

Mamaji

1979

DEEP IN THE CITY OF LAHORE, SOMETHING OVER A hundred years ago, there lived a moody young woman known throughout the neighboring *gullis* as the Mother. Sometimes she would take it into her head to appear in a *gulli* with a young male attendant, who would call out in a singsong, to the haunting thud of a drum, "You are our great mother, our supernatural mother! You are the blessed one! You are the Durga Mata!" (Durga, one of the consorts of the god Shiva, is the goddess of destruction, and *mata* means "mother.") The *gullis* would resound with the thud of the attendant's drum, and crowds from the surrounding *gullis* would converge on the pair. Each of those who came would bear an offering: a handful of cardamoms or anise seeds, a bowl of raisins and peeled almonds, a basket of fruit—whatever he or she could afford. The people would sit everywhere on the dirt, watching expectantly. The thud of the drum would quicken, growing rhythmic and hypnotic. The woman, sitting languidly on the ground, would start to roll her head to the beat of the drum, as if possessed, but her body would remain inert. The people would edge forward, each hoping to be allowed to petition the goddess Durga through the Mother. Sometimes people would go to the Mother's spiritual sessions for months or years without being called upon and allowed to petition. "The spirit of Durga Mata has entered your head!" the young attendant would shout in ecstasy to the woman. "Speak, speak, Mother!

Speak!" The people would watch tensely, afraid that, with no warning, the Mother would come out of her trance and get up and leave without hearing their petitions.

One evening, during the full moon, people in the *gullis* heard the familiar thud of the drum. They had been waiting for its sound for almost a year, and everyone ran out to see the Mother. One of those who ran out was Leela; her daughter was already over eighteen and no one would marry her. Another was Ram Lal; his shop had burned down, leaving him without a livelihood, and with nineteen mouths to feed. Another was Ram Das; his bride was dying of a mysterious disease, and he wanted the Mother to intercede for her life. And there were Bulaki Ram and Mukandi.

It was the season of the *loo* (hot wind), which stirred up the dust in the *gullis*. The air in the narrow, grimy, cavernous *gulli* in which the Mother sat was heavy and suffocating. The people pressed around her as if they were all trapped in the bottom of a pit and only she could lead them out.

The Mother stared directly at Bulaki Ram and then—her head rolling from side to side to the beat of the drum—called in an unearthly, echoing voice, "You, the man with the white starched turban, what brings you to Goddess Durga?"

"All my ten children have died," Bulaki Ram cried out. "Every child that comes from my Mukandi's stomach dies. The evil eye has cast its spell on me. I don't know what to do."

"You and yours are all accursed," the unearthly voice said, and then it fell silent. As Bulaki Ram and

Mukandi watched, the Mother's head started to roll faster and faster, until it seemed like a top out of control.

"Speak on, Mother, speak on!" the attendant shouted vehemently.

Bulaki Ram was fixed to the spot, afraid to take a breath lest the Mother come out of her trance without telling him how to lift the curse. He had attended her sessions many times before and had all but given up hope that she would call on him.

"Your house is under the evil influence," the woman resumed, haltingly. "And it is because . . . you have neglected . . . to pay homage to . . . the universal mother . . . Durga. In the dark underground room of your house, there is a small altar to Durga Mata in an alcove, but it is overlaid with dust and cobwebs. Go to the dark underground room of your house, dust the altar and sweep away the cobwebs, baste the altar with the holy cow dung, and light there the biggest mud lamp, with the richest ghi, to Durga Mata. Keep the mud lamp burning night and day for six months and pray at the altar daily. Tell your wife to keep all of Durga Mata's fasts. She will be with child. She will be delivered of a son. And if you take care of him he will bring the blessings of Durga Mata on your head."

Bulaki Ram and Mukandi were dazed, and hardly heard the crowd's murmurs of congratulations. They hurried back to their house, in Kucha Kaghzian (Paper Merchants' Lane), and went down into the dark underground room. They found the small altar in the alcove, dusty and covered with cobwebs, just as

the Mother had said. They did exactly as the Mother had directed them, and their hope, so long extinguished, began to burn again.

When the six months were over, Mukandi, it seemed, was still not with child, but Bulaki Ram's faith in the Mother was unshaken. "Let's go to Peshawar and make a new beginning," he said to Mukandi. "We've had nothing but misfortunes in Lahore." He had heard Peshawar spoken of by travelling merchants as a thriving cantonment, or permanent military station, in India's mountainous Northwest Frontier Province. He had seen two or three tall and fierce-looking Pathans from the Frontier Province working as watchmen in the houses of the rich outside the old city of Lahore. He had heard that the Pathans were the first cousins of the Afghans, in faraway Afghanistan, and that they spoke a strange-sounding tongue called Pushtu. When people in the *gulli* didn't understand something, they said, "It's all Pushtu to me."

Bulaki Ram rented out his house. He collected his few worldly possessions—bedding, clothes, pots, pans, and wooden kitchen tools—and packed a wicker basket of chapattis, stalks of sugar cane, and chick-peas for the journey. Finally, he set off with Mukandi and his aunt Ganesh Devi on the North Western Railway. This railway was a much-touted amenity of the British raj, although it had originally been built so that the government could move troops quickly to distant cantonments. None of the three had ever been on a train before. They looked ahead at the engine puffing smoke and behind at the guard puffing a cheroot, and wondered whether the engine was going to pull the train or the

guard was going to push it. Then, miraculously, as if Durga Mata herself had begun to move the train, it thundered out of the station. They held on to their seats until the steady rocking motion calmed them. The train took them as far as the town of Rawalpindi, and they proceeded from there in a hired bullock cart along the seemingly interminable Grand Trunk Road, now and again exchanging greetings with wayfarers who rested in the shade of tall, leafy shisham trees that lined it.

When they reached Peshawar, after several days on the road, they felt sure that Mukandi was with child. About eight months later, on the twenty-fifth of November, 1872, Mukandi was delivered of a son. They named him Durga Das (Servant of Durga). This was my maternal grandfather, Babuji.