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Swami Paramananda, Banagram Ashram, Bengal, India 1984. Photo: Asgeir Arnesson.

IN SEARCH OF TRUTH

MY EXPERIENCES WITH
SWAMI PARAMANANDA

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A YOGI IN THE WEST

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and

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THE ART OF MEDITATION

Adaptation to Banagram

We arrived in Calcutta on Thursday October 25th 1984 and were received at the airport by Devendranath and a new acquaintance, Swami Purnananda. Taking several hours and using a huge variety of private and public means of transport, they escorted us safely all the way to the ashram at Banagram. It was a hearty reunion with Paramananda on my part, and the first meeting for Asgeir and Glenn, one which made a deep impression on them. All three of us took lodgings on the ground floor of a two-storied, four-room, new clay house with straw roof, just near the hut of Paramananda. Tripti Ma had already moved into the room just above us and used to serve tea to the ashram inmates and to visitors at any time during day and night. We slept on thin straw mats spread directly on the clay floor, so when winter approached in November and the nights became cold, Paramananda saw to it that lots of nice rice straw was put on the floor in several layers, so that we should not freeze. It was very warm and soft with a nice smell, and we felt comfortable in every way.

The only thing that we found difficult about the simple lifestyle there was that there was no toilet in the ashram at that time. We had to go out into the open field to attend to the call of nature, like they still do everywhere in the countryside (and even in the cities sometimes) all over India. If you had an intense need during day-time and had to hurry out, preferably not too far, it could well happen that people from the village who were passing by would come up close to take a look at you. Naturally, they had never seen a white man sitting like that before, so, of course, it was very interesting! For Asgeir in particular it was very difficult, as he had only one leg and had to use crutches, because the prosthesis which he mostly used was useless in such circumstances. Thinking about this and with the benefit of my experiences from my previous time there, I made Asgeir buy a small, folding footstool like those used by classical guitarists to gain more height for the leg where the guitar rests during playing. In that way he was able to support his cut leg when he crouched. Luckily, it functioned fairly well.

Otherwise, our outdoor daily baths beneath an old water pump with a handle, displaying lots of pale, naked, Western skin and lots of shampoo foam in hair and beard, exposed for all to see, a public contemplation and entertainment, was not what we liked the most. This represented a combination of several things that most villagers had never seen before: white skin, blonde hair,

big bodies, soap and shampoo. In addition, Asgeir had a red beard and, of course, only one leg. What could we expect!? And then, the village people of India being extremely innocent and having always lived close together with lots of other people around all the time, have not the faintest idea about privacy, which we keep so sacred and take for granted in the West. But we soon found a solution by delaying our bath till after dark.

With the food we were all happy. It was exceedingly simple both in content and preparation, but pure and tasty, and as a rule consisted of rice, potatoes and one or two kinds of vegetable. For the most part we adapted well to dress and life-style in general. On one of the first days when we were together with Paramananda in the village in the evening, at Mukherjee's house, where he always ate his supper, he turned towards me and enquired smilingly about how we, who came from afar with such a totally different culture, would be able to live there with them under such simple conditions. "Oh, we will adjust", I replied spontaneously without hesitation. Paramananda chuckled contentedly and remarked for all the others present: "Such is always the attitude of a spiritual person – he may travel anywhere in the world without problems."

Only six days after our arrival in India, on Wednesday October 31st 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was shot and killed by her own bodyguards, and great agitation reigned over most of India. People were beaten up and even murdered arbitrarily in the open on the street countrywide, even in the nearest town Burdwan, so we three from the West were temporarily banned from going to town until tempers had cooled down and the situation had improved. All felt sorrow, and Paramananda closed himself inside his hut for prayer and meditation on the future of India, it was said.



The Brahmacharis Hari and Keshab in Banagram Ashram 1984.
Photo: Asgeir Arnesson.



Typical scenery from a Bengali village: Clay huts with straw roofs, ponds, big trees, cattle, dogs and children, together, of course, with strong sunlight and difficulty of taking photos during daytime. Here from Banagram village. Photo: BP. 1985.

Life in Paramananda Mission

At that time the Banagram ashram was only six years old and still in the process of getting off the ground. It was small and poor, and its only resources were the ten or twelve residential brahmacharis and sannyasins, who only owned what they wore, and who worked untiringly on a purely idealistic basis. They were almost all young people about the same age as myself, mainly between 20 and 30 years of age. In addition there were several people from the village and other places who sympathized with the project and who helped in the ashram at times on a voluntary basis. The ashram was at the development phase in every department, and was actively in the process both of acquiring more land and of collecting the means for constructing buildings.

All expenses and financing relied on cash donations of various amounts from friends and sympathizers. These gifts came of their own accord through incidental visitors to the ashram or to Paramananda during his travels, or through monthly collections in which certain sannyasins travelled widely to all friends and acquaintances appealing for contributions. In the latter case it was enough, really, that the sannyasin appeared at the door of the house because in India, in such cases, it is common to offer a warm welcome, where the household deems it a great honour to receive such a visitor and at the same time have the opportunity to give and to ask questions about spiritual matters to a qualified person. Moreover there are strong traditions over thousands of years in India for giving donations to ashrams, and most good Hindus deem it their duty to give to the best of their ability to a good and selfless purpose.

In addition to those who were working in the ashram, about seven or eight orphan boys also lived there, and new ones came frequently. Not all of them were complete orphans, but in India, if you are without a father, you are counted as an orphan. In an overpopulated patriarchal society where survival in general may be challenging enough; where there is a lot of competition for jobs and where the woman always stands at the end of the queue and at best always gets the lowest payment, to lose one's father as a child is a catastrophe. There are also no means of support from the Government in underdeveloped countries like India. And public orphanages may often be like nightmares. As a result therefore, too often, there are homeless children in the streets who are easy prey to unscrupulous people. Banagram ashram, therefore, became a very good option for many of these families and children.

In October 1984 the ashram consisted of a total of six buildings. In addition to the three already there during my visit some fifteen months earlier, there were three new buildings, so that the ashram had doubled its number of buildings in that short span of time. The new buildings were the building where we stayed, a kitchen and a sick-room cum dispensary, where the sick people of the surrounding area came by day for diagnosis, medicines or treatment completely free of charge. Apart from the hut of Paramananda, these buildings also served as bedrooms for the resident workers at night. Some were also sleeping in the village. The more casual and short term overnight visitors usually slept in the office building. The orphan boys slept in the upper room beside Tripti Ma, in the same building as we foreigners were residing. The fourth room in that building was used as a store for potatoes, which were cultivated in the ashram. In addition to these buildings, the oldest member, Swami Tapeshwarananda, who



Above: Paramananda (in front), Bjørn (to the left), Asgeir and Glenn underneath the big Banyan tree in Banagram Ashram, November 1984. Photo: Devendranath.

Below: Paramananda and two small girls from the village in front. Behind from the left are Hari Maharaj (Brahmachari Sahajananda), Madan Maharaj (Brahmachari Chitbilasananda) and Swami Tapeswarananda with his hut underneath the tree behind. In the left background we glimpse the office building. Far left, one of the orphan boys. Banagram Ashram, November 1984. Photo: Asgeir Arnesson.



Above: The office building in the Ashram. Below: Paramananda and Devendranath in the village at Mukherjee's. Both photos: BP. 1984



Mana, from the neighbouring village Samanthi, and Tapi Ma (Brahmacharini Pabitra Prana), who were born and raised in Banagram village, together with Paramananda underneath the Banyan tree in Banagram Ashram, November 1984. Mana came daily to help in the Ashram, and she too wished to devote herself completely, but Paramananda said that it was her destiny in this life to marry and have a family. Photo: Asgeir Arnesson.

had come to see me in Rishikesh and who at that time was around 70 years old, had built a charming little 'cave' for himself attached to the big trunk of the great banyan tree in the vast, open courtyard.

The ashram's greatest asset, on which everything and everybody else rested, was, of course, Paramananda himself. Without him nothing would have happened, and the ashram area would have remained the bush strewn waste land that it was before he came there and cleared it and where nobody dared to go after dark for fear of meeting ghosts. Right at the beginning of 1978 villagers had made a tiny clay hut for him there, and the seven disciples who were with him stayed in private homes in the village.

It was in this period that he told the villagers about his grand visions for a future ashram on that spot. At that time nobody believed him – they viewed it as mere fancy, and the villagers thought him a little eccentric and strange.

Nor did he wear the characteristic and traditional orange coloured robes of a legitimate sannyasin at that time, but was clad in ordinary white like everybody else, and was only known as Robin Maharaj. But he was very much liked by everybody and all respected him. In every way he was a very interesting person around whom something happened all the time, and who could master most situations and answer most questions.¹⁾ They understood that he was a highly unusual person with extraordinary abilities, because even at their first meeting he could often tell in detail about a person's life – past, present and future, and he would frequently go into ecstatic states for shorter or longer periods. In every way he was a most remarkable person, but they all thought it was only grand words when he talked about the future ashram there which would house 500 orphan boys, have its own school and hospital, and so on, and which would be situated just outside the village beside the big pond and the old banyan tree.

At this time he also underwent *nirvikalpa samadhi*, which, according to Indian tradition, is regarded as the absolute ultimate of what a human being can experience of spiritual reality. It is also called “Self-Realization” or “God-Realization”. Physically and relatively speaking it may occur only for a short time, but in its full length it is usually a process of three weeks. Those yogis who do not want to be reborn may enter this kind of samadhi at the end of their lives to ensure that there is no more cause for individual life. Only those who have a greater mission in life will survive it, otherwise the body will “fall off like a dry leaf” after these 21 days in which your individual identity has merged completely with the Absolute, and the ego has disappeared for ever. If an ordinary person who doesn’t have any knowledge about this, should happen to find a person in *nirvikalpa samadhi*, they would certainly think him dead, because breathing and pulse would hardly be felt, and at the same time there would be no active mind to function as a medium between body and soul.

When this point in time arrived for Paramananda, he shut himself into his little clay hut for many days in a row without food or drink. But the villagers became afraid, because to them it was an unknown phenomenon, and they started to throw stones at his hut and shout at him to make him come out. In the night, in utmost secrecy, Trishan therefore managed to bring him to his own village some kilometers away. There he could stay undisturbed in a small hut on the property of Trishan’s family, while Trishan himself stood guard outside. After the full length of three weeks in this condition Paramananda’s physical body was in a very bad shape for quite some time, and he had to learn to walk and talk again. His eyesight was also badly affected, and for some time he had to wear very powerful glasses. All of his senses were severely affected and set back during the process, and in addition a rat had eaten a piece of his thigh. But Paramananda recovered after a while and could soon function again as before with his extraordinary good health. Otherwise it was well known among his close friends that he had many siddhis or supernatural powers, actually all the ten it was possible to have, but that he offered them all to the Universal Mother before he went into *nirvikalpa*.



Paramananda plays with children from the village, who used to come every day, at the big playground by the Banyan tree. Swami Purnananda is lying on the grass underneath the tree. Photo: Asgeir Arnesson, 1984.



Paramananda together with all the orphan boys in the Ashram at that time, with Murari Maharaj (Brahmachari Niskamananda), who, besides Trishan, was (and remain), the manager of the Banagram Ashram, standing in the middle just behind Paramananda. Photo: Asgeir Arnesson, November 1984.

Banagram (lit. ‘forest-village’) was a quite small, poor village at that time where only five Hindu families lived and the rest of the population were Santals. The Santals are people with australoid features who belong to the original tribes of the Indian Subcontinent. These people were driven away and oppressed by the Caucasian people with their Aryan culture who, it is said, invaded the subcontinent in prehistoric times and from whom the present day Hindus are descended.²⁾ The Santals are said to be “shining black” and they have their own language, religion and culture and have, to a great extent, lived their own life far out in the countryside, where traditionally they have lived by keeping cattle and farming.

But a continually expanding Hindu society took most of the soil and land from them, and without any form of status in the Hindu society, they ended up as lowly pariahs without rights. Most of this is to a great extent changing now in modern India, but when as a boy Robin wandered around Bengal, every time he came to a village with especially poor and oppressed people, he promised himself that he would come back there as a grown-up to help them. Apart from the fact that he always took the side of the weak and defenceless, he liked the Santals very much and picked up their difficult language, which does not belong to the Indo-European group of languages. And as soon as Banagram ashram was established, he sent out his trained sannyasins to all those villages where he had felt pity with the population as a boy and where help was most needed, and established new ashrams there. At the time Asgeir, Glenn and I lived in Banagram there were already at least five such newly established ashrams at other places in Bengal.

Paramananda’s ashrams are special in that they are functioning as welfare centres in addition to being traditional ashrams. They are both orphanages, hospitals, old people’s homes, schools and libraries for the common people of that surrounding area, and at the same time a place where truth-seekers from near and far can live undisturbed, have satsanga (spiritual communion) and spiritual guidance, and practice sadhana in an inspiring and stimulating atmosphere. Paramananda’s ashrams are probably the only ones in India where you cannot find a temple with the statue of some deity inside. Paramananda says that in his ashrams the orphanages, the schools and the hospitals are the temples, and that the highest form of worship of God is through the selfless service of others, because every human being is the living image of God.³⁾

They are also the only ashrams where you will find that all kinds of people are eating together, irrespective of caste, gender or affiliation. It is unthinkable in India that a member of the brahmin caste will sit and eat beside a Santal or another without a caste, and especially unthinkable that they will eat their food. It is also unthinkable that sannyasins are eating beside a woman or that all are living together with resident and initiated women in the ashram. It has even happened that Paramananda has given the lead to women without caste in his ashrams – which is completely outrageous in the all too convention-ridden and rigid India. All such meaningless, but firmly ingrained, thousands of years old customs in the Hindu society, have been fully abolished and rejected in the ashrams of Paramananda. They are in many ways really free areas, and in a way he has managed to make the foundation for a calm, social revolution in India.

As an example he always encouraged “love marriage” when young people came to him who had fallen in love, and he would send for their parents so that he could talk to them. And in case of the more traditional arranged marriages he always encouraged inter-caste marriage, and in any case always without any dowry. For all these changes he sometimes had to bear harsh criticism from

a variety of so-called “spiritual” or religious leaders in India, or from others in authority and power. Nothing of all that was known to Glenn or Asgeir or me as we arrived in the Banagram ashram in that Autumn of 1984, but little by little, as the days went by, we got to experience most of it during our stay there.

FOOTNOTES

1) Paramananda was actually known as one who could answer all, or any one, question. This was certainly also my own experience with him. Paramananda could always give a most supplementary and satisfying answer to any question put to him, regardless of topic, spiritual or profane. And at the same time we knew that he had only four years of children’s school and that he didn’t used to read books.

Extremely rarely I experienced that he didn’t answer a question (of a worldly nature). Then he remained silent, but only shortly afterwards he would give a very satisfactory answer. I know that he then needed to concentrate on that particular topic for a while before he was ready to answer. Sometimes he would have one of us near him read a particular book that caught his interest and then report its contents to him, as was the case with my friend Torleif when he asked him to read “Satanic Verses” by Salman Rushdie – a long book.

2) This is currently a very controversial topic in that many intellectual Indians now vocalise the opinion, supported by the latest archeological and other scientific findings, that history for too long has lied to us, and that the so-called “Aryan invasion” never happened. When once I asked Paramananda about the reality of this “Aryan invasion” he answered briefly, with a smile: “Perhaps they were always here?”

3) Paramananda was always very clear on this, and it was a great characteristic of all his ashrams. Especially he didn’t like sculptures, but said that pictures were okay. In his ashrams there was usually a very modest *puja*-place with pictures of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Ma and Swami Vivekananda. Similar *puja*-places (with variable contents) are found in practically every Hindu home in India, for prayers and devotion every morning and evening – it is simply unthinkable for a Hindu not to have this in his or her dwelling. So naturally there was also one for the ashram inhabitants.

But now, since Paramananda left his physical body, this characteristic seems to lessen, especially in the Banagram Ashram where a huge temple recently has been built, moreover with a statue of Paramananda inside!



Part of the Banagram Ashram. Photo: Asgeir Arnesson, 1984

GLOSSARY (simplified)

brahmachari – male performer of *brahmacharya*.

brahmacharya – apprenticeship (period of training), or the first of four stages in a Hindu’s life; self-discipline, especially in relation to sexuality.

brahmin – representative of the traditional priest- and teacher caste in India.

maharaj – ‘great king’; respectful address and title for sannyasins and other truth seekers.

nirvikalpa samadhi – that form of *samadhi* which is without any object in mind and which therefore cannot be explained, in contrast to *savikalpa* and other forms of *samadhi*. After complete *nirvikalpa samadhi* there is no more cause for rebirth.

puja – worship by rituals, with outer objects, like flowers, incense, food and other effects.

sadhana – ‘which leads straight to the goal’; a person’s spiritual search or quest for truth (which involves personal commitment and practice); the collected effort – physically, emotionally and spiritually – for the realization of life’s end.

samadhi – ‘union’ (‘putting together’ or ‘bringing into harmony’); full absorption in meditation; the eighth and last step of Classical Yoga.

satsanga – ‘gathering for truth’; a popular type of company with questions and answers, between guru and disciples or spiritual head and audience.

siddhi – ‘perfection’; ‘the full achievement of something’; usually used in connection to success in yoga; “supernatural power” or ability.

Swami Chitbilasananda – one of Paramananda’s sannyasins in Banagram Ashram, also known as **Madan Maharaj**, who has already left his body; cousin brother of Paramananda.

Swami Devananda – one of Paramananda’s sannyasins in Banagram Ashram, also known as **Keshab Maharaj**; native of Banagram village, and cousin brother of Hari and Tapi Ma.

Swami Purnananda – one of Paramananda’s sannyasins who is the manager of the Tapoban Ashram in Raina.

Swami Sahajananda – one of Paramananda’s sannyasins in Banagram Ashram, also known as **Hari Maharaj**, native of Banagram village, brother of Tapi Ma and cousin brother of Keshab Maharaj.

Tapi Ma – name of one of the closest female disciples of Paramananda, with the sannyasi name **Pavitra Prana**.

Continuation follows in the next number next week.