

Title

*Autobiography of a Yogi*



*Paramahansa Yogananda*

*By*

*Paramahansa Yogananda*

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## ***About this eBook***

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...

*"Except ye see signs and wonders,  
ye will not believe."*

John 4:48.

***Dedicated ...***

To The Memory Of

Luther Burbank

*An American Saint*

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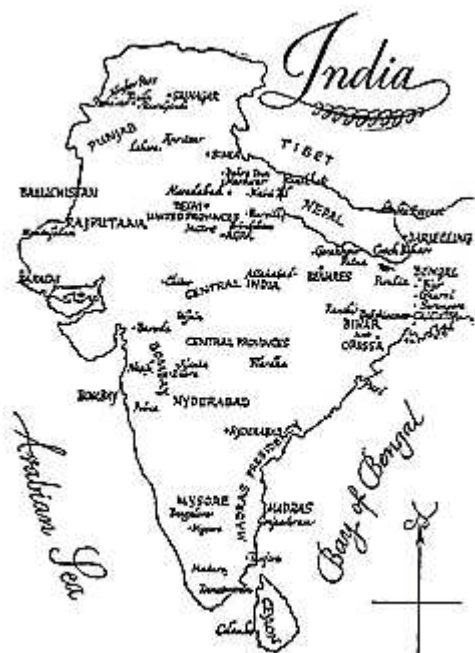
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### Preface

The value of Yogananda's *Autobiography* is greatly enhanced by the fact that it is one of the few books in English about the wise men of India which has been written, not by a journalist or foreigner, but by one of their own race and training—in short, a book *about* yogis *by* a yogi. As an eyewitness recountal of the extraordinary lives and powers of modern Hindu saints, the book has importance both timely and timeless. To its illustrious author, whom I have had the pleasure of knowing both in India and America, may every reader render due appreciation and gratitude. His unusual life-document is certainly one of the most revealing of the depths of the Hindu mind and heart, and of the spiritual wealth of India, ever to be published in the West.

It has been my privilege to have met one of the sages whose life-history is herein narrated—Sri Yukteswar Giri. A likeness of the venerable saint appeared as part of the frontispiece of my *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*.<sup>1</sup> It was at Puri, in Orissa, on the Bay of Bengal, that I encountered Sri Yukteswar. He was then the head of a quiet ashrama near the seashore there, and was chiefly occupied in the spiritual training of a group of youthful disciples. He expressed keen interest in the welfare of the people of the United States and of all the Americas, and of England, too, and questioned me concerning the distant activities, particularly those in California, of his chief disciple, Paramhansa Yogananda, whom he dearly loved, and whom he had sent, in 1920, as his emissary to the West.

Sri Yukteswar was of gentle mien and voice, of pleasing presence, and worthy of the veneration which his followers spontaneously accorded to him. Every person who knew him, whether of his own community or not, held him in the highest esteem. I vividly recall his tall,

<sup>1</sup> Oxford University Press, 1935.



straight, ascetic figure, garbed in the saffron-colored garb of one who has renounced worldly quests, as he stood at the entrance of the hermitage to give me welcome. His hair was long and somewhat curly, and his face bearded. His body was muscularly firm, but slender and well-formed, and his step energetic. He had chosen as his place of earthly abode the holy city of Puri, whither multitudes of pious Hindus, representative of every province of India, come daily on pilgrimage to the famed Temple of Jagannath, "Lord of the World." It was at Puri that Sri Yukteswar closed his mortal eyes, in 1936, to the scenes of this transitory state of being and passed on, knowing that his incarnation had been carried to a triumphant completion. I am glad, indeed, to be able to record this testimony to the high character and holiness of Sri Yukteswar. Content to remain afar from the multitude, he gave himself unreservedly and in tranquillity to that ideal life which Paramhansa Yogananda, his disciple, has now described for the ages.

W. Y. Evans-Wentz

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I am deeply indebted to Miss L. V. Pratt for her long editorial labors over the manuscript of this book. My thanks are due also to Miss Ruth Zahn for preparation of the index, to Mr. C. Richard Wright for permission to use extracts from his Indian travel diary, and to Dr. W. Y. Evans-Wentz for suggestions and encouragement.

*Paramhansa Yogananda*  
*October 28, 1945*  
*Encinitas, California*

## ***1. My Parents and Early Life***

The characteristic features of Indian culture have long been a search for ultimate verities and the concomitant disciple-guru<sup>2</sup> relationship. My own path led me to a Christlike sage whose beautiful life was chiseled for the ages. He was one of the great masters who are India's sole remaining wealth. Emerging in every generation, they have bulwarked their land against the fate of Babylon and Egypt.

I find my earliest memories covering the anachronistic features of a previous incarnation. Clear recollections came to me of a distant life, a yogi<sup>3</sup> amidst the Himalayan snows. These glimpses of the past, by some dimensionless link, also afforded me a glimpse of the future.

The helpless humiliations of infancy are not banished from my mind. I was resentfully conscious of not being able to walk or express myself freely. Prayerful surges arose within me as I realized my bodily impotence. My strong emotional life took silent form as words in many languages. Among the inward confusion of tongues, my ear gradually accustomed itself to the circumambient Bengali syllables of my people. The beguiling scope of an infant's mind! adultly considered limited to toys and toes.

Psychological ferment and my unresponsive body brought me to many obstinate crying-spells. I recall the general family bewilderment at my distress. Happier memories, too, crowd in on me: my mother's caresses, and my first attempts at lisping phrase and toddling step. These early triumphs, usually forgotten quickly, are yet a natural basis of self-confidence.

My far-reaching memories are not unique. Many yogis are known to have retained their self-consciousness without interruption by the dramatic transition to and from "life" and "death." If man be solely a body, its loss indeed places the final period to identity. But if prophets down the millenniums spake with truth, man is essentially of incorporeal nature. The persistent core of human egoity is only temporarily allied with sense perception.

Although odd, clear memories of infancy are not extremely rare. During travels in numerous lands, I have listened to early recollections from the lips of veracious men and women.

I was born in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and passed my first eight years at Gorakhpur. This was my birthplace in the United Provinces of northeastern India. We were eight children: four boys and four girls. I, Mukunda Lal Ghosh<sup>4</sup>, was the second son and the fourth child.

Father and Mother were Bengalis, of the *kshatriya* caste.<sup>5</sup> Both were blessed with saintly nature. Their mutual love, tranquil and dignified, never expressed itself frivolously. A perfect parental harmony was the calm center for the revolving tumult of eight young lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Spiritual teacher; from Sanskrit root *gur*, to raise, to uplift.

<sup>3</sup> A practitioner of yoga, "union," ancient Indian science of meditation on God.

<sup>4</sup> My name was changed to Yogananda when I entered the ancient monastic Swami Order in 1914. My guru bestowed the religious title of *Paramhansa* on me in 1935.

<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, the second caste of warriors and rulers.

Father, Bhagabati Charan Ghosh, was kind, grave, at times stern. Loving him dearly, we children yet observed a certain reverential distance. An outstanding mathematician and logician, he was guided principally by his intellect. But Mother was a queen of hearts, and taught us only through love. After her death, Father displayed more of his inner tenderness. I noticed then that his gaze often metamorphosed into my mother's.

In Mother's presence we tasted our earliest bitter-sweet acquaintance with the scriptures. Tales from the *mahabharata* and *ramayana*<sup>6</sup> were resourcefully summoned to meet the exigencies of discipline. Instruction and chastisement went hand in hand.

A daily gesture of respect to Father was given by Mother's dressing us carefully in the afternoons to welcome him home from the office. His position was similar to that of a vice-president, in the Bengal-Nagpur Railway, one of India's large companies. His work involved traveling, and our family lived in several cities during my childhood.

Mother held an open hand toward the needy. Father was also kindly disposed, but his respect for law and order extended to the budget. One fortnight Mother spent, in feeding the poor, more than Father's monthly income.

"All I ask, please, is to keep your charities within a reasonable limit." Even a gentle rebuke from her husband was grievous to Mother. She ordered a hackney carriage, not hinting to the children at any disagreement.

"Good-by; I am going away to my mother's home." Ancient ultimatum!

We broke into astounded lamentations. Our maternal uncle arrived opportunely; he whispered to Father some sage counsel, garnered no doubt from the ages. After Father had made a few conciliatory remarks, Mother happily dismissed the cab. Thus ended the only trouble I ever noticed between my parents. But I recall a characteristic discussion.

"Please give me ten rupees for a hapless woman who has just arrived at the house." Mother's smile had its own persuasion.

"Why ten rupees? One is enough." Father added a justification: "When my father and grandparents died suddenly, I had my first taste of poverty. My only breakfast, before walking miles to my school, was a small banana. Later, at the university, I was in such need that I applied to a wealthy judge for aid of one rupee per month. He declined, remarking that even a rupee is important."

"How bitterly you recall the denial of that rupee!" Mother's heart had an instant logic. "Do you want this woman also to remember painfully your refusal of ten rupees which she needs urgently?"

"You win!" With the immemorial gesture of vanquished husbands, he opened his wallet. "Here is a ten-rupee note. Give it to her with my good will."

---

<sup>6</sup> These ancient epics are the hoard of India's history, mythology, and philosophy. An "Everyman's Library" volume, *Ramayana and Mahabharata*, is a condensation in English verse by Romesh Dutt (New York: E. P. Dutton).

Father tended to first say "No" to any new proposal. His attitude toward the strange woman who so readily enlisted Mother's sympathy was an example of his customary caution. Aversion to instant acceptance- typical of the French mind in the West-is really only honoring the principle of "due reflection." I always found Father reasonable and evenly balanced in his judgments. If I could bolster up my numerous requests with one or two good arguments, he invariably put the coveted goal within my reach, whether it were a vacation trip or a new motorcycle.

Father was a strict disciplinarian to his children in their early years, but his attitude toward himself was truly Spartan. He never visited the theater, for instance, but sought his recreation in various spiritual practices and in reading the *bhagavad gita*.<sup>7</sup> Shunning all luxuries, he would cling to one old pair of shoes until they were useless. His sons bought automobiles after they came into popular use, but Father was always content with the trolley car for his daily ride to the office. The accumulation of money for the sake of power was alien to his nature. Once, after organizing the Calcutta Urban Bank, he refused to benefit himself by holding any of its shares. He had simply wished to perform a civic duty in his spare time.

Several years after Father had retired on a pension, an English accountant arrived to examine the books of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway Company. The amazed investigator discovered that Father had never applied for overdue bonuses.

"He did the work of three men!" the accountant told the company. "He has rupees 125,000 (about \$41,250.) owing to him as back compensation." The officials presented Father with a check for this amount. He thought so little about it that he overlooked any mention to the family. Much later he was questioned by my youngest brother Bishnu, who noticed the large deposit on a bank statement.

"Why be elated by material profit?" Father replied. "The one who pursues a goal of evenmindedness is neither jubilant with gain nor depressed by loss. He knows that man arrives penniless in this world, and departs without a single rupee."

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<sup>7</sup> This noble Sanskrit poem, which occurs as part of the *Mahabharata* epic, is the Hindu Bible. The most poetical English translation is Edwin Arnold's *The Song Celestial* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 75 cents). One of the best translations with detailed commentary is Sri Aurobindo's *Message Of The Gita* (Jupiter Press, 16 Semudoss St., Madras, India, \$3.50).

**Father Bhagabati Charan Ghosh (Illustration)**

A Disciple of Lahiri Mahasaya



Early in their married life, my parents became disciples of a great master, Lahiri Mahasaya of Benares. This contact strengthened Father's naturally ascetical temperament. Mother made a remarkable admission to my eldest sister Roma: "Your father and myself live together as man and wife only once a year, for the purpose of having children."

Father first met Lahiri Mahasaya through Abinash Babu,<sup>8</sup> an employee in the Gorakhpur office of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway. Abinash instructed my young ears with engrossing tales of many Indian saints. He invariably concluded with a tribute to the superior glories of his own guru.

"Did you ever hear of the extraordinary circumstances under which your father became a disciple of Lahiri Mahasaya?"

It was on a lazy summer afternoon, as Abinash and I sat together in the compound of my home, that he put this intriguing question. I shook my head with a smile of anticipation.

"Years ago, before you were born, I asked my superior officer-your father-to give me a week's leave from my Gorakhpur duties in order to visit my guru in Benares. Your father ridiculed my plan.

"Are you going to become a religious fanatic?' he inquired. 'Concentrate on your office work if you want to forge ahead.'

"Sadly walking home along a woodland path that day, I met your father in a palanquin. He dismissed his servants and conveyance, and fell into step beside me. Seeking to console me, he

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<sup>8</sup> *Babu* (Mister) is placed in Bengali names at the end.

pointed out the advantages of striving for worldly success. But I heard him listlessly. My heart was repeating: 'Lahiri Mahasaya! I cannot live without seeing you!'

"Our path took us to the edge of a tranquil field, where the rays of the late afternoon sun were still crowning the tall ripple of the wild grass. We paused in admiration. There in the field, only a few yards from us, the form of my great guru suddenly appeared!<sup>9</sup>

"Bhagabati, you are too hard on your employee!" His voice was resonant in our astounded ears. He vanished as mysteriously as he had come. On my knees I was exclaiming, 'Lahiri Mahasaya! Lahiri Mahasaya!' Your father was motionless with stupefaction for a few moments.

"Abinash, not only do I give *you* leave, but I give *myself* leave to start for Benares tomorrow. I must know this great Lahiri Mahasaya, who is able to materialize himself at will in order to intercede for you! I will take my wife and ask this master to initiate us in his spiritual path. Will you guide us to him?'

"Of course.' Joy filled me at the miraculous answer to my prayer, and the quick, favorable turn of events.

"The next evening your parents and I entrained for Benares. We took a horse cart the following day, and then had to walk through narrow lanes to my guru's secluded home. Entering his little parlor, we bowed before the master, enlocked in his habitual lotus posture. He blinked his piercing eyes and leveled them on your father.

"Bhagabati, you are too hard on your employee!" His words were the same as those he had used two days before in the Gorakhpur field. He added, 'I am glad that you have allowed Abinash to visit me, and that you and your wife have accompanied him.'

"To their joy, he initiated your parents in the spiritual practice of *Kriya Yoga*.<sup>10</sup> Your father and I, as brother disciples, have been close friends since the memorable day of the vision. Lahiri Mahasaya took a definite interest in your own birth. Your life shall surely be linked with his own: the master's blessing never fails."

Lahiri Mahasaya left this world shortly after I had entered it. His picture, in an ornate frame, always graced our family altar in the various cities to which Father was transferred by his office. Many a morning and evening found Mother and me meditating before an improvised shrine, offering flowers dipped in fragrant sandalwood paste. With frankincense and myrrh as well as our united devotions, we honored the divinity which had found full expression in Lahiri Mahasaya.

His picture had a surpassing influence over my life. As I grew, the thought of the master grew with me. In meditation I would often see his photographic image emerge from its small frame and, taking a living form, sit before me. When I attempted to touch the feet of his luminous body, it would change and again become the picture. As childhood slipped into boyhood, I found Lahiri Mahasaya transformed in my mind from a little image, cribbed in a frame, to a living, enlightening presence. I frequently prayed to him in moments of trial or

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<sup>9</sup> The phenomenal powers possessed by great masters are explained in chapter 30, "The Law of Miracles."

<sup>10</sup> A yogic technique whereby the sensory tumult is stilled, permitting man to achieve an ever-increasing identity with cosmic consciousness.

confusion, finding within me his solacing direction. At first I grieved because he was no longer physically living. As I began to discover his secret omnipresence, I lamented no more. He had often written to those of his disciples who were over-anxious to see him: "Why come to view my bones and flesh, when I am ever within range of your *kutastha* (spiritual sight)?"

I was blessed about the age of eight with a wonderful healing through the photograph of Lahiri Mahasaya. This experience gave intensification to my love. While at our family estate in Ichapur, Bengal, I was stricken with Asiatic cholera. My life was despaired of; the doctors could do nothing. At my bedside, Mother frantically motioned me to look at Lahiri Mahasaya's picture on the wall above my head.

"Bow to him mentally!" She knew I was too feeble even to lift my hands in salutation. "If you really show your devotion and inwardly kneel before him, your life will be spared!"

I gazed at his photograph and saw there a blinding light, enveloping my body and the entire room. My nausea and other uncontrollable symptoms disappeared; I was well. At once I felt strong enough to bend over and touch Mother's feet in appreciation of her immeasurable faith in her guru. Mother pressed her head repeatedly against the little picture.

"O Omnipresent Master, I thank thee that thy light hath healed my son!"

I realized that she too had witnessed the luminous blaze through which I had instantly recovered from a usually fatal disease.

One of my most precious possessions is that same photograph. Given to Father by Lahiri Mahasaya himself, it carries a holy vibration. The picture had a miraculous origin. I heard the story from Father's brother disciple, Kali Kumar Roy.

It appears that the master had an aversion to being photographed. Over his protest, a group picture was once taken of him and a cluster of devotees, including Kali Kumar Roy. It was an amazed photographer who discovered that the plate which had clear images of all the disciples, revealed nothing more than a blank space in the center where he had reasonably expected to find the outlines of Lahiri Mahasaya. The phenomenon was widely discussed.

A certain student and expert photographer, Ganga Dhar Babu, boasted that the fugitive figure would not escape him. The next morning, as the guru sat in lotus posture on a wooden bench with a screen behind him, Ganga Dhar Babu arrived with his equipment. Taking every precaution for success, he greedily exposed twelve plates. On each one he soon found the imprint of the wooden bench and screen, but once again the master's form was missing.

With tears and shattered pride, Ganga Dhar Babu sought out his guru. It was many hours before Lahiri Mahasaya broke his silence with a pregnant comment:

"I am Spirit. Can your camera reflect the omnipresent Invisible?"

"I see it cannot! But, Holy Sir, I lovingly desire a picture of the bodily temple where alone, to my narrow vision, that Spirit appears fully to dwell."

"Come, then, tomorrow morning. I will pose for you."

Again the photographer focused his camera. This time the sacred figure, not cloaked with mysterious imperceptibility, was sharp on the plate. The master never posed for another picture; at least, I have seen none.

The photograph is reproduced in this book. Lahiri Mahasaya's fair features, of a universal cast, hardly suggest to what race he belonged. His intense joy of God-communion is slightly revealed in a somewhat enigmatic smile. His eyes, half open to denote a nominal direction on the outer world, are half closed also. Completely oblivious to the poor lures of the earth, he was fully awake at all times to the spiritual problems of seekers who approached for his bounty.

Shortly after my healing through the potency of the guru's picture, I had an influential spiritual vision. Sitting on my bed one morning, I fell into a deep reverie.

"What is behind the darkness of closed eyes?" This probing thought came powerfully into my mind. An immense flash of light at once manifested to my inward gaze. Divine shapes of saints, sitting in meditation posture in mountain caves, formed like miniature cinema pictures on the large screen of radiance within my forehead.

"Who are you?" I spoke aloud.

"We are the Himalayan yogis." The celestial response is difficult to describe; my heart was thrilled.

"Ah, I long to go to the Himalayas and become like you!" The vision vanished, but the silvery beams expanded in ever-widening circles to infinity.

"What is this wondrous glow?"

"I am Iswara.<sup>11</sup> I am Light." The voice was as murmuring clouds.

"I want to be one with Thee!"

Out of the slow dwindling of my divine ecstasy, I salvaged a permanent legacy of inspiration to seek God. "He is eternal, ever-new Joy!" This memory persisted long after the day of rapture.

Another early recollection is outstanding; and literally so, for I bear the scar to this day. My elder sister Uma and I were seated in the early morning under a *neem* tree in our Gorakhpur compound. She was helping me with a Bengali primer, what time I could spare my gaze from the near-by parrots eating ripe margosa fruit. Uma complained of a boil on her leg, and fetched a jar of ointment. I smeared a bit of the salve on my forearm.

"Why do you use medicine on a healthy arm?"

"Well, Sis, I feel I am going to have a boil tomorrow. I am testing your ointment on the spot where the boil will appear."

---

<sup>11</sup> A Sanskrit name for God as Ruler of the universe; from the root *Is*, to rule. There are 108 names for God in the Hindu scriptures, each one carrying a different shade of philosophical meaning.



"You little liar!"

"Sis, don't call me a liar until you see what happens in the morning." Indignation filled me.

Uma was unimpressed, and thrice repeated her taunt. An adamant resolution sounded in my voice as I made slow reply.

"By the power of will in me, I say that tomorrow I shall have a fairly large boil in this exact place on my arm; and *your* boil shall swell to twice its present size!"

Morning found me with a stalwart boil on the indicated spot; the dimensions of Uma's boil had doubled. With a shriek, my sister rushed to Mother. "Mukunda has become a necromancer!" Gravely, Mother instructed me never to use the power of words for doing harm. I have always remembered her counsel, and followed it.

My boil was surgically treated. A noticeable scar, left by the doctor's incision, is present today. On my right forearm is a constant reminder of the power in man's sheer word.

Those simple and apparently harmless phrases to Uma, spoken with deep concentration, had possessed sufficient hidden force to explode like bombs and produce definite, though injurious, effects. I understood, later, that the explosive vibratory power in speech could be wisely directed to free one's life from difficulties, and thus operate without scar or rebuke.<sup>12</sup>

Our family moved to Lahore in the Punjab. There I acquired a picture of the Divine Mother in the form of the Goddess Kali.<sup>13</sup> It sanctified a small informal shrine on the balcony of our home. An unequivocal conviction came over me that fulfillment would crown any of my prayers uttered in that sacred spot. Standing there with Uma one day, I watched two kites flying over the roofs of the buildings on the opposite side of the very narrow lane.

"Why are you so quiet?" Uma pushed me playfully.

"I am just thinking how wonderful it is that Divine Mother gives me whatever I ask."

"I suppose She would give you those two kites!" My sister laughed derisively.

"Why not?" I began silent prayers for their possession.

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<sup>12</sup> The infinite potencies of sound derive from the Creative Word, *Aum*, the cosmic vibratory power behind all atomic energies. Any word spoken with clear realization and deep concentration has a materializing value. Loud or silent repetition of inspiring words has been found effective in Coueism and similar systems of psychotherapy; the secret lies in the stepping-up of the mind's vibratory rate. The poet Tennyson has left us, in his *Memoirs*, an account of his repetitious device for passing beyond the conscious mind into superconsciousness:

"A kind of waking trance-this for lack of a better word-I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone," Tennyson wrote. "This has come upon me through *repeating* my own name to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words-where death was an almost laughable impossibility-the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life." He wrote further: "It is no nebulous ecstasy, but a state of transcendent wonder, associated with absolute clearness of mind."

<sup>13</sup> Kali is a symbol of God in the aspect of eternal Mother Nature.

Matches are played in India with kites whose strings are covered with glue and ground glass. Each player attempts to sever the string of his opponent. A freed kite sails over the roofs; there is great fun in catching it. Inasmuch as Uma and I were on the balcony, it seemed impossible that any loosed kite could come into our hands; its string would naturally dangle over the roofs.

The players across the lane began their match. One string was cut; immediately the kite floated in my direction. It was stationary for a moment, through sudden abatement of breeze, which sufficed to firmly entangle the string with a cactus plant on top of the opposite house. A perfect loop was formed for my seizure. I handed the prize to Uma.

"It was just an extraordinary accident, and not an answer to your prayer. If the other kite comes to you, then I shall believe." Sister's dark eyes conveyed more amazement than her words.

I continued my prayers with a crescendo intensity. A forcible tug by the other player resulted in the abrupt loss of his kite. It headed toward me, dancing in the wind. My helpful assistant, the cactus plant, again secured the kite string in the necessary loop by which I could grasp it. I presented my second trophy to Uma.

"Indeed, Divine Mother listens to you! This is all too uncanny for me!" Sister bolted away like a frightened fawn.

## ***2. My Mother's Death and The Mystic Amulet***

My mother's greatest desire was the marriage of my elder brother. "Ah, when I behold the face of Ananta's wife, I shall find heaven on this earth!" I frequently heard Mother express in these words her strong Indian sentiment for family continuity.

I was about eleven years old at the time of Ananta's betrothal. Mother was in Calcutta, joyously supervising the wedding preparations. Father and I alone remained at our home in Bareilly in northern India, whence Father had been transferred after two years at Lahore.

I had previously witnessed the splendor of nuptial rites for my two elder sisters, Roma and Uma; but for Ananta, as the eldest son, plans were truly elaborate. Mother was welcoming numerous relatives, daily arriving in Calcutta from distant homes. She lodged them comfortably in a large, newly acquired house at 50 Amherst Street. Everything was in readiness—the banquet delicacies, the gay throne on which Brother was to be carried to the home of the bride-to-be, the rows of colorful lights, the mammoth cardboard elephants and camels, the English, Scottish and Indian orchestras, the professional entertainers, the priests for the ancient rituals.

Father and I, in gala spirits, were planning to join the family in time for the ceremony. Shortly before the great day, however, I had an ominous vision.

It was in Bareilly on a midnight. As I slept beside Father on the piazza of our bungalow, I was awakened by a peculiar flutter of the mosquito netting over the bed. The flimsy curtains parted and I saw the beloved form of my mother.