

The Loving Aspect of Holy Mother

By Swami Tathagatananda

Impersonal God or Brahman in association with Maya becomes personal God. This universe of names and forms streams forth from God. The power behind this creation, maintenance and absorption is called Maya. Shri Ramakrishna worshipped Maya as the Divine Mother. He taught that Brahman and Maya are not different, like ice and its coldness, fire and its burning power, or a diamond and its effulgence. Throughout the world, God is regarded as Father, Mother, Counselor, Friend,—as everything. But the Indian tradition wants to look upon God as Divine Mother in view of the fact that all living beings emerge from mother. Swami Vivekananda says:

Mother-worship is a distinct philosophy in itself. Power is the first of our ideas. It impinges upon man at every step; power felt within is the soul; without, nature. And the battle between the two makes human life. All that we know or feel is but the resultant of these two forces. Man saw that the sun shines on the good and evil alike. Here was a new idea of God, as the Universal Power behind all—the Mother-idea was born.

Mother is the first manifestation of power and is considered a higher idea than father. With the name of Mother comes the idea of Shakti, Divine Energy and omnipotence, just as the baby believes its mother to be all-powerful, able to do anything. The Divine Mother is the latent power sleeping in us; without worshipping Her we can never know ourselves. Every manifestation of power in the universe is Mother. She is life, She is intelligence, She is Love. . . . A bit of Mother, a drop, was Krishna, another was Buddha, another was Christ . . . worship Her if you want love and wisdom.

The human mind, however, normally gravitates to the material plane and ordinary people nurtured in secular, sensate cultures find it impossible to fathom the Divine Mother. Though we cannot understand the inscrutable grace of the Divine Mother, we can understand an infinitesimal part of her glory if She is worshipped with devotion.

Down the ages, India has been worshipping God as Mother, as *Devi*. This worship is particularly popular in Bengal during the different religious festivals, when thousands of images of the Divine Mother are worshipped. Holy Mother Shri Sarada Devi was born as an incarnation of the Divine Mother. To meet the need of this age, the Divine Mother manifested her gentle aspect of the redeeming power and universal love of divine motherhood to the highest degree in Holy Mother, who demonstrated her divinity during her exemplary life of sixty-seven years. She belongs to all nations, to all races. This universal appeal of Holy Mother is easily understood due to the fact that Holy Mother is

the living embodiment of the Eternal Feminine. Her divine love is extraordinarily expressed through her profound, intimate motherly compassion free from bondage and attachment. The Divine and human, the infinite and finite, are fused in her. Infinite Divinity assumed the finite form of Holy Mother. She was sweetness incarnate and grace abounding. Her simple words went right to the heart of listeners, giving them complete solace and satisfaction. Her pure, immaculate nature radiated purity and utter tranquility.

Holy Mother's all-pervading love may be described as a vertical love for God and a horizontal love for the suffering humanity. Born to a poor family in rustic surroundings and with no chance of schooling, Shri Sarada Devi raised herself to the highest stature of spiritual sublimity, which commanded respect and adoration from Shri Ramakrishna himself, who worshipped Holy Mother as the Mother of the Universe, Shodashi, at Dakshineswar in 1872. Moreover, Shri Ramakrishna prostrated before the Deity and offered the fruits of all his spiritual practices as well as his rosary at the feet of Holy Mother.

Shri Ramakrishna left Holy Mother behind to exhibit the Motherhood of God. God as Savior is full of love. As a mother loves her children, the great Mother-Heart of God loves all. The expression, "Motherhood of God," conveys to us that God, as Mother, loves His children infinitely more than a human mother. The foremost disciple of Shri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda was the first to understand Holy Mother and articulated this in a letter from the USA in 1894: "To me, Mother's grace is a hundred thousand times more valuable than Father's. Mother's grace, Mother's blessings are all paramount to me." The monastic and lay disciples of Shri Ramakrishna as well as common persons also revered her and worshipped her as Divine Mother. She was in reality the Divinity, the Guru, a nun and a wife, all in one. Her words, "I am the Mother of all. I am the Mother of the good. I am the Mother of the bad, too," gives us the reassurance that every one of us is near to her, not far. She is an enigma. The world has never seen anyone like her. To think of her lovingly and reverently will make our mind purer.

In this short essay, we are presenting only a few of the innumerable anecdotes describing Holy Mother's all-encompassing love for the suffering devotees. God feels our pain, anxiety, and so on. When genuine devotees wholeheartedly, sincerely and consistently seek God's grace to tide over the situation, He comes to their aid. One particular event at the Dakshineswar Temple gives a beautiful illustration of the infinite love of God gushing forth through Holy Mother. Holy Mother used to bring Shri Ramakrishna's food to his room. One day, a woman suddenly appeared and requested Mother to give her the plate, which she carried to Shri Ramakrishna and then left immediately. On many occasions during the Master's life, it had been observed that Shri Ramakrishna was unable to touch any food defiled by the touch of a human being of immoral character. This time also, he did not touch the food. After a little while Holy Mother came to his room. She was gently reprimanded by Shri Ramakrishna for handing his lunch over to that woman and spoiling it. He tried to extract a promise from Holy Mother that she would always bring his food to him herself. Although Holy Mother was ever obedient, vigilant, and dedicated in the service of Shri Ramakrishna, she had to tell Shri

Ramakrishna that it was impossible for her to refuse anybody who addressed her as “Mother.” Shri Ramakrishna felt immense inner joy as he observed the flowering of her universal motherly affection. But this is not the only such occurrence. Readers of her enigmatic life will invariably find out that she was the living embodiment of Vedanta and rooted in Divinity—she moved and had her being in the Divine and the Divine alone. Being the Universal Mother, she did not refuse anyone who approached and addressed her as “Mother.” Actresses and other women of immoral character also received her abundant love and sympathy. When some intimate devotees of Shri Ramakrishna did not approve of Mother extending her love to undesirable types of people, she ignored their advice and remarked, “Everybody can be the mother of the good, but who will accept these dregs of society and console them? I am the mother of the wicked as well as the mother of the good.”

Once, an elderly maidservant carrying a bundle came to Holy Mother at Jayrambati, on behalf of Akshay Kumar Sen, the author of *Ramakrishna-Punthi*. As usual, Holy Mother received her with the full affection of a compassionate mother and made her sleep at Jayrambati that night. Holy Mother’s regular habit since her days at Dakshineswar was to arise at early dawn. At dawn the following day she entered the maidservant’s room and found the poor woman burning with a fever and in the pathetic condition of having soiled the bed. Holy Mother was very affectionate with the maidservant. She encouraged her to avoid the scorching heat of the sun by starting early on her return journey. Then Mother immediately cleaned everything herself so that no one would find any trace of the soiled bed.

Another time, a woman belonging to the Bannerjee family at Jayrambati was in a precarious condition. She had no one to look after her and had developed a disease in her ears. Her condition was so pathetic that pus was exuding from both ears and she had a fever. Learning about it, Holy Mother nursed her and gave her hot milk. She also approached Brahmachari Varada (Swami Ishanananda) in an effort to find shelter for her at Koalpara Ashrama, where they used to take care of some patients. Varada went to Koalpara, consulted with the Head of Koalpara Ashrama and returned to take the patient to Koalpara. Revealing her immense concern for this unfortunate woman, Holy Mother sent her to Koalpara in a bullock cart. The attending doctor at Koalpara gave the woman some medicine but in spite of the best efforts of the inmates, she passed away. When Holy Mother heard of it, she told them, “You acted as her own children in serving her and I am happy that she received this humane treatment at the end of her life.”

Holy Mother’s divine love was always conspicuous. Due to the fact that she was born and raised in a rural society, Holy Mother often encountered issues generated by caste-consciousness. When the collapse of their trade deprived Amzad and other Muslim weavers of their basic needs, they were forced to resort to theft and highway robbery. But this did not provide them with enough means to take care of their families. In their desperate condition, they went to Holy Mother for help. Though she was fully aware of their unlawful behavior, Holy Mother’s heart was deeply touched by their pitiable condition. Despite the local prejudice against Muslims, Holy Mother treated them as her own children. Like the most affectionate mother, she provided them with some

opportunities to work. Every one of these Muslim weavers regarded Holy Mother as their Guardian Angel.

In another example, Holy Mother's niece Nalini harbored a strong sense of the superior purity and social status of Brahmins accorded by the Hindu caste system. On one occasion when Nalini found Holy Mother removing the left-over scraps of a meal. This sight naturally horrified her and she cried out, "Ah me! She's removing the leavings of a multitude of castes!" But the universality of Holy Mother's love which knows no division immediately revealed itself. She responded, "What if they are from various castes? They are all my children." Removing leftovers was actually a part of Holy Mother's daily routine. Although she was steeped in the Orthodox tradition of Hinduism, Holy Mother never allowed devotees or the Swamis to remove their leftovers themselves. By her own example, she relieved them of their stigma of division that was associated with their caste-consciousness. When Swami Vishweshwarananda resisted and offered to remove his own plate after the meal, Holy Mother persuaded him to allow her take it instead and said to him, "What indeed have I done for you? A child even soils its mother's lap and does so many other things. You are rare jewels to be sought for by gods." With these sweet words she expressed the grace of her divine Motherhood. Some other women who had the good fortune to live near Holy Mother nevertheless criticized her for this. Her pure and natural response was, "Well, I am their mother. If a mother shouldn't do it for her children's sake, who else should?" Yet another time, Holy Mother caused great joy in the heart of a man from a lowly caste by allowing him to offer flowers at her feet on the second day of Durga worship at Jayrambati.

These are not the only cases demonstrating Holy Mother's lack of prejudice. We have seen that throughout her life of infinite universal love, she consistently transcended the limitations of social convention, even with foreigners. These and many other similar events bear eloquent testimony to the ease with which she endeared herself as Mother. Her motherly affection removes all timidity and doubt from any devotee inclined to approach Holy Mother with hesitation or reservation.

Holy Mother gave shelter to giant souls like Swamiji and others. Her simple word was final to them. Whereas these great disciples had the innocent habit of arguing with Shri Ramakrishna, they never dared to think of arguing with Holy Mother. Every word of Holy Mother's was a command to them. Swami Vivekananda ceremonially purified himself before going to Holy Mother and shook with pious emotion in her presence. Her word was their command. We would like to cite one instance of Holy Mother's guidance of the Mission in times of crisis.

Some political revolutionaries dedicated to winning India's freedom later joined the Ramakrishna Order. They did so with great sincerity and completely eschewed the path of politics. On December 11, 1916 the Governor of Bengal, Lord Carmichael, made a statement that cast aspersions on the Ramakrishna Mission. During that crucial period of India's history, the Mission's devotees and well-wishers were alarmed that sinister consequences might follow the governor's unfriendly opinion of the Mission. They suggested to the Mission authorities that they call for the revolutionaries to leave the

Order. At that juncture, Swami Saradananda, the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission, discussed the matter with Holy Mother, who firmly rejected this suggestion. Notwithstanding the adverse official remarks of the government, Holy Mother deemed that those who joined the Order in the name of Shri Ramakrishna should be allowed to remain. She suggested that Swami Saradananda meet personally with the governor to explain the Mission's viewpoint. Accordingly, Swami Saradananda met with the governor's private secretary with the result that the governor finally exonerated the Mission and its members in his statement of March 26, 1917.

Not only did the Holy Mother bless all of the Mission's philanthropic activities, she was keenly interested in all the details of this work. Whenever relief workers came to her, she always inquired in depth about these activities. She always wanted to know if the Mission had been informed and if it had alleviated the people's woes. Recognizing that the ordinary monk cannot remain absorbed in meditation round-the-clock, she advised such monks to earnestly accept philanthropic activity for their own benefit. She once said, "That is why my Naren started all these centres for work. Our organization will function this way. Those who cannot adjust will leave."

Mother loved Girishchandra Ghosh, although he was a bohemian in every respect. Due to his unwavering staunch faith, he regarded Holy Mother as Divine Mother. Once, he went to Jayrambati and stayed there a whole month. Every day, he saw with his own eyes the divine love of Holy Mother. Even in her old age, her body frail and rheumatic, she would go door-to-door to get some milk and vegetables in her effort to bring a little comfort to Girishchandra in that village surrounding. Nearly every day, Girishchandra would notice that Mother herself washed his bed sheets. Girish had become so embittered with life that during that time he broached the idea to Mother of renouncing the world and becoming a monk. When she did not approve of the idea, Girish "resorted to the logical and vehement reasoning of which his keen intellect were and poetic tongue were capable, and which was calculated to sweep anyone off his feet." She withstood this barrage of words without changing her mind and he had to give up the thought of becoming a monk. Despite his faults, Girish was a great devotee of fiery radiant faith in the divinity of the Master and the Mother. Her tender actions and loving concern for him when he was at Jayrambati left deep impressions in Girishchandra's mind; he requested Holy Mother to grace his house with her presence on the occasion of Durga Puja in 1907. To his great disappointment, due to her continuous illness which left her physically debilitated, Holy Mother initially did not want to make the long, arduous journey to Calcutta. However, because of his deep, abiding and steadfast devotion, she accepted this importunity and came to Calcutta. This made Girishchandra and the other devotees extremely happy.

On the first day of Durga Puja, she endured much. An endless stream of devotees came to place flowers at her feet. Holy Mother sat quietly for many hours together at Balam's residence before going to Girishchandra's house where she had to remain for the rest of the worship. On the second day, she was not at all well and covered herself with a cotton sheet. Again, she sat for many hours, gratifying all the devotees with her serene presence. Not a single devotee was disappointed. Holy Mother's patience was

unflagging, but the strain of it all weakened her further. Her exhaustion became more apparent and it was decided that she would be unable to satisfy the devotees' greatest wish: her presence during the evening juncture of the eight and ninth days of the moon. But without Mother's presence, the Puja worship would be useless. Of all the disappointed devotees, Girishchandra was the most distressed, for his heart was filled with overwhelming love for Holy Mother and he was convinced of the absolute necessity of her presence. He withdrew to his drawing room upstairs with some of his friends and refused to participate; no amount of cajoling could convince him to come back down. Then, to everyone's amazement, at the exact moment of the blessed juncture Holy Mother appeared at the doorway and stated simply, "Here I am." Swami Premananda was there and tells the story:

Girish Babu, the great devotee, celebrated Durga puja in his house. Holy Mother attended the worship. So I went there. What I witnessed struck me with great wonder. Girish Babu is comparable only to Girish Babu. He is indeed unique.

At about half past two in the morning, the palanquin that was sent to Balaram Babu's house for the Holy Mother to attend the *sandhi* puja [the most important hour of the worship] came back empty. Five minutes later, at just the moment of the *sandhi* puja, the Holy Mother arrived by herself. [She walked just one block from Balaram Babu's house to the house of Girish.] We all were struck dumb. Girish Babu was overwhelmed with joy at seeing her. Now again, imagine the presence of an array of girls in the worship hall, girls who are despised by society [prostitutes who were dancers and actresses in the theatre of Girish], and the Holy Mother, who is worshipped as an embodiment of purity, seated in their midst. This was indeed a unique sight. Girish is the only one who can make the impossible possible.

Indeed, Girish was beside himself with sheer joy and could barely speak as he ran downstairs to greet her. Catching his breath he exclaimed, "I thought that my worship had come to naught, and just now the Mother knocks at the door and announces, 'Here I am'." Everyone, including his theatrical troupe of performers, rushed to offer the flowers of their devotion at her feet. Mother stood still the whole time, her pure gaze concentrated on the image of the Goddess Durga.

The Goddess Durga was worshipped the entire three days. During those three days, Holy Mother also received the worship of all without exception while sitting calmly and serenely in a chair, in spite of her illness. And although her condition required her to return home as soon as possible, she fulfilled the devotees' wish to prolong her stay for the worship of Kali. Having thus satisfied them all, Mother returned to Jayrambati, partially on foot, and arrived there in the darkness of night. Her failed health and the general lack of conveniences made it a very stressful journey for her.

As only the tip of a massive iceberg is visible above the ocean's surface, this essay also, gives only a glimpse of the unobservable immensity of her Mother-soul. No greater being was ever born in such obscurity and quietude as Holy Mother Shri Sarada Devi. Those who are acquainted with Holy Mother's life know very well that from the age of

six to her very last breath, she served humanity ceaselessly. Peace always dwelled in her pure heart. To us, she was a sweet and lovely rose quietly radiating the fragrance of her graceful life. Grace, like radium, penetrated her entire personality, giving a halo of unknown beauty. Hardly do we come across one who is so sweet, so motherly, so gentle and humane. She was the living embodiment of love, non-attachment, kindness, gentleness, sympathy and loving service to all. By her genial temperament and loving nature she endeared herself to all, sweetened interpersonal relationships and unconsciously gave people insights that helped them to cultivate deep admiration and reverence for God's work. When great spiritual souls take rest and are no longer actively involved in human welfare with their whole-souled, sincere willingness, we are forced to acknowledge the deep impact of their treasured presence and loving concern on our behalf. Their exemplary lives are our greatest tangible treasure which gives us hope and increases our faith in God. The power of their pure and loving memory is the eternal legacy of their gift to humanity.

REFERENCES

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C. W., VII: 26-7.

Swami Gambhirananda, *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1957), p. 218.

Swami Premananda, *Teachings and Reminiscences* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1970), pp. 210-11.

Between the dream at night and the assurance of the Mother and its cure, there were only four days. 27 Chaitra the devotee had a dream and Sankranti was four days after on 31.12.1319—the Sankranti.