, Sunday, 20th November

*A devotional gathering for Nama Sankirtan by Maharaj's Anandam Kirtan Group was organized at the residence of a devotee in Baranagar. The kirtan assembly was filled with devotees. Among those present that day was **Kinkar Abhayananda** (Dr. Prof. Arindam Chakrabarty), the beloved disciple of **Sri Sri Thakur Sitaramdas Omkarnath Dev** and one who was deeply cherished by Maharaj. Before the kirtan began, he was requested to speak about Maharaj. His deeply contemplative discourse, enriched with profound scriptural insights and supported by authoritative references from the sacred texts, was later compiled and published in **Panch Sike Panch Ana**, the monthly house journal of Kailash. Presented here is a reprint of that very article.*

Abhayanandaji began his reminiscences of Maharaj by saying: "There are two ways of seeing a person—seeing after knowing, and seeing before knowing. Sometimes we hear about someone long before we meet them. We hear endless praise, glowing descriptions and enthusiastic accounts. By the time we finally see the person, the surprise is often gone. Sometimes we are even disappointed. We think, '*Is this the person everyone was talking about?*' But when one encounters someone unexpectedly, without having heard anything beforehand, the very first sight can dazzle the eyes. Gradually one comes to know the person more deeply, yet that initial astonishment never fades.



It was my great fortune to meet *Swami Shivananda Giri Maharaj* in precisely this way. The first time I saw him was at *Adyapeath*. On that day my Gurudev, *Sri Sri Thakur Sitaramdas Omkarnathji* was visiting *Adyapeath*. Whenever we accompanied *Thakur*, our entire attention remained fixed upon him. In his presence, nothing else seemed to exist; our eyes naturally rested only upon him. That day the crowd had gathered in great numbers to have *Thakur's* darshan. It was sometime around **1972** or **1973**. The gathering had become extremely disorderly. No one was able to control the surging masses. It was there that I first noticed *Swami Shivananda Giri Maharaj*—and I was utterly astonished. Ordinarily, our gaze never wandered away from *Thakur*. Why, then, on that day, did it turn elsewhere?

Let me tell you how I first saw *Maharaj*. He was standing in an obscure corner of the assembly—a place where one would normally expect to find volunteers or local boys helping to manage the crowd. Saints and revered monks usually occupy places of honour at the front. They are respectfully seated according to their position. *Maharaj* was nowhere near such a place. When *Thakur* visited different gatherings, I had often observed that many monks did not even rise from their seats to receive him. Those of gentler disposition would stand up. Some would offer pranam; others would merely acknowledge him with a courteous Western-style bow. (Had *Thakur* been physically present today, he would probably have made me perform penance for speaking so openly about these matters.) With folded hands I bow before all those holy souls. Such scenes had become familiar to my eyes, and I scarcely noticed them anymore. But against that familiar background, *Maharaj* stood out like a

towering presence. He wore the ochre robes of a monk, yet he seemed completely unconcerned about maintaining their appearance. He paid no attention to whether his rudraksha beads were properly arranged. His entire being was absorbed in one task alone—doing everything possible to manage the unruly crowd. The eager devotees surged forward, desperate to touch *Thakur's* feet or receive his blessings. Amidst that chaotic sea of people, *Maharaj* was tirelessly guiding the crowd, protecting *Thakur*, and trying to escort him safely to his seat. There was something extraordinary about him.

As I watched him, an image from the scriptures arose vividly in my mind—the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva. Shiva is dancing—wildly, magnificently. Brahma and the gods stand singing hymns in his praise. His dance continues relentlessly. High above, flocks of birds fly in beautiful formations across the sky. Then the violent movement of Shiva's matted locks scatters their perfect formations into seeming disorder. Yet, strangely enough, the scene becomes even more beautiful because of that very disruption.

Jatājūṭa-skhalat-khara-cara-vyūha-rucirāravam
Padanyāsa-kliśyat-kṣiti-calana-vibhrānta-bhuvanam |
Mahāhāsa-ullāsa-pramatha-kara-tālair-upacitam
Viriñcyādi-stutyam Tripurahara-nṛtyam vijayate ||

"Victory to the dance of Tripurahara (Lord Shiva), praised by Brahma and the gods; whose mighty footsteps shake the worlds, whose joyous laughter echoes through creation, and whose tossing matted locks scatter the formations of birds, making the entire spectacle all the more wondrous."

That divine vision of Shiva's dance came alive in my heart when I beheld *Maharaj*.

Thakur, of course, had already known *Maharaj*. But for me, this was our first meeting. I stood there wondering, *'What kind of man is this?'* At that moment I was not even thinking of him as a saint. In fact, he hardly looked like what people generally imagine a saint to be. There was no elevated seat. No solemn grandeur. No attempt to distinguish himself from others. He simply continued managing the crowd until *Thakur* had been safely seated. He seemed utterly forgetful of himself. Later I learned that he had many disciples of his own. That only deepened my amazement. I thought, *'What sort of person is he? He is a Guru, yet he behaves like the most ordinary of men'*. *Thakur* having respectfully seated, *Maharaj* quietly went and sat at his feet.

Many years after that first encounter at Adyapeath, another incident unfolded that revealed to me even more clearly the inner kinship between *Maharaj* and my own revered Gurudev. On one occasion, *Jagadguru Sri Jayendra Saraswati* was to visit our *Mahamilan Math*. Late in the night, *Thakur* suddenly arrived and instructed us, "Decorate the Ashram". We replied, "Everything has already been decorated." "No," *Thakur* said. "This decoration will not do. Remove it all." We were astonished. He continued, "The one who is coming must be received in a manner befitting him. Everything should be adorned in saffron." We protested, "But this is not how our Ashram is usually decorated." *Thakur* smiled and said, "From today, it shall be. Everything should be arranged according to the tradition of the one who is coming." So we did exactly as instructed. The entire Ashram was redecorated in saffron. Two seats were prepared—one for the guest and one for *Thakur*. After inspecting everything, *Thakur* asked, "Where is the picture of *Adi Shankaracharya*?" "We do not have one," we replied. "Then paint one." There was no alternative. We hastily painted a portrait and placed it in the hall. When *Jagadguru Jayendra Saraswati* arrived, *Thakur* personally welcomed him with the highest honours and escorted him inside. The *Jagadguru* took his seat. Everyone naturally expected *Thakur* to occupy the seat prepared for him. Instead, he quietly sat at the feet of the young *Shankaracharya*. He began gently removing the flower garlands from the *Jagadguru's* feet and serving him with the utmost reverence. Immediately my mind returned to that unforgettable day at Adyapeath. This was exactly what

Maharaj had done. At that time, Jagadguru Jayendra Saraswati was barely twenty-five or twenty-six years old—young enough to be *Thakur's* grandson. Many in the Ashram were deeply disturbed. They could not understand why our Guru, revered by countless devotees, should sit at the feet of someone so much younger. A meeting was convened. Several devotees decided that *Thakur* must be asked why he had behaved in this manner. When the question was finally put before him, *Thakur* answered with perfect simplicity: "Do you think I was serving that individual? I was serving *Shankaracharya* through him." That one sentence dissolved all our confusion. In that instant I understood something profound. *Thakur* and *Maharaj* were fashioned from the very same mould. *Maharaj* too would often say, "Do you think I bow to the external form of *Thakur*? No. I bow to the Divine Pair—*Sita* and *Rama*—who dwell within him." At this point Abhayanandaji paused for a moment and said, "In my entire life I have seen only two such souls. Two unique beings beyond comparison." Then, after reflecting quietly for a few moments, he corrected himself. "Our scriptures teach us to behold God in our Guru. But how many of us are actually capable of seeing with such vision?"

As the years passed, I met *Maharaj* on many more occasions—in Puri, in various Ashrams, and at numerous spiritual gatherings. Yet it was only after the physical departure of my own Guru, *Sri Sri Thakur Sitaramdas Omkarnathji* that I truly came to know *Maharaj*. You can perhaps imagine the state we disciples were in after *Thakur's* *Mahasamadhi*. We felt completely shattered. Like a boat drifting helplessly without its helmsman. *Maharaj* himself possessed the same carefree, unattached temperament as *Thakur*. Despite founding so many Ashrams and institutions, *Thakur* was never attached to any of them. Once, while travelling, our vehicle stopped beneath a bridge beside a river. Looking around at the peaceful surroundings, *Thakur* remarked, "One could spend one's whole life wandering the roads like this." At that time, he had already established fifty or sixty Ashrams across the country. Yet there was not the slightest trace of possessiveness in him. On another occasion, we were staying beneath a simple tin shed at *Gangasagar*. *Madhab Swamiji* picked up an ordinary bucket and said, "When we return, I'll take one like this for our Ashram." *Thakur* immediately replied, "Return to the Ashram? Who said anything about returning? Perhaps we'll simply stay here." Such was the nature of true saints. They build institutions for the welfare of others, yet inwardly remain utterly free from every sense of ownership.

The detachment of *Thakur* from worldly possessions was something that revealed itself again and again in the most unexpected ways. A great deal of money had been spent to establish an Ashram at *Hrishikesh*. One day a telegram arrived with alarming news: "All the utensils have been stolen. Please send money so that an iron gate can be installed." *Thakur's* reply was astonishing. "There is no need for an iron gate. Leave the doors and windows open. Once everything has been stolen, there will be nothing left to steal." Another telegram soon followed: "If all the utensils are gone, how are we to cook and eat?" *Thakur* replied, "Use banana leaves." Yet another message came: "Where shall we keep the money to buy the banana leaves?" His answer was as simple as it was profound: "Beg for it each day." Such is the natural disposition of a true monk. Possessions neither burden nor define him. His dependence is entirely upon the Divine.

After *Thakur* laid aside his mortal body, an extraordinary incident occurred. *Maharaj* organised a festival named 'Nikhil Banga Bhaktigeeti Sammelan' at Dakshineswar Kali Temple, in which a portrait of *Sri Sri Thakur Sitaramdas Omkarnathji* was placed on the stage and worshipfully honoured. When news of this reached us, we were amazed. "Who is this person?" we wondered. We went to meet him. There was something that struck me immediately. Ordinarily, when someone performs a noble deed, there is at least a subtle trace of satisfaction—a desire that others should know what has been done. But *Maharaj* made no mention whatsoever of what he had done. Not a word. He neither referred to the festival nor sought any appreciation. Finally, I myself raised the subject. With complete simplicity he replied, "Please do not misunderstand me. Everything happened rather suddenly. There simply

wasn't enough time to consult all of you beforehand." There was no self-congratulation. No expectation of praise. Only humility.

Thakur often lived in a world filled with continuous divine experiences. He would speak of the **Bindu**, the **Nada**, the **Divine Light**, the **Infinite Sky of Consciousness**, and many other mystical realizations. The remarkable thing was that he assumed such experiences were natural for everyone. One day he asked me, "Tell me, do you also experience these things?" I replied honestly, "No, *Thakur*. Nothing like that happens to me." He touched me gently and asked again, "And now?" I smiled helplessly. "No... I still don't experience anything." Can everyone be another *Swami Vivekananda*? Great souls naturally imagine others to be like themselves. *Maharaj* possessed exactly the same outlook. Once I said to him, "What you have done—placing *Thakur's* portrait upon the stage and paying homage in this manner—is something one rarely sees." *Maharaj* looked genuinely surprised. He replied, "What do you mean? Every spiritual tradition ought to do this. *Thakur* belonged to everyone." Those few words revealed the vastness of his vision. He never regarded *Thakur* as belonging to a particular Ashram, institution, or sect. For him, *Thakur* was a universal spiritual treasure.

The birth anniversary of *Thakur* was our greatest annual festival. It was to us what Durga Puja is to Bengal. Devotees from far and wide were invited. *Maharaj* attended every year. On one occasion, however, some members of our Ashram remarked, "Why do we invite the same person year after year? Surely others should also be given an opportunity." A mischievous thought crossed my mind. I went straight to *Maharaj* and repeated these comments to him. He laughed heartily. There was not the slightest trace of hurt or offence. Instead he said, "They're quite right." That was all. Anyone else might have felt insulted. Anyone else might have refused to come again. But *Maharaj* was different. That year he attended the festival on all three days. On one of those days he came twice—once in the morning and again in the evening. There was no wounded pride. No resentment. No desire to prove anything. His only concern was to participate in the celebration of *Thakur*. That was enough.

Reflecting upon *Maharaj's* life, I am reminded of a moving episode from the *Mahabharata*. The great war of Kurukshetra had ended. Arjuna and Lord Krishna were returning together in their chariot. When they reached their destination, Arjuna requested Krishna to descend first. But Krishna said, "No, Arjuna. You must step down before I do." Arjuna obeyed. Only after Arjuna had safely alighted did Krishna descend from the chariot. The very moment Krishna stepped onto the ground, the entire chariot burst into flames and was reduced to ashes. Astonished, Arjuna asked, "How could this happen?" Krishna explained, "Throughout the war, this chariot had already been consumed by the fiery force of countless celestial weapons. Only because I remained seated upon it was it preserved until now. Had I descended before you, the chariot would have burned instantly, and you would have perished with it." Whenever I think of *Maharaj*, this incident comes vividly to mind. His body was that chariot. Day after day he immersed himself in endless work, tireless travel, ceaseless service, and unremitting labour. The body had long since been worn out. It continued only because the indwelling Divine still chose to abide within it. *Maharaj* did not wish to remain for long in that worn-out chariot of the body. Yet, even during his stay in the nursing home, he gave us precious time—time to prepare ourselves inwardly, time to gradually reconcile ourselves to the inevitable. It was as though he slowly withdrew his presence so that the shock of his departure might not overwhelm us all at once. Then, one day, he stepped down from the chariot. The body perished. To us, however, it felt as though our own world had collapsed. The doctors at the nursing home had said, "With the illness he is suffering from, this body simply cannot continue. If it is still functioning, it is solely because of his own will." *Maharaj* had long been afflicted with a serious heart condition. Yet no one who saw him at work could have imagined it. I have seen him leap down from high places without hesitation. I have watched him tirelessly moving from one place to another, serving in innumerable ways.

I saw him at Dakshineswar, at Ananda Ashram, and in many other places. One might think that in another person's Ashram he behaved with exceptional humility out of courtesy. But what astonished me even more was that he was exactly the same in his own Ashram. Nothing changed. There too he lived in the spirit of the words:

"Tṛṇād api sunīcena"
"Humbler than a blade of grass."

He never assumed the air of a superior. He never sought distinction. He never behaved like the head of an institution. The same natural simplicity shone everywhere.

To *Maharaj*, every religious order and every spiritual tradition stood before him like a beggar—not because they came asking for alms, but because he himself went to them with folded hands. He would go from door to door, appealing with extraordinary humility: "Come and join the Bhaktigeeti Sammelan. Let us all come together." Outwardly it appeared that *Maharaj* was begging. In truth, it was we who were the beggars. Not everyone can truly beg. The greater a person's ego, the more difficult it becomes to ask with humility. Only one who has completely conquered self-importance can stand before others with empty hands. When *Maharaj* stretched out those hands, we never gave as we should have. Today we all regret it. He asked us only for a little. Yet he gave us everything. At this point my thoughts are irresistibly drawn to Rabindranath Tagore's immortal poem:

*"I brought the begging bowl into my house and emptied it—
What marvel was this?
Among the alms I found a tiny grain of gold.
What I had offered to the Royal Mendicant
Returned to me transformed into pure gold.
Then tears filled my eyes,
And I wept,
'Why did I not give him everything I had?'"*

That is exactly how we feel today. When *Maharaj* came to us asking only for a little participation, a little cooperation, a little love, we offered only a fraction of what we could have given. Now we realise that whatever we gave has returned to us immeasurably enriched. If only we had emptied ourselves completely before him.

On another occasion, representatives of various monastic orders travelled together to *Delhi* to attend a great conference of saints organised by the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*. Among the monks from Bengal, *Swami Shivananda Giri Maharaj* had naturally become the leading figure. Most of us travelled with one or two attendants or disciples. *Maharaj* came entirely alone. When we reached *Delhi*, the arrangements for accommodation had not yet been finalised. Night had already fallen. Everyone was searching anxiously for a place to stay. Someone noticed a saffron-clad monk lying quietly on one corner of the railway platform. Thinking it might be one of the monks who had arrived earlier, we walked towards him. To our utter astonishment, it was *Maharaj*. Since no lodging had yet been arranged, he had simply spread himself upon the platform and gone to sleep. There was no anxiety. No complaint. No concern for prestige. No thought that people might say, "How can such a respected monk sleep on a railway platform?" Such ideas simply did not exist within him. His simplicity was not cultivated. It was his very nature.

Austerity alone does not make a saint .One may say of someone: "He has no ego." "No pride." "No greed." "No desire for recognition." "No inclination for self-advertisement." These are indeed noble qualities. But greatness cannot be measured merely by what is absent. Something must also be profoundly present. There must be a positive fullness. There must be an inner treasure. *Maharaj* possessed that treasure. Once he heard the beautiful bhajan of ***Saint Ravidas***:

"Prabhuji, Tum Chandan, Hum Pani"
"O Lord, You are sandal; I am but water."

He asked me, "What do you think is the deepest meaning of this line?" Outwardly, he was constantly occupied with organising programmes, travelling, meeting people, serving devotees, and carrying countless responsibilities. Yet inwardly his mind dwelt upon such profound spiritual truths. His inner communion with God never ceased. That is why I say: It was not merely that worldly qualities had disappeared from him. He possessed something infinitely greater. He was always united with the Divine.

Thakur used to tell us: "The Lord comes to each of us three times every day—morning, evening, and night. He comes to see what we are doing. But we remain so absorbed in our own affairs that we never notice Him. So He says, 'Oh, you are busy now. Very well, I shall come again later.' He returns. But still we have no time. Then He quietly departs once more." *Thakur* would say with great feeling, "How heartless you are! The Lord Himself comes to your door, and yet you cannot spare Him even a little of your time. He keeps returning again and again." As I observed *Maharaj's* life, I realised that he was one who always kept company with that Divine Visitor. His outer activities never interrupted his inner remembrance. The two flowed together seamlessly.

Many people say of great souls that they never truly depart. They tell us that saints do not die; they merely withdraw from our physical sight while continuing to remain with us. Perhaps that is true. Many speak of their unseen presence. Many affirm that they continue to guide and protect their devotees. Yet, however often I hear such words, my heart cannot be fully consoled. For I no longer behold him before my eyes. Now I see only his photograph. Until one reaches that exalted state in which one can perceive the living presence of the Master in every atom of creation, the pain of physical separation remains. I have not yet attained that vision. I cannot yet experience him everywhere. When I cannot see him with these very eyes, I feel deeply helpless. Perhaps one day such realization will dawn. But until then, the longing itself remains my companion.

Abhayanandaji continued: "May this sacred pain of separation from *Maharaj* remain ever alive within our hearts. As long as this longing endures, our spiritual welfare is assured." He then recalled the immortal prayer of Rabindranath Tagore:

"If I do not behold You, O Lord, in this very life,
let me never forget that I have not found You.
Let the pain of that separation remain with me—
in waking, in dreams, and in every moment of my life."

Such yearning is itself a form of grace. The ache of separation prevents the heart from becoming complacent. It keeps the soul awake. It preserves devotion from growing cold.

There is one final thought I wish to share. Earlier I remarked that in my entire life I had encountered only two personalities who embodied such complete self-effacement and reverential humility. On further reflection, I realise that even this was not entirely accurate. It would be more truthful to say there was only **one**. Sri Sri *Thakur Sitaramdas* Omkarnathji and Swami Shivananda Giri *Maharaj*

appeared as two distinct individuals. Yet the spirit that shone through them was one and the same. The humility of one was the humility of the other. The devotion of one was the devotion of the other. The complete disappearance of personal ego was equally natural to both. They were not two separate manifestations. They were one spiritual reality expressed through two human lives.

As I look back today, I feel overwhelmed by the immeasurable gifts that *Maharaj* bestowed upon us. He gave without ever asking for recognition. He poured himself out without measure. He expected nothing in return. Only now do we begin to understand the greatness of what we received. We accepted so much. We appreciated so little. The concluding song expresses that truth more beautifully than any prose can:

"You have given me so much—
gifts beyond anything I ever asked.
I failed to understand their greatness;
I failed to value them as they deserved.
Yet Your generosity never ceased.

Day after day You showered Your compassion,
enfolding me in Your boundless love.
Carelessly I scattered Your blessings,
yet never once did You feel hurt or offended."

Such was *Maharaj*. His greatness lay not merely in the institutions he founded, the festivals he organized, the devotees he inspired, or the countless acts of service he performed. His true greatness lay in the complete absence of self. He lived only for the Divine. He honoured holiness wherever he found it. He recognized no barriers of sect, lineage, or denomination. To him, every saint was worthy of reverence, every devotee deserving of love, and every opportunity for service an act of worship. Those who met him did not merely encounter a monk or a spiritual teacher. They encountered a living embodiment of humility, self-effacement, universal love, and unwavering devotion. His physical form has vanished from our sight, but the fragrance of his life continues to inspire all who seek to walk the path of love, surrender, and service.