

VISITS TO GIRNARIBANTA

Since the year 1950, I became a regular visitor to Girnaribanta. And my frequent visits to the Ashram made me familiar to Baba. Baba was very tall; when seated over the cot at the verandah, I could see Baba's head with matted hair from a distance (a little away from the foot of the dune). That would give me energy and joy, for getting sure that Baba was at the Ashram. I used to go to the Ashram only on sunny days, and mostly in the morning. I could hardly find any visitor at that time of the day; the Ashram appeared to be lonely, and so also the locality. Excepting a few passers-by, the entire locality seemed to be deserted.

The track was narrow and bushy, and there were many white-ant hills and screwpine plants, all around. Walking along that lonely track towards Girnaribanta, many a times I came across poisonous snakes. There was a small pool full of water (now mostly dried up), near the foot of the dune, with blooming water-lilies. I used to stop there for a minute, to see the beauty of the pool, full of

red lilies. At that place, I had seen cobras crossing the path and entering the pool. I also had a momentary view of running jackals. At first I thought them to be dogs, but later I was told that they were not dogs but jackals. Sometimes I got terrified. So one day, I reported the matter to Baba. On hearing the cause of my fear, Baba laughed loudly; and then in a very soft voice said, "What fear? When I am here there cannot be any fear." My fear then vanished, and walking along that lonely path was no more a problem to me.

In Puri, we were staying at a rented house close to Swargadwar. Our land-lady was a tight-fisted woman; she would never give anything to anybody so easily. The ripe papaya fruits in her papaya plant were very tempting; and we the young girls planned to steal them. One evening while the land-lady was out, after eating the ripe-fruits joyfully, we buried the skin of the fruits under the sand.

Next day, when I went to the Ashram and offered my *pranam*, Baba became serious and did not speak to me for some time. Then in a harsh voice said, "Even now you like to steal fruits from other's tree." I was taken aback, and shocked. "How could Baba know about it?" I pondered. It was

unbelievable. I was so ashamed that I hung down my head, and covered my face with the hands. Then only it came to my mind, that Baba had the knowledge of my everything—the past, present and the future. There was no point in coming to Baba with a wicked mind. I felt very sorry for what I had done. That day I first realized, that Baba was not an ordinary *Sannyasin*, but must be the God incarnate. That was exactly what my land-lady had said.

I would go to the Ashram at that time, when Baba used to sit alone. It was usual to find Baba at the Ashram, sitting either at the verandah over the cot, or near the banyan tree. I used to spend most of the time by sitting before Baba. In the beginning, when I first started going to the Ashram and sitting before Baba, just to move me away, Baba would say in a soft voice, "What is the use of sitting here before me; there are so many things to see; go round and see the scenery this side or that side". But I would then say smilingly, "No Baba, I won't go; I shall sit here only." Noticing my firmness, Baba would not say anything afterwards, thus giving me his silent approval to sit before him. That was a great blessing in my life, to get Baba's divine company.

Usually, Baba would not speak, but sit alone in silence. At times he would speak, ask questions, and answer questions if asked. His reply to questions was always brief and to the point. Sometimes Baba would order me to bring the book *Panchadashi* from the almirah, and read before him. I used to read loudly, and Baba would listen with eyes closed. While reading, Baba would often inquire, if I had understood what I was reading. If I would make any mistake in reading, Baba would immediately open his eyes, and correct the mistake. Since I could not speak well in Hindi, Baba said, "You speak in your own language, I will understand."

Baba was a *Jnanamargi, Advaitavadi Sannyasin* of the highest order. He was very strict and reserved in his speech; he would never talk about unnecessary or useless matters. Visitors who used to come for Baba's *darshan*, dared not to talk before him. I would often ask Baba many childish questions; but Baba would not mind. One day I casually asked Baba, what was his age. "Ask this banyan tree its age", replied Baba jokingly, pointing to the tree. Then after a pause, said, "I am unborn; I have no birth". Another day, I went to Baba with some *prosada* of Lokenath Siva, and requested him to partake a little. Baba said, "I don't take

prosada". On another occasion, I asked Baba if he had any difficulty in getting his food at that lonely place like Girnaribanta. With a smile Baba had replied, "Even when I was wandering from forest to forest, away from locality in Nepal, I had no difficulty; now I am not very far-off from the habitation". I had heard that when wandering on foot as an ascetic, Baba had travelled all over India, and passed through dense forests.

One day while going to sit before Baba, I saw a *Sannyasin* wearing red-ochre dyed cloth, talking to Baba. I had a talk with him later, and came to know that he was Swami Jnanananda. Through regular visits, I gradually developed a pleasant relation with Swami Jnanananda also. He would treat me as his daughter; used to call me 'Ma Monika', and give me Baba's *prosada*. One morning Swamiji prepared *sherbat* of watermelon for Baba, and he gave me a little as Baba's *prosada*.

Swami Jnanananda was in-charge of the Ashram; he had to work hard single handedly. Even with his unsound health, he used to go to Lakshmi-bazar for purchases. During the absence of the cook, he would himself prepare *chapati* for Baba. On one occasion, Swamiji was sick and the cook was also absent; Swamiji after pointing out many

difficulties faced by him, inquired if I could prepare *chapati* for Baba. I wanted to know the process, and Swamiji taught me the process of boiling wheat-flour. I then baked some *chapati* for Baba. On many occasions, I accompanied Swami Jnanananda to the nearby forest, to collect tender neem-leaves for making *sherbat* for Baba (a drink made by grinding tender neem-leaves).

Many a times, I had cleaned and swept Baba's room. One morning Baba was seated in the prayer hall. I was about to enter his room with a broom in my hand. Seeing that, Baba immediately became alert and asked, "Hei, where are you going?" Baba didn't like anybody to enter his room. I showed him the broom and said, "To sweep your room". He appeared to be somewhat surprised, but didn't say anything.

Swami Jnanananda used to tell me many things about the Ashram. One day during conversation, Swamiji said that in the year 1921, some of the devotees of Sree Digambar Baba wanted to set-up an Ashram at Girnaribanta for Baba. But till 1926, Digambar Baba was never stationary in any one place. After staying for some time at one place, suddenly one day he used to be vanished— to a

new forest or a seashore; or sometimes to a cave or a solitary river bank. The proverb 'Wandering *Sadhu* — Flowing River', became very clear in his life. Digambar Baba used to visit Puri often. Whenever he would come to Puri, people would rush to him. Baba didn't like gathering, but the people would like his company only.

Another day Swamiji said that Digambar Baba once came to Puri, probably in the year 1920. And placed his seat upon the sand at Puri sea-beach, near the Flag-staff. He was staying there day and night, under the open sky, even during the severe storm. When the sand became very hot due to the strong Sun, Baba could be seen lying down on the sand at ease. This self-absorbed Saint would remain engaged in his own divine glory all the time. The visitors who used to come to the beach, would offer their devoted *pranam* to this bare-bodied, charming *Sannyasin* with long matted hair.

Swami Jnanananda then narrated the following incident:

Once the then Police Superintendent of Puri, had submitted the following report to the Magistrate, about Digambar Baba. "This *Sadhu* sits at the beach during the day time, in a naked condition. It

is not only objectionable, but also uncivil and against the law of the land. Many foreign visitors, both ladies and gents, come to the beach, and take photos also; hence it is necessary to remove the *Sadhu* from that place".

But the Magistrate had already heard many good words about Digambar Baba; even his wife had a *darshan* of him. So, the Magistrate himself came to verify the report. And found that a graceful, huge-bodied *Sannyasin* was seated there, like the all sacrificing *Mahadeva*. Many devotees were sitting before him with respectful devotion. The Magistrate was very much charmed by that sight, and offered his respectful salutation. Baba then said to him affectionately, "Your son has passed his examination with credit." "Yes Baba," replied the Magistrate, "By your grace he has passed nicely. He will come here soon, and then go to England." Baba didn't say anything in reply.

After the arrival of his son, the Magistrate one day came to Baba with his wife and the son. He requested Baba to give his blessings to the boy. Baba looked at the boy for a short while, and then said, "Come here with your son after four days." The Magistrate was very much surprised. It was

not clear to him as to why Baba said—'after four days'. He could not understand the hint of the coming danger. Then on the third day, the boy was attacked with a deadly disease. And inspite of all the efforts of the doctors, the boy died the next day. Swamiji concluded by saying, "*Mahapurushas* can see everything beforehand".

Swami Jnanananda had served Baba sincerely and whole heartedly. I had a great regard for him. Once Baba casually remarked, "Jnana is all the time here; he has never left me". (Surprisingly, Swami Jnanananda died within a very short time after Baba's *Mahasamadhi*). On another occasion, when Swamiji was very ill, I offered him some money for taking milk. Swamiji became very pleased and said, "You are my real daughter, otherwise how could you feel for me". Thus a deep attachment and affection was established between myself and the Ashram.