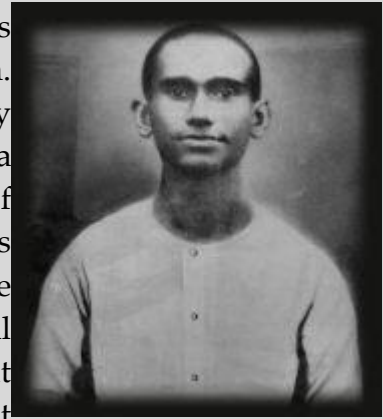


SWAMI PRABHANANDA : HIS PIONEERING WORK IN THE KHASI HILLS

- excerpts from an earlier publication

In the heyday of the Non-co operation Movement of India, in 1920-21, two young men, both still undergraduate students, rented a small house in Dacca, now in Bangladesh, with a view to holding secret party meetings to plan and direct subversive activities against the British. Lest the police suspect their real intention, they used to ply toe spinning-wheel (which in those days was regarded as a sure sign of one's allegiance to the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence) and one of them used to spend long hours practicing vocal music also. As always happens in cities, the neighbours scarcely took any notice of the young men until the singing became so loud and so persistent that they felt that they had had enough of it and they must protest. At first, they called individually and then in groups, to impress on the young men how at least on humanitarian grounds, the singing should stop at night, when, after a day's hard work, they badly needed some sleep. When nothing availed they began to throw stones at the house whenever the singing started at an inconvenient hour.



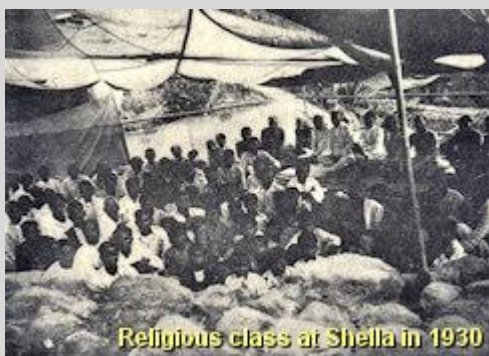
There was an Anglo-Indian gentleman among the neighbors who objected not only to the music but also to the sound of spinning-wheel, though others thought it did not cause much disturbance to them and even if it did, they were prepared to ignore it in the interests of the country. The Anglo-Indian gentleman at first sent word through his servants that the spinning too must stop. This, coming from an Anglo Indian, was only a signal for intensifying the spinning activity if possible, with a louder noise. When repeated warnings did not serve any purpose, the Anglo-Indian gentleman one day rushed in to the house with a pistol in hand and aiming it at the young men threatened them with shooting if they did not stop the spinning immediately. The older of the two young men whose name was Ketaki sprang to his feet and baring his chest said, 'Shoot me, if you dare, but I am not going to stop spinning'. The Anglo-Indian gentleman realized that he had before him two desperate men who would stop at nothing if they were provoked further. Cursing them, he quietly withdrew. Ketaki felt that it was time that they left the place for the Anglo-Indian gentleman was sure to report them to the police who, already on their trial in connection with their political activities elsewhere, would soon appear and take them in custody under some pretext or other.

For some time after this they began to drift having no fixed aim and no fixed address for the police were constantly after them. They had always been great admirers of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and it was in fact from their speeches and writings that they had derived inspiration to work for the country. At this point, they began to

visit the local branch of the Ramakrishna Mission oftener than they did before and as a result, the conviction slowly grew on them that while patriotism was good, a greater ideal was to serve the whole of mankind which was what the Mission was trying to do. Ketaki who was the older of the two forthwith joined the Mission, withdrawing completely from political activities and turning his whole attention to study and spiritual discipline such as the Mission prescribed for its monastic members.

While Ketaki was undergoing training at the Mission branch of Dacca, word was received that there were many belonging to the Khasi tribe of the Khasi & Jaintia Hills who were anxious to have some society, start schools in their hills to which they could safely send their children without any danger of their being exposed to the propaganda of any sectarian religion such as happened in the case of children attending the existing schools in their hills, schools which, though financed by the State, were managed by the Christian Church. The suggestion was made from several quarters that the Ramakrishna Mission undertake this work, for then the work would enjoy the support of all sections of people irrespective of their religious persuasion. Since it was not possible for the Mission to start an activity of the kind without first being sure that there was enough justification for it, it was decided that a junior monk should first visit the area to study the situation there and provided the conditions warranted it, then start some kind of educational activity on modest scale so that if necessary, could easily be wound up later without any inconvenience to anybody. The choice fell on Ketaki who had by then struck everybody as being an extraordinary young man- tough, yet sensitive, generous to the point of being self-effacing, intelligent, daring, with a will of his own and also, having many Plans about what ought to be done to help the common man. He, too, accepted this call with alacrity, seeing in this an opportunity to serve a section of people who had been neglected by society for centuries.

IN THE KHASI HILLS



So, it was that sometime in September, 1924, Ketaki arrived at a small village called Shella in the Khasi Hills, a stranger, almost penniless and without knowing a word of the language of the people among whom he was going to work or any thing about their history, religious beliefs and ways of life. Going round the village he came upon a Bengali-one Mathuranath Deb Nath who was working as medical assistant in the Government dispensary there. On hearing of the object of Ketaki's visit, this gentleman welcomed him to his house offering him his hospitality for as long as he needed it. Ketaki accepted but stayed with him only for a couple of days. He argued that since the purpose of his visit was to serve the Khasis, it was desirable that he should identify

himself completely with them, living with them, sharing their food, speaking their language, and sympathizing with their hopes and aspirations, so that they, too, in their turn might accept him as one of their own. One special reason why he accepted Mathuranath's hospitality for the first two days was that he noticed that he spoke the language of the people and being a member of the medical profession serving in a Government dispensary, knew all the top men in the village and had also some influence over them. He wanted, through him, to explain to the leaders of the village the object of his visit and ask them in what way he was to begin his work and what help, if any, they might be able to give him to carry out his mission of service.

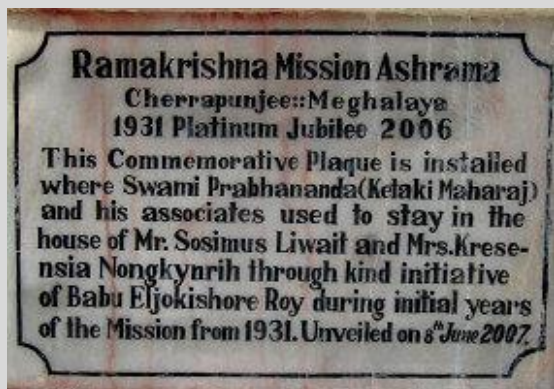
Mathuranath took him round the village the next day to give him an idea about the place and also to introduce him to its leaders. The village as it turned out, was already very much Hinduised, for Vaishnava preachers from the plains came to the village once or twice a year in answer to the invitation of the local leaders and organized singing parties with the help of local talents to teach the Khasj public devotional songs. The songs were all in Bengali (in archaic Bengali), at that, but the Khasis with their almost incredible gift for music, learnt to sing them with the least efforts, though they had no idea of what they were singing about since they did not know Bengali, not at least the kind of Bengali in which the songs were composed. The songs nevertheless roused in them much religious fervour, partly because they created an atmosphere in which the mind involuntarily turned Godward, and partly because the songs were sung with such gusto and with such feelings that it was impossible for any one not be touched. Another factor which had helped the Khasis to have some idea about the broad principles of Hinduism was the work some preachers of the Brahmo Mission had done among them prior to Ketaki's arrival. The Brahmo Mission had started a school too for their children, but for some reason or other, it had since become defunct.

Among those Ketaki met during his tour round the village were two persons who were later to play an important role in his work - Gouri Charan and Yogidhan Wadadar. Men of great

vision and courage and possessing considerable experience of life in the plains, they welcomed the idea that the Ramakrishna Mission should work among the Khasis. They assured him that they would give him every possible support, individually as well as collectively.



REASON FOR WELCOMING THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION



It is necessary to understand at this stage the reason why these two gentlemen, or for that matter, many others of the village wanted the Ramakrishna Mission to work among them in preference to the Christian Missions who were already working there. They had observed that as a result of the work of the Christian Missions, many of their children had been converted to Christianity and a larger number of them, though nominally still loyal to their own religious

traditions, were being influenced by Christian dogmas. This happened because, they observed, the text-books used in the Missionary schools were all books of Christian theology- 'I am a sinner you are a sinner, we all are sinners and we can save ourselves only through Christ', and so on; also, because the teachers, who, apart from the fact that they invariably were Christians, often played the dual role of teacher and clergy man. They showed more enthusiasm for preaching Christianity among the students than for teaching them the three R's. The Khasi leaders felt resentful that this should happen in schools which were maintained chiefly, if not entirely, out of the tax-payer's money. They were, however, helpless to do anything about it since it suited the interests of the alien power then ruling in India to utilize Christian Missionaries to spread education and with it also Christianity among the tribal people of Assam. There was already much erosion of their ancient customs and traditions going on as a result of the various unhealthy influences to which they had become exposed following the British conquest of their territory, but there was now real danger of their entire tribal life being completely swamped by the well-calculated and systematic attacks which the missionaries were carrying on against their religious beliefs and traditions, social habits and customs, against, in fact, everything they held dear and sacred as an inheritance from their ancestors. Not being able to resist them because of absence of any organization of their own, they welcomed the Ramakrishna Mission, which though an organization having its roots in the plains and to that extent, suspect in their eyes, would at least not interfere with their way of life or try to impose on them an alien culture. Some of them who considered themselves Hindus were particularly happy that they would have a Hindu organization of the stature of the Ramakrishna Mission working among them, but even others who preferred to regard themselves as a separate community from the Hindus for reasons of the latter's irritating caste prejudices, welcomed the Mission because they did not like the way the Christian Missionaries were trying to undermine their own cultural life.



A SMALL BEGINNING IS MADE



It was decided, after a brief parley that, in the first instance a night school should be started for adults and later, if this proved a success, a day school for children might also be started. It is interesting to note that from the very beginning, Ketaki left it entirely in the hands of the village elders to decide in what form they would have his services and he also made it clear to them that, while he did not want any remuneration from them for any

services he gave them, they were not to expect, either, that he would bring money from outside, as the Christian Missionaries did for the work they wanted him to do. He explained to them the conditions on which the Ramakrishna Mission insisted before agreeing to work in a particular area. He pointed out that it never started work in any place unless the local people wanted it and assured it of their continued moral and financial support. What is remarkable is that the Khasis of Shella, though themselves rather poor depending as they did upon their very uncertain income from primitive agriculture, gladly agreed to bear the entire financial responsibility so far as this project was concerned. What is more, when they discovered that Ketaki, after enjoying Mathuranath's hospitality for two or three days, had left his house and was in fact living in the open, sometimes going without food and sometimes eating whatever chance brought him, they offered him accommodation in their houses.



They did not invite him to have his meals with them, for they thought that, like most Hindus of the plains, he might not eat with them; instead, they gave him rice, vegetables, etc, which Ketaki cooked for himself twice daily. When, however, they discovered that he had not the least objection to eating cooked meals provided by them, that is to say, he was not a person who had any faith in the prevailing caste rules, they invited him to have meals with them, which Ketaki gladly accepted. This marked the beginning of a relationship full of love, good will and trust which grew stronger every year and lasted till the end.

The Night School which Ketaki was running proved a great success, it was meant primarily for those adults, who wanted to learn Bengali so that they could communicate with Bengalis with whom they had much business connections. When the schools had gone on for some months, the elders of the village felt that it was time that they started an elementary school for children to be held at day time. This was accordingly started, at first



experimentally, and with Ketaki as its sole teacher, but soon this too became very popular and its roll-strength began to swell rapidly with children who came not only from Hindu families but also from Christian families, for Ketaki proved to be an excellent teacher. He had to work very hard for apart from the fact that he ran now two schools, he spent whatever time he could save from his other duties, learning the language of the people and studying their manners and customs, their social habits, religious beliefs, etc. He also visited every house in the village irrespective of whether it was Christian or Hindu, rich or poor.

THE MOTIVATION OF HIS WORK

He let every body know that he had come there without any ulterior motive, without even the motive of trying to Hinduise them, though it was true that if anybody having already been under Hindu influence, wanted to study Hinduism further, he was ready to help him. It pained him to see that conversions often took place because the people were poor and ignorant. It pained him more when he saw that those who embraced Christianity became thoroughly denationalized. But what could he, one single individual do against this? Also, he felt that if he was to make any impact on their minds, it was imperative that he should win their trust and affection. They had a deeply ingrained suspicion about all plains people who often exploited them taking advantage of their simplicity and ignorance. He had, therefore, to convince them first that he was different from the kind of plains people that they had so far known. He had to prove that he had come there not for any material gain, but to serve, which was only another form of prayer with him. In other words, he needed to explain to them the purpose of his life and how as a monk of the Ramakrishna Mission, he viewed selfless service as a way of realizing the ultimate truth which is in religion.

HIS COMMAND OF THE KHASI LANGUAGE

Ketaki knew he could never discuss these matters with the Khasis or reach their hearts unless he could communicate with them freely in their language. He, therefore, concentrated all his efforts on mastering Khasi. The quick progress he made in this was incredible: within three months, he was able to speak Khasi fluently and correctly to the amazement of everybody. Soon he began to hold talks and discourses in Khasi on subjects of



wide interest, specially on subjects of immediate concern to the Khasis. Those who attended his talks and discourses testify to his great command of the language and his clear and logical way of putting things without being in the least dogmatic.

HIS CAUTION TO THE KHASIS



He made no attempt through his talks and discourses, to influence their thinking in any particular direction, except that he cautioned them against losing their identity as a race while they were trying, as they must try, to take advantage of the many opportunities which the present age had brought them; in other words he wanted them to be progressive, but they must see that the progress they were going to make was not at the expense of the fine traditions they had inherited from the past. He also pointed out to them that it would be futile for them to try to live in isolation as they did in the past, but that they must come forward to share with the rest of the Indian people the burden of shaping the destiny of their common motherland. They often expressed their doubts and misgivings about what might be their fate if they did not try to keep away from the maelstrom of life which was going on in the plains. He explained to them that the solution did not lie in physical isolation but in assimilating what was good, no matter where it came from, and rejecting what, in spite of its deceptive looks, was in fact detrimental to their ultimate interests. As they listened to him they felt they were getting a whiff of fresh air from a new world and even though not all of what he said was clear to them they hung on his words because of the soundness of his views and the great concern he expressed for their welfare. Slowly they came to recognize that he was different not only from other plains people but also, from the missionaries some of whom certainly cared for them, but cared for them without showing the least concern whether they retained their separate identity as a race or not.

HIS IMAGE

Even after many decades later, people remember his talks and the enthusiasm and racial pride that he was able to infuse into the people. They also speak of his humility, his capacity to make the humblest man feel at ease in his company, and above everything else, his smile, a smile that earned the reputation of having won many friends. A Deputy Director of Education says that even when he was suffering from his last fatal illness, he was never without his smile on his face. Ketaki was a small figure even for a Bengali, but he was



well-proportioned; not muscular but wiry and very tough, light complexioned, with lustrous eyes, a broad forehead and a firm chin. He was, by no strength of imagination, a handsome man, but his dignified bearing and sense of self-assurance which marked his dealings with others left no one in doubt that he came of a good family. As a matter of fact, his parents belonged to upper caste Hindu hierarchy and enjoyed an assured measure of affluence with the income they derived from their landed property. Being a monk he was careful never to disclose his family background to others but later enquiries showed that he was from Sylhet, the eldest boy in a joint family of several brothers and cousins-eldest as well as brightest.

WORK EXPANDING

Soon words spread to other villages that a strange young man had arrived at Shella who was running schools without any attempt to convert the pupils to a particular religious belief and what was more, was anxious, like the Khasi themselves that they should preserve their ancient traditions while adapting themselves to the altered circumstances in which they found themselves now as a result of the British conquest of their territory. Leaders of those villages soon approached him to start similar schools in their villages. Ketaki visited those villages, and agreed to start schools in those villages only when he found that the villages sincerely felt the need for separate schools and were also prepared to make necessary sacrifices in order to run them. Soon he had a net-work of schools, covering many villages with Shella as their centre. Although he was the moving spirit of this work, he had local committees appointed which shouldered the responsibility of running those schools. Meanwhile, the school at Shella had been raised to the status of an ME. School and when this was done the Durbar of the Shella Confederation, a Council of village elders elected through adult franchise, sanctioned an annual grant of Rs. 500/- for the school.

SEARCH FOR WORKERS

As Ketaki had to travel around constantly it was no longer possible for him to spare much time for teaching. He, therefore, set about looking for competent assistants who would work not for money, but out of love for the people. He first wrote to his friend in Dacca who had once been his partner in political activities, urging him to come at once to help him in his work. The friend-Satish was his name-had by then left Dacca and was working in a commercial house in Calcutta. He immediately resigned and left for the Khasi Hills. He was a great help, but Ketaki needed more workers as his work was growing by leaps and bounds. He wrote to many friends and was, after a protracted correspondence, able to get a few young men to come to work in his village centres. They came not so much for love for the work as for high adventure which they thought they would have. Some of them turned out to be altogether unsuitable for this kind of work, but some proved quite good. A brother-monk too had meanwhile arrived to assist him. He, with his musical talents and knowledge of Homeopathy, was a pillar of strength to him. Other monks also came, but not all of them were able to stay for long, either because their services were needed elsewhere or their health gave way.

WRITING TEXT-BOOKS

Ketaki observed that the text-books which the Khasi students used taught only Christian theology. He rightly argued that his attempt to give liberal education to the Khasis would not succeed unless he had appropriate textbooks which might be used not only in the schools he had started but also elsewhere. As such books were not available at the time, he set about writing the books himself and in spite of the heavy burdens he bore, was able to publish some books within an incredibly short time-a feat he was able to accomplish only because he never spared himself. Even after several decades, some of them were used - a testimony to skill and care he brought to bear on the task of writing those books. A brother-monk too wrote a few books of songs which have not known their peers since they first appeared. Those songs became an immediate hit because of the fine sentiments they expressed and their charming notes and some of them are sung over the radio even today.

HIGH SCHOOL

It was at this time that Ketaki felt that his efforts would be fruitless unless he had a high school which the students could join after they had finished their primary and middle standards in schools set up by him. He had noticed how the children who went to the high school in Shillong often came back with such exotic habits and tastes that they became complete misfits in their rural society. The people of Shella begged him to start the high school in their village to enable their children and the children of neighbouring villages to receive higher education in a congenial environment. Ketaki

however, felt that the best place where the school could be located was Cherrapunjee, for it was easily accessible from different point of the Khasi Hills and it was also the seat of ancient Khasi culture. Though his Shella friends was disappointed that he did not select their village, they readily conceded that Cherrapunjee was a far better place for the proposed school.

Ketaki soon visited Sohra to explore what help and co-operation he might get from the local people to start the high school there. He found that while the Christians in a body opposed the idea of an Hindu organisation starting any school there, the non-Christians were either lukewarm or just did not care what happened. When Ketaki had almost given up hope of being able to start a high school at Cherrapunjee, one Khasi gentleman offered him a piece of land saying it was his, should he at any time decide to start a high school there. A small table-land atop a hill higher than those which constituted the village and commanding an enchanting view of surrounding forests, fountains and the distant plains of Sylhet, it was, judged by any standard the best possible site for a school. Encouraged by this sudden stroke of good luck, Ketaki quickly formed a committee consisting of the prominent men of the village, both Christian and non-Christian, to whom he entrusted the work of organising the school, himself remaining in the background as far as possible. How wise this course was, was proved by what followed shortly: No sooner had word spread that someone in the village had offered a gift of land to the Hindu monk almost free of conditions than the Syiem (i.e , Raja) of the local State, probably under the pressure of some interested parties, took a hand in thwarting the move. He had a notice served on both Ketaki and the intending donor of land saying that they were not to proceed further in the matter. This proved to be a blessing in disguise, for the members of the Committee felt insulted that the Syiem should try to put a spanner across the project that they had by now come to regard as their own and they took up the cudgels on behalf of Ketaki and fought the Syiem till they were able to wrest from him his consent to the proposed gift of land and the startling of the school.

The problem of land having been thus happily settled, he now set about collecting funds to construct the school building. He had by now made important contacts in Shillong and through them was able to raise enough money to construct a school building with C. I. sheet roofing.

He was also able to enlist the services of a few educated young Bengalis who agreed to work on a bare subsistence allowance. He distributed them to his various schools, but most of them were not suitable for work in a tribal area and some were so bad that he had to ask them to leave forthwith. This resulted in the collapse of some of his newly started schools, but he did not mind it in the long-term interest of his work.

Ketaki now spent more time at Sohra than elsewhere for he knew his presence was needed to boost the morale of his workers as well as the guardians of the students

who naturally enough often wondered how the school was going to have a stable footing without a semblance of a guarantee about money and man-power. He himself wondered about in no less, but he was determined to make the school a success and if necessary to sacrifice some of his feeder schools (which he did) for this purpose lest the Khasis lose confidence in him. As it is, the Khasis had noted how handicapped he was as compared with the Christian missionaries in point of resources and man-power, but he had taught them to think that the venture he was making was their own and that they themselves were responsible for its success or failure. Ketaki's main headache being about men and money, he often visited Shillong, the capital of Assam, where he had by now been able to rouse much public sympathy for his work. A small committee had been formed there with influential men who began to take much interest in the work started by him in the Khasi Hills and who also held themselves responsible for its good management.

OPPOSITION

This policy of associating the public with his venture proved wise and ultimately paid rich dividends. In the first place, it secured for him an increased measure of public support and co-operation, it also ensured that if there was ever any organised opposition to his work, it was not that he alone would have to stand up in its defence, but that there would be others also to do so. It is perhaps not known to many that the hills of Assam in those days were treated by the British as 'excluded' areas, that is to say, as places where people from the plains could come and work only under duress. For instance, if the local authorities at any time felt that Ketaki's presence was not in public interest, he might then be expelled from the Khasi Hills at short notice without showing any reason whatsoever. Ketaki could not even appeal to a higher authority against this. That he ran this risk soon proved true, for a few Christian leaders wrote to the district authorities complaining that under the pretext of giving education to the Khasi children, Ketaki was in fact preaching hatred against the British. This was in the days when anti-British feelings ran very high in the country. The district authorities naturally took alarm and the Deputy Commissioner, an English man, ran posthaste to Shella where Ketaki was then staying, to make enquiries on the spot. He questioned people of all shades of opinion in an attempt to get a true picture of the man that Ketaki was, his activities, the source of his income, who were his supporters and so on. It was quite a surprise to him to find that except for a handful of diehard Christians, the Khasis too a man praised Ketaki. It was their unanimous opinion that his only concern was to promote the all-round welfare of the Khasis irrespective of their religious beliefs. He was not interested in politics-at least, he had never tried to preach any particular political viewpoints which might even remotely be construed as anti-British or anti-Government. The Deputy Commissioner then sent for Ketaki and had a long talk with him. He was so impressed by Ketaki's straightforward and intelligent answers that he declared that regardless of what others might say about him, he, as head of the District, would be glad to have him continue his labours and

was prepared to help him in any way he could. Ketaki soon came to know who were the people who had sent the clandestine report against him, but he never bore any ill-will against them.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Ever since Ketaki came to work in the Khasi Hills, he was struck by the fact that the Khasis otherwise a charming people, suffered from the peculiar complex that they regarded every non-Khasi as a wicked person. He realized that this happened because they had for centuries lived in isolation and also because if they ever came in contact with people from the outside world, it was often the wrong kind of people. To remove this misconception, he arranged for small groups, of Khasi leaders to tour different parts of the country, often under his own personal care. These leaders had no idea that India was a vast country inhabited by a multitude of races this kind of tour enabled them to know the country and its people. He also picked up some intelligent boys and girls and sent them to Dacca and Calcutta for their education. His idea was that some of them after they had spent a few years under the influence of progressive societies, would come back home to provide an intelligent and broad-minded leadership to their people.

CENTRE IN SHILLONG

It slowly occurred to Ketaki that he needed to have a centre in Shillong in order that he might keep alive public interest in his work. He accordingly purchased a piece of land on which he sowed the seeds of what later developed into a magnificent institution embracing a wide range of activities. The centre in Shillong served as the headquarters of the work in the Khasi Hills, though Ketaki himself seldom stayed in Shillong as he spent most of his time overseeing the work in the hills.

Thus, in the course of ten years or so, Ketaki, single-handed and in face of great opposition from many quarters, succeeded in creating a number of schools of various grades situated in important areas of the hills in which the Khasi children could have their education without any danger of their religious beliefs and traditions being undermined.

BREAK-DOWN OF HEALTH

But since 1934, Ketaki had been feeling weak and tired for no apparent reason. He had previously walked twice between Sohra and Shella in a single day covering twenty-six miles of much hard climbing, a feat few local hillmen had attempted successfully, but now it was difficult for him to walk even a few steps. He saw doctors in Shillong, but they could not tell him what was wrong with him. It was true that he had never had enough nutrition ever since he came to work in the Khasi Hills, but he had great faith in his physique which was as hard as steel and he could not bring himself to

believe that there was really anything wrong with him. Since he began to get worse everyday, he had no alternative but to agree, at the insistence of his friend to go to Calcutta for examination by Dr. B.C. Roy. That medical wizard, after a series of tests, announced that Ketaki was suffering from a kind of virus attack. He added that the chief symptom of the disease was muscular atrophy and that there was no cure for this that he knew of. Though this was like death-sentence, Ketaki received the news with complete unconcern. He was taken back to Shillong where he had nothing to do but await slow death. Soon a time came when he was not able even to use his limbs. Once he was alone in his room when a fly harassed him by trying to dig into the pupils of his eyes, but he was not able to do anything until an attendant came. Smiling, he remarked, 'I used to be proud of my strong body. This is why I am in this state now.'

SRI RAMAKRISHNA CENTENARY

It was Ketaki's ambition to publish a book in Khasi containing the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna on the occasion of his birth centenary which fell in 1936. He had now and then talked to his Khasi friends about Sri Ramakrishna, but since the time was now fast approaching when he would be no more he wanted to leave behind a book in Khasi which would tell the people all about the source from which he derived inspiration for what he had done for the Khasis. He now spent most of his time writing the book with the help of some volunteers. As there was not much time left, he often worked far into the night, but, despite the physical strain that this involved, he was in high spirits because he was going to see his last task accomplished before death called him. Happily, the book appeared, just as he had wished, on the day the Centenary celebration began in Shillong.

FINAL

Since Ketaki was no longer able to look after the work, he requested the Committee in Shillong to relieve him of all his responsibilities and manage the work without him. They agreed to do their best, but begged that he continue to guide them so long as that was possible. From the time Ketaki ceased to be actively involved in the work, he refused to allow the Committee to spend any money on him. He even began to live outside the Centre, for he did not wish that in looking after him it should divert its attention from its more important tasks. At first, he occupied a room which somebody lent to him. Here he lived depending upon a few young men who took it upon themselves to look after him. They took turns in nursing him while a friend supplied his food. It was hard life, but Ketaki had never cared about comforts. His only concern was that the work should not suffer because of his inability to supervise it. He had many visitors coming to see him every day—men and women of every age-group. His last and only appeal to them was that they try to understand the tribal problem and help solve it as best they could in the larger interests of the nation. Among his callers were many Khasis too, some who had known him and had reasons to be grateful to

him and some who had never met him but had simply heard about him. To them too Ketaki appealed that they learn to look upon the schools started by their leaders with his help as their own and love and serve them in any way they could. Although he was now a complete invalid he never tired of meeting people, specially those who were comparatively young and urging them to dedicate themselves to the service of the poor and the backward.

Meanwhile, his relations at home, specially the young people of his village who had heard about his colourful life were pressing him to come back to the village to spend his last days there. Seeing that he was too much of a burden on the people who were looking after him in Shillong, he returned to his village after more than a decade. The whole village began to look upon him as if he was their most prized possession. Although life was fast ebbing out and he knew that the end might come any day, he did not rest but kept himself busy encouraging the young men of the village to spend their free time in the service of the community. It was at his instance that an organization soon came into being through which the young men of the village began to care for the weaker sections of the village population. It was at this time that the village people woke up, one day to see a crowd of strange people wending their way to Ketaki's house. It was the Khasis who had come to pay their last homage to their benefactor. No eye was dry when they arrived at his house or when, some days later, they took leave of him. As if he was waiting for this last meeting with the people he had come to regard as his own, for Ketaki, not long after this quietly slipped into death on a cold morning in 1938. He was barely thirty seven then!

It must have given much comfort to Ketaki Maharaj (Swami Prabhananda) to hear before his death that the Ramakrishna Mission had taken over his work among the Khasis. Besides giving him moral support and some broad guidance, the Mission had so long had no direct involvement in what he was doing, but from now on the work was to be entirely its responsibility. The work has since then grown much, there being now more than forty schools spread over the Khasi Hills with Cherrapunjee as their headquarters (Shillong is now a separate centre). The Mission's high school at Cherrapunjee is now reckoned as one of the best in Assam. There are also other activities started by the Mission at Cherrapunjee which have brought it closer to the Khasis.

A long time has passed now since Ketaki Maharaj first arrived in the Khasi Hills and although the people who knew him personally are now few, it is impossible to visit the Khasi Hills without being conscious of Ketaki Maharaj's influence. One feels as if he is still there inspiring, supervising and directing. His spirit seems to be everywhere.