

## Swami Vivekananda's Devotion to His Mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi

By Swami Tathagatananda

The study of the cultural history of the world gives us an insight about the deep impact of religion on human development. Religious ideals, unflinching faith in divinity and a spiritual orientation permeate daily life. To understand a culture, we must evaluate the harmonious religious values of that culture. The English historian Christopher Dawson expressed this view:

... throughout the greater part of mankind's history, in all ages and states of society, religion has been the great unifying force in our culture. It has been the guardian of tradition, the preserver of the moral law, the educator and the teacher of wisdom. In all ages, the first creative works of a culture are due to a religious inspiration and dedicated to a religious end.

The spiritual and ethical culture of any race preserves its noble characteristics. Swamiji says, "It is a change of the soul itself for the better that alone will cure the evils of life." In his lecture, "The Future of India, Swamiji highlights the true role of culture:

It is culture that withstands shocks, not a simple mass of knowledge. You can put a mass of knowledge into the world, but that will not do it much good. There must come culture into the blood. We all know in modern times of nations which have masses of knowledge, but what of them? They are like tigers, they are like savages, because culture is not there. Knowledge is only skin-deep, as civilization is, and a little scratch brings out the old savage. Such things happen; this is the danger. Teach the masses in the vernaculars, give them ideas; they will get information, but something more is necessary; give them culture. Until you give them that, there can be no permanence in the raised condition of the masses.

Despite social and political upheavals in India throughout the ages, it is remarkable that by virtue of their deeply religious culture, successive generations of Indians have preserved and transmitted India's eternal religion solely to preserve her time-tested traditional values of healthy living. This great heritage is still dynamic in the Hindu consciousness: "The sages who meditated in the jungles of the Ganges Valley 600 years B. C. are still forces in the world." "The reason that we Indians are still living in spite of so much misery, distress, poverty, or oppression from within and without, says Swami Vivekananda, is that we have a national ideal, which is yet necessary for the preservation



of the world!” That national ideal is the spiritual quest: to attain perfection through Self-discovery, Self-knowledge and Self-fulfillment has been the one dominating impulse of individual and collective life in India. Religion is the backbone and life-current of India; hence, the ideals of “Renunciation and Service” permeate our outlook of life. Despite political and cultural change in India, spiritual growth through timeless values continues to be her most honored ideal.

### The Motherhood of God

India is a peculiar country: she has always glorified the Motherhood of God. Therefore, Swami Vivekananda upholds the age-old Indian attitude to women expressed as the glory of Motherhood. In his lecture, “The Women of India,” in the West, he declares that the ideal of womanhood in the West is the wife, while the mother is the ideal in the East: “The very peculiarity of Hindu women which they have developed and which is the ideal of their life, is that of the mother. If you enter a Hindu's home, you will not find the wife to be the same equal companion of the husband as you find her. But when you find the mother, she is the very pillar of the Hindu home. The wife must wait to become the mother, and then she will be everything.” Swamiji defines the place of mother in the Indian family:

The mother is the God in our family. The idea is that the only real love that we see in the world, the most unselfish love is in the mother always suffering, always loving. And what love can represent the love of God more than the love which we see in the mother? Thus the mother is the incarnation of God on earth to the Hindu.

“Every incarnation worshiped Mother in public or in secret, or how could he have got energy?” Vivekananda said. Someone who heard him in the West noted: “The Mother is holy. The Motherhood of God is more in his mind than Fatherhood.” Swamiji told his disciples at Thousand Island Park: “The worship of even one spark of Mother in our earthly mother leads to greatness. Worship Her if you want love and wisdom.”

Vivekananda was an exemplar of devotion through service. He served his mother as a living goddess throughout his life, which reveals a fresh dimension of the all-renouncing monk who had rejected, like his own master, the desire for woman and gold and severed all ties with his family. Nonetheless, his master kept one un-severed bond to tie Narendra to this world of human suffering: his attachment for his mother—Vivekananda retained a commitment of eternal love for his mother. Srimati Bhuvaneshwari Devi, who passed her entire life of tribulations and poverty with a rare human dignity, offered her eldest son Narendra to the world as a wandering monk, as a savior, and as a world teacher.

In India, women are the replica of Divine Mother who is beheld in the highest esteem as the shakti of Brahman. Mothers are regarded as the embodiment of a living and loving God. God is the Mother of all creation; self-effacing love, of which the human mother is the ideal symbol, is known by the Hindu as Divine love. Throughout the world, great writers have paid the highest tribute to their mother's selfless love: "Women have more heart and imagination than men. Enthusiasm arises from imagination; self-sacrifice springs from the heart. They are, therefore, by nature more heroic than heroes." This reflects their value of high ideals. In India, where every woman is regarded as "mother," the national ideal of "Renunciation and Service" holds true for women as well as men. Looking upon woman as mother is the purest and noblest Hindu conception.

Maharaja Ajit Singh of Khetri,  
Instrument of Swamiji's Devotion

As he was nearing the end of his life, Swamiji's shared correspondence with Maharaja Ajit Singh of Khetri poignantly reveals Swamiji's agony of loving concern for his mother. On 22 November 1898, Swamiji sent a letter from Belur Math to Maharaja Ajit Singh, which reads in part:

I approach your Highness today on a most important business of mine, knowing well that I have not the least shame in opening my mind to you, and that I consider you as my only friend in this life. . . .

I have one great sin always rankling in my breast, and that is [in order] to do a service to the world, I have sadly neglected my mother. Now my last desire is to make seva and serve my mother for some years at least. I want to live with my mother . . . Now my last desire is to make Seva and serve my mother . . . This will certainly smoothen my last days as well as that of my mother. She lives now in a hovel. I want to build a little, decent home for her . . . Is it too much for a royal descendant of Ramchandra to do for one he loves and calls his friend? I do not know whom else to appeal to. The money I got from Europe was for the "work" and every penny almost has been given over to that work. Nor can I go beg of others for help for my own self. About my own family affairs I have exposed myself to your Highness and none else shall know of it. I am tired, heart-sick and dying. Do, I pray, this last great work of kindness to me.

This is one of Swamiji's most remarkable letters, bearing every mark of tenderest affection for his mother. He was Love incarnate; love seems to drip from every word in this letter. Here we find in Swamiji a rare blend of the strength of steel and the softness of dew.

Why, of all the persons he knew, did Vivekananda approach Maharaja Ajit Singh of Khetri? It is known from Swami Vivekananda's letters that his relationship with Ajit Singh was very close and cordial. On his first visit to Khetri, Swamiji spent two and a half months with him, during which the Maharaja asked about his family's

circumstances. Anxious about his family's economic crisis, Swamiji might have disclosed his troubled mind to him. Subsequent to that visit, the Raja took a keen interest in Swamiji's family and regularly sent one hundred rupees every month to Bhuvaneshwari Devi. This happy news removed a "terrible anxiety" from Swamiji's mind and "made it possible for him to face the world and do some work." This monthly stipend was regularly sent to Swamiji's mother until the Maharaja's death in 1901. Whether she continued to receive it after his death or not remains a matter of controversy.

On 17 December 1897, at Khetri, Swamiji said in a meeting that whatever little he had done for the uplift of India would not have been possible had he not met the Raja of Khetri. Again, he wrote in a letter to Munshi Jagmohanlal on 11 October 1897, "Certain men are born in certain periods to perform certain actions in combination. Ajit Singh and myself are two such souls—born to help each other in a big work for the good of mankind. . . . We are as supplement and complement." On 17 September 1898, Swamiji wrote to Ajit Singh, "I am in want of funds. Though the American friends are doing everything they can to help me, I feel shame to beg from them all the time, especially as illness makes one incur contingent expenses. I have no shame to beg of one person in the world and that is yourself. Whether you give or refuse, it is the same to me." On 26 October 1898, Swamiji again wrote to Ajit Singh, "I am praying day and night for your welfare. Do not lose heart if anything befalls, the 'Mother' is your protection." In the light of Swamiji's deep feeling of friendship for the Raja of Khetri, we can easily understand how Swamiji could make such an appeal to the raja for assistance to his mother.

Touched by the tone of Swamiji's letter, the Maharaja immediately replied to Swamiji, inquiring in his letter about the cost of maintaining a house for his mother. On 1 December 1898, Swamiji wrote back to him, "One more thing will I beg of you—if possible the one hundred rupees a month for my mother be made permanent, so that even after my death it may regularly reach her. Or even if your Highness ever gets reasons to stop your love and kindness for me, my poor old mother may be provided [for], remembering the love you once had for a poor Sadhu."

Upon receiving this letter, the Maharaja at once sent five hundred rupees to Swamiji but for various reasons, the idea was dropped. Some time later, Swamiji took a loan of five thousand rupees and purchased a house from his aunt, who cheated him outright by refusing to hand over the legal title deed. On 6 August 1899, he wrote in a letter to Mrs. Ole Bull, "The aunt whom you saw had a deep-laid plan to cheat me, and she and her people contrived to sell me a house for 6,000 rupees or 400 pounds, and I bought [it] for my mother in good faith. Then they would not give me possession, hoping that I would not go to court for the shame of taking forcible possession as a Sannyasin."

### Swamiji's Increasing Devotion to His Mother

During his second stay in America, Swamiji again was compelled to think about his

mother and the problems she faced. In a letter to Mrs. Ole Bull dated 17 January 1900, he wrote, “It is becoming clearer to me that I lay down all concerns of the Math and for a time go back to my mother. She has suffered much through me. I must try to smooth her last days. Do you know, this was just exactly what the great Shankaracharya himself had to do! . . . leaving my mother was a great renunciation in 1884—it is a greater renunciation to go back to my mother now.”

On 7 March 1900, Swamiji wrote to Mrs. Ole Bull:

As for my mother, I am going back to her—for my last days and hers. The thousand dollars I have in New York will bring Rs. 9 a month; then I bought for her a bit of land which will bring about Rs. 6; and her old house—that will bring, say, Rs. 6 . . . All my life I have been a torture to my poor mother. Her whole life has been one of continuous misery. If it be possible, my last attempt should be to make her a little happy. I have planned it all out.

On 18 May 1900, Swamiji again wrote to Mrs. Ole Bull, “Mrs. [James Henry] Sevier gave me 6,000 Rs. for family—this was distributed between my cousin, aunt, etc. The 5,000 Rs. for buying the house was borrowed from the Math funds.”

Swamiji left America on 26 July 1900, and eventually returned to India in shattered health due to diabetes, dropsy and asthma, the sight in his right eye almost gone. In spite of that, he never abandoned any duty which he considered sacred. He continued to visit his mother and tried to alleviate her economic troubles and solve her family affairs as best as he could.

Though Swamiji’s plan to build “a little cottage” for his mother on the Ganga ever remained a dream unfulfilled, he continued to strain his every nerve to settle the court case over a property dispute that had begun when Swamiji was fourteen years old. He went to his mother’s residence on 19 June 1902, gave an additional thousand rupees to the opposing party, and settled it. On 2 July, two days before his demise, Swamiji gave an additional four hundred rupees to settle the case. His mother was sixty-one years old when Swamiji left his body.

### Swamiji’s Parental Background

We cannot understand the purity and nobility of Bhuvaneshwari Devi’s character and hence her influence on Swamiji’s character—which inspired Swamiji’s deep devotion to her—without a brief look into Swamiji’s parental background.

### Nobility of Swami Vivekananda’s Paternal Grandparents and Father

The Datta family of Simulia in northern Calcutta was well known for its wealth, education and charity. Swamiji was born Narendranath Datta, son of Vishwanath Datta (1835-1884) and Bhuvaneshwari Devi (1841-1911). Vishwanath's father, Durgaprasad, had a strong desire to become a monk and renounced the world in 1835 a few months after Vishwanath was born. In obedience to scriptural injunctions, he paid only a brief visit to Calcutta after twelve years of spiritual practices.

An interesting anecdote about Swamiji's grandfather that is related to this visit reveals his mettle as a monk. Durgaprasad took shelter in the house of a friend who assured him that his presence would remain secret. However, unable to conceal his joy, his friend informed Durgaprasad's family, who immediately whisked him away. Meanwhile, without losing his mental equipoise, Durgaprasad sat in the corner of the room he was given; the door was locked. For three days, he did not touch any food. Fearing that he might die, his relatives finally unlocked the door and Durgaprasad disappeared. Later, Vishwanath searched in vain for his father in Varanasi.

Vishwanath's mother also proved her mettle. One has to imagine how difficult it was for her to raise her son while enduring the constant enmity, hostility, and selfishness of her husband's family. His affectionate mother passed away when Vishwanath was about twelve years old.

Now an orphan, he grew up in the family of his uncle Kaliprasad, who usurped much of Vishwanath's rightful property. Despite this unsympathetic behavior, Vishwanath "reverenced and generously helped the uncle, though he was well aware that he was cheated by him at every step."

Vishwanath embraced the trend of his times, during which there was a blending of the Hindu and Islamic cultures with the culture of the West. He developed into a man with a modern outlook. He was proficient in many Indian languages as well as in English. He studied music, for which he had a great love, under an ustad. People in Calcutta remembered his love for music and his generosity well after his death.

He enrolled himself as an attorney-at-law in the High Court of Calcutta. His eminence in legal practice took him to many places in northern India. A man of liberal temperament, he enjoyed the culture and literature of people belonging to other religions. He read not only the Hindu scriptures but the poems of Hafiz and the Bible as well. He was very liberal-minded and deviated a little from Orthodox Hindu traditions in his food and dress and other personal habits. He was completely at home with his Muslim and English friends. Once, he presented a copy of the Bible to his son Narendranath and remarked, "All of religion is to be found in this one book."

Vishwanath was free of superstitions. When Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championed the marriage of young widows, for example, Vishwanath supported it. Once, in Lahore, he worshipped the Divine Mother Durga in a picture and enjoyed her festival in the company of many people by offering them consecrated food. "But," according to

Swami Saradananda, “to earn money, live amply, and make others happy by practicing charity as far as possible—these constituted the highest purpose of his life.” In fact, Vishwanath’s huge earnings in the legal profession were spent extravagantly to maintain a large retinue of dependents. As one of his sons later wrote, “Extending charity to the poor and the distressed was like a disease with him.”

Sister Christine recalls Swamiji’s words about his father in *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*:

“To my father,” he said, “I owe my intellect and my compassion.” He would tell how his father would give money to a drunkard, knowing for what purpose it would be used. “This world is so terrible, let him forget it for a few minutes, if he can,” the father would say, in self-defense. His father was lavish in his gifts. One day when he was more recklessly extravagant than usual, his youthful son said, “Father, what are you going to leave me?” “Go, stand before your mirror,” was the father’s reply, “and you will see what I leave you.”

Swamiji’s Noble Mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi

The mother for whose welfare Swamiji demonstrated exemplary devotion and dedication was an extraordinary woman. She was the embodiment of the timeless virtues that form the backbone of India’s culture. In India, mothers are the custodians of the cultural training of their children. Therefore, the entire future of the country is completely in the hands of mothers. The ancient lawgiver Manu writes, “From the point of view of reverence due, a teacher is tenfold superior to a mere lecturer, a father a hundredfold to a teacher, and a mother a thousandfold to a father.” We will make our humble study of the great and noble character of Bhuvaneshwari Devi, keeping this idea before us.

Bhuvaneshwari Devi was the only child of her parents, who were very well known in northern Calcutta. When she was only ten years old, Bhuvaneshwari Devi was married to Vishwanath Datta, who was sixteen. Vishwanath was very fortunate to have Bhuvaneshwari as his wife. She was his good companion in every respect, sharing the joys and agonies of her husband’s large, joint family and faithfully following the traditional pattern of Hindu life.

Bhuvaneshwari Devi’s Austerity and Prayer for a Son

Vishwanath and Bhuvaneshwari Devi had four sons and six daughters. Their first child, a son, and their second, a daughter, died in childhood. Their next three children were daughters. The birth of a son, according to ancient tradition, is always welcome in a Hindu family. Naturally, Bhuvaneshwari Devi longed for a son. Down the ages, Hindu women have invoked the grace of God to tide over their difficulties in life. Their wants

and grievances are made known to God and they practice various austerities and read scriptures to invoke His grace. Bhuvaneshwari Devi observed somvara vrata, fasting and praying on Mondays, praying to Lord Shiva. An elderly aunt of the family who was living in Varanasi was asked to “make the necessary offerings and prayers to Vireshwar Shiva that a son might be born to her.”

Bhuvaneshwari Devi observed all the injunctions meticulously. Her whole-souled devotion to Lord Shiva was fulfilled through his grace. One night, she had a vivid dream: “She saw the Lord Shiva rouse Himself from His meditation and take the form of a male child who was to be her son.” On Monday, 12 January 1863, Makara Sankranti, their son Narendranath was born at a very auspicious time, his features strongly resembling those of his grandfather Durgaprasad. He also inherited his mother’s melodious voice, taste for sacred music and extraordinary memory. It has been written of Bhuvaneshwari Devi:

Above all, Bhuvaneshwari Devi was deeply religious in temperament, and used daily to perform herself the worship of Shiva. She was not given to much talking. Calm resignation to the will of God in all circumstances, power, and reserve characterized this noble Hindu woman. The poor and the helpless were the special objects of her solicitude. Like Vishwanath, Bhuvaneshwari Devi had a very sweet voice and could sing beautifully the songs on Sri Krishna, as heard in religious dramas. When beggars singing religious songs came to the house to beg, she could learn their songs by listening only once. She was, indeed, noted for her unusual memory and knew by heart long passages from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. More important, she had absorbed the essence of these timeless epics, and that essence, together with the culture to which it was the key, she passed on to her children as their great heritage.

It was, then, to these two, Vishwanath and Bhuvaneshwari Devi, that the boy who was to become the greatest man of his age, whose influence was to shake the world, and who was to lay the foundation of a new order of things, was born.

Swamiji was their sixth child. Their seventh and eighth children were both daughters. The last two children were sons, Mahendranath and Bhupendranath, both of whom lived long lives.

The most exalted law of motherhood is the law of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the lifeblood of a mother’s existence. Bhuvaneshwari Devi raised her prayer-born child with utmost care, infinite patience and constant prayer. The child Narendranath became her whole being. As we read about his early life, we are struck by the deep impact of her personality upon the formation of his character.

Swamiji’s mother always counseled her children to be truthful, chaste, dignified and humane. In their developing minds, she imprinted eternal values of healthy living. Once, Narendra was unfairly punished by his schoolteacher without justification. When Narendra told his mother about it, she consoled him:



“If you are right, my boy, what does it matter? It may be unjust and unpleasant, but do what you think right, come what may.” Many times he suffered, many times he was misunderstood even by those nearest and dearest to him when he adopted a course which to them seemed strange, but which to him was inevitable because, in his opinion, it was right. The maxim he had learned, and which he followed always in life was, “Stick to your guns, dead or alive!”

Bhuvaneshwari Devi was short in stature and very beautiful, with a regal gait that Narendranath inherited. Sister Christine recalls:

[Swamiji said:] “After she hears the Ramayana read, she can recite what she has heard.” . . . He [Swamiji] considered a good memory one of the signs of spirituality.

Many were the stories he told of his mother—the proud, little woman who tried so hard to hide her emotions and her pride in him. How she was torn between her disapproval of the life he had chosen and her pride in the name he had made for himself.

Those of us who were privileged to see his mother, know that from her he inherited his regal bearing. This tiny woman carried herself like a queen.

#### Bhuvaneshwari Devi’s Righteousness

Bhuvaneshwari Devi lived almost her entire, long life in the Datta family, from her marriage at age ten until her death in 1911, except for a brief time. She demonstrated a profound capacity to remain silent in spite of the harsh injustices inflicted on her by her guardian uncle-in-law and his wife—to the extent of not providing her with more than one sari to wear. Bhuvaneshwari silently endured all the injustices heaped on her by their immediate guardians. This was eventually noticed by her husband, who once grumbled, “How is it that I who earn so much money see that my wife does not get [a] bellyful to eat!” The anguish he expressed had no effect at all on the aunt and uncle.

Due to a family quarrel, separation was forced on Vishwanath Datta, and he moved to another place, where Narendranath studied for his B. A. Bhupendranath Datta writes, “After separation, our family removed temporarily from the ancestral place and hired a house at 7, Bhairav Biswas Lane, where Narendranath studied to prepare himself for the B. A. Examination.” His father returned to their ancestral home, much to the uncle’s consternation.

After Vishwanath Datta’s death, Swamiji’s family was sheltered by Swamiji’s grandmother, Raghmani (c. 1825-1911) at her house at 7 Ramtanu Basu Lane, which Swamiji had described in his letter to the Raja of Khetri as “a hovel.” Bhupendranath Datta wrote, “We stayed with her till 1903. She supported us and suffered for us. She had to part with . . . rented land . . . for conducting the law-suit brought against us by our aunt.” The difficulty of her life in a joint family headed by an unscrupulous uncle who,

along with others, foiled their every legitimate claim at every opportunity can only be imagined.

### Other Exceptional Qualities of His Mother

Bhuvaneshwari Devi demonstrated her exceptional capacity in managing the affairs of the large, complicated household. She was free of superstition and valued education for her daughters as well as her sons. She sent her two eldest daughters to be educated at Bethune College and her two younger daughters to Rambagan's Mission school. Jogendrabala studied English from Miss Kamini Seal, Principal of the Bethune College. Mrs. Macdonald, the wife of Prof. Macdonald, used to come to teach her as well at her home.

Most of the members of the Datta family participated in the annual Hindu mela, organized by Nabagopal Mitra in 1867 to encourage and advance national pride in India's cultural heritage. Bhuvaneshwari Devi's daughters contributed samples of their handicrafts. One year, two of her children received one of the highest awards—her daughter Haramani for her exhibit of a jari (embroidery) design on red velvet and her son Naren for gymnastics. In the Youbert Exhibition of 1880 in Calcutta, her daughter Jogendrabala's exhibit of a garland of beads also won a medal.

In the midst of her rigorous duties, Swamiji's mother had found time to learn English. She could converse in English with Sister Nivedita and Sister Christine when they visited her. She personally taught primary English lessons to her three sons at home. Along with her secular training in English, she imparted moral instruction. She emphatically told them that, in spite of the hardships and many troubles one encounters, one should never abandon moral principles.

She also found time to read daily from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, to read the Bengali literature of the day, and to compose Bengali verses. Her Bengali handwriting was exceptionally beautiful. Thanks to her prodigious memory, Narendranath learned many stories from the epics and the Puranas at her knee. He shared many of these with Sister Nivedita, who revised them and immortalized them with her own style in her Cradle Tales of Hinduism.

Bhuvaneshwari and Vishwanath were both very large-hearted. Fully approving of her husband's support of marriage for young widows, Bhuvaneshwari joined him in defense of two such marriages that took place in their locality. amidst the strong resistance of their neighbors to this social reform.

Her husband used to buy large properties from court sales and resell them. One of these properties he kept and rented after purchasing it in Bhuvaneshwari's name. When the Muslim tenants were unable to pay the rent, they approached him about it. Vishwanath directed them to his wife, the rightful owner of the property. When she heard their case,

she relieved them of their concern. Thereafter, the Muslims did not pay any rent and eventually earned squatter's rights to the property.

There is another telling incident of her rare magnanimity and spirit of self-sacrifice. Her son-in-law remarried after her daughter Jogendrabala's suicide in 1891, at age twenty-five, at Simla Hill. Sublimating her own emotions, she accepted the new wife into her home and treated her as her own daughter.

When a heavy deluge of rain fell on Calcutta and its environs for a fortnight in 1900, Bhuvaneshwari sent some foodstuffs through her son Bhupendranath, who had to go a long way through waist-deep water to deliver them to Kankurgacchi Yogodyan (where some of the sacred remains of Sri Ramakrishna are interred).

Bhuvaneshwari Devi was forty-three years old when her husband passed away in 1884. After Vishwanath's death, her resourcefulness protected the family from disaster. Swami Saradananda describes her ingenuity and initiative:

Fallen on bad days after her husband's death, her mettle was put to the test. She, however, showed wonderful patience, calmness, frugality and adaptability to the sudden change of circumstances. The lady who spent a thousand rupees monthly to manage her household affairs, had now only thirty rupees a month to maintain herself and her sons and daughters. But she was never for a day seen to be dejected. She managed all affairs of her family with that meagre income in such a way that those who saw it took her monthly expenditure to be much higher. One shudders indeed to think of the terrible condition into which Bhuvaneshwari fell on the sudden death of her husband. There was no assured income with which to meet the needs of her family; and yet she had to maintain her old mother, sons, and daughters brought up in opulence, and meet expenses for the education of her children. Her relatives, who had been enabled to earn a decent living by her husband's generosity and influence, in place of coming forward to help her in her bad days, found now an opportunity to do something that was to their liking, and that was to do their best to deprive her even of her legitimate possessions. Her eldest son Narendranath, possessed of many good qualities, failed to find a job in spite of his best efforts in many directions and losing all attraction for the world, was making himself ready to renounce it forever. One naturally feels respect and reverence for Sri Bhuvaneshwari when one thinks of the manner in which she performed her duties even in that terrible condition.

Bhuvaneshwari Devi was extraordinary in many ways, which evoked profound admiration from her son. It may be recalled that there were several causes for her suffering—illegal eviction from the family's residence, deprivation of her legitimate share of property, expensive law-suits over many years as well as other acute financial difficulties, and Jogendrabala's suicide. There was also the significant absence of her eldest son and her second son Mahendranath's absolute silence about his whereabouts in England, where he had gone to study law in 1896. Mahendranath returned to his mother in Calcutta only after Swamiji's demise.

In that critical period of Bhuvaneshwari Devi's financial deprivation and emotional suffering, Bhupendranath joined the Indian revolutionary movement in 1903. In 1907, he was charged with sedition as the editor of Yugantar (the revolutionary movement's literary organ in Bengal). He was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for one year, after which he was released. With the suggestion and financial aid of Sister Christine, he left Calcutta the same day. Three or four days later, he was traveling incognito to the United States, leaving the police baffled in their fruitless search for him at Belur Math. The women of Calcutta congratulated Bhuvaneshwari Devi for being the mother of such a brave son. Bhuvaneshwari Devi spoke these sober words, "Bhupen's work has just begun. I have dedicated him for the cause of the country." This certainly speaks highly of the magnanimity of her heart and her courageous attitude.

Manmatha Nath Ganguly, a disciple of Swamiji who saw Bhuvaneshwari Devi in her old age gave this account: "Her very appearance commanded respect. She was a strongly built lady with large, fine eyes and long eyelashes. She had a remarkably strong personality that commanded respect without any questioning. No wonder that Swamiji had inherited these qualities from her." Sadly, posterity knows little of the magnitude of Bhuvaneshwari Devi's influence in the life of her great son Swami Vivekananda, except for a few words pertaining to her in the Vivekananda literature. One photo of his mother alone exists. It speaks of her devotion in following the Indian traditional spiritual life by telling beads and concentrating on the ishta devata, the Chosen Ideal. No photo of his father is available.

### Glimpses of Swamiji's Devotion to His Mother

A few glimpses into Swamiji's love, devotion and praise for his mother are now being given. Although Swamiji became a monk, he never forgot the dire poverty his mother was facing. He expressed his anguish before Pramadas Mitra who sent twenty rupees for Swamiji's mother. In Swamiji's letter from Simla, Calcutta on 14 July 1889, it is revealed that his mother, out of family pride, did not accept that money. In Swamiji's "clashing and jarring life," he never forgot the pitiable condition of his mother and two younger brothers, Mahendranath and Bhupendranath.

When Swamiji was about to go to the West, a dream about his mother completely upset his mind. Later he described this event thus:

Once, when I was putting up at Manmathababu's place, I dreamt one night that my mother had died. My mind became much distracted. Not to speak of corresponding with anybody at home, I used to send no letters in those days even to our Math. The dream being disclosed to Manmatha, he sent a wire to Calcutta to ascertain the facts of the matter. For the dream had made my mind uneasy, on the one hand; and on the other, our Madras friends, with all arrangements ready, were insisting on my departing for America immediately: yet, I felt rather unwilling to leave before getting any news of my mother. So Manmatha, who discerned this state of my mind, suggested our repairing to a man

(named Govinda Chetti) living some distance from the town, who, having acquired mystic powers over spirits, could tell fortunes and read the past and future of a man's life. So at Manmatha's request, and to get rid of my mental suspense, I agreed to go to this man. Covering the distance partly by railway and partly on foot, we four of us—Manmatha, Alasinga, myself and another—managed to reach the place. There, what met our eyes was a man with a ghoulish, haggard, soot-black appearance, sitting close to a cremation ground. His attendants used some jargon of a South Indian dialect to explain to us that this was a man with perfect power over ghosts. At first the man took absolutely no notice of us; and then, when we were about to retire from the place, he requested us to wait. Our Alasinga was acting as interpreter and he explained the request to us. Next, the man commenced drawing some figures with a pencil, and presently I found him becoming perfectly still in mental concentration. Then he began to give out my name, my genealogy, the history of my long line of forefathers, and said that Sri Ramakrishna was keeping close to me all through my wanderings, intimating to me also good news about my mother. Furthermore, he foretold that I should have to go very soon to far-off lands to preach religion.

We have seen several intimate glimpses of Swamiji's feelings for his mother. To Bhuvaneshwari Devi, Swamiji was the "veritable apple of the eye." To Swamiji, his mother was the one being in the world, if there was any, whom he loved. On 29 January 1894, he wrote to his friend, Haridas Viharidas Desai, the Dewan of Junagadh State:

Your last letter reached me a few days ago. You had been to see my poor mother and brothers. I am glad you did. But you have touched the only soft place in my heart. You ought to know, Diwanji, that I am no hard-hearted brute. If there is any being I love in the whole world, it is my mother. Yet I believed and still believe that without my giving up the world, the great mission which Ramakrishna Paramahansa, my great Master, came to preach would not see the light, and where would those young men be who have stood as bulwarks against the surging waves of materialism and luxury of the day? These have done a great amount of good to India, especially to Bengal, and this is only the beginning. With the Lord's help they will do things for which the whole world will bless them for ages. So on the one hand, my vision of the future of Indian religion and that of the whole world, my love for the millions of beings sinking down and down for ages with nobody to help them, nay, nobody with even a thought for them; on the other hand, making those who are nearest and dearest to me miserable; I choose the former. "Lord will do the rest."

It is interesting to note that although more than 775 letters from Swamiji have been published to date, strangely, we do not come across a single letter that Swamiji wrote to or received from, his mother. Still, those who study his life know of Swamiji's tender devotion to his mother while facing his own difficulties with great moral strength and forbearance, of his constant anxiety to make her financially self-sufficient and of his genuine respect for her great character.

Envious of Swamiji's personal success at Chicago's Parliament of World Religions in 1893, the Brahma leader Pratap Chandra Mazoomdar had kept up a long campaign of vituperative slander against Swamiji's character, rousing many Bengalis to his cause of

defaming Swamiji. However, ignoring the false slander against him in America and India, and demonstrating indifference towards the accolades Americans were simultaneously heaping upon him, Swamiji wrote to Miss Isabelle McKindley from New York on 26 April 1894:

Now I do not care what they even of my own people say about me (referring to Mazoomdar and others who agreed with him)—except for one thing. I have an old mother. She has suffered much all her life and in the midst of all she could bear to give me up for the service of God and man; but to have given up the most beloved of her children—her hope—to live a beastly immoral life in a far distant country, as Mazoomdar was telling in Calcutta, would have simply killed her. But the Lord is great, none can injure His children.

Swamiji had delivered a series of lectures in Cambridge. At the special request of Mrs. Ole Bull, he delivered his lecture, “The Ideals of Indian Women” at her house on 17 December 1894. It made a particularly deep impact on the women, who were highly impressed by his talk. Unknown to Swamiji, some American women sent a letter to his mother in India, along with a beautiful picture of the child Jesus in the lap of the Virgin Mary. Referring to the lecture, Mrs. Bull wrote:

Having given from the Vedas, from Sanskrit literature and the dramas these Ideals, and having cited the laws of today favourable to the women of India, he paid his filial homage to his own mother as having enabled him to do the best he had done, by her own life of unselfish love and purity, that caused him by his very inheritance to choose the life of a monk.

We read further in the Life:

It was conspicuous in the Swami that wherever he went he paid the highest tribute to his mother, whenever occasion arose. One of his friends, recalling the few happy weeks that he had spent as a fellow guest in the house of a common friend, writes: “He spoke often of his mother. I remember his saying that she had wonderful self-control, and that he had never known any woman who could fast so long. She had once gone without food, he said, for as many as fourteen days together.” And it was not uncommon for his followers to hear such words upon his lips as: “It was my mother who inspired me to this. Her character was a constant inspiration to my life and work.”

Returning from his first trip to the West in 1897, Swamiji went to see his mother at the earliest opportunity, in spite of a very pressing engagement, and continued to visit her frequently. There is a moving portrait of that first visit: “After his glorious career in the West, after calling forth the adoration of three continents he met his mother. With his head on her lap, with all the pranks and helplessness of a child” he cried, ‘Mother, feed me with thine hands and make me grow’.” On another day when Swamiji happened to visit his mother, she had just finished her midday meal. Swamiji was very disappointed as nothing was left over for him to take as prasad. One sajna stick was all that was left on his mother’s plate. Swamiji immediately grabbed it and put it in his mouth.

We have another glimpse of Swamiji's concern about his mother and his eagerness to give her a little happiness. Once, Swamiji and Swami Brahmananda were staying at Balaram Bose's house. Swamiji, being a diabetic, could hardly sleep at night; he had to take a nap in the daytime. One day, his mother's maidservant was passing through that vicinity and casually asked about "Naren." Swami Brahmananda peeped into Swamiji's room and, seeing him asleep, reported that to her. She left. When Swamiji awakened from his nap, Swami Brahmananda told him about the maidservant's visit. Swamiji scolded him severely for not telling him about it. Believing that the maidservant had come on some urgent matter from his mother, Swamiji immediately hired a carriage and went to his mother's place, where he learned that his mother had not sent her—the maidservant had gone of her own accord. Regretting his harsh treatment of Swami Brahmananda, Swamiji sent a carriage to bring him to his mother's place. As soon as Swami Brahmananda arrived, Swamiji, as was his wont, begged him to be forgiven.

Swamiji did his best to fulfill his devotion to his mother through action, and was able to make her happy in many ways significant to her spiritual heart. In October 1901, Swamiji performed the first Durga Puja in the name of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, at Belur Math, which Holy Mother attended. At the invitation of Swamiji, his mother also attended. Swamiji personally looked after all the arrangements for the Jagaddhatri Puja at his mother's house; the monks were also invited and participated in the puja.

Bhuvaneshwari Devi's painful observation of Swamiji's current failing health at that time brought the memory of an unfulfilled vow to her conscious mind. Many years before, when Swamiji was suffering from a serious childhood illness, she had prayed to Mother Kali to save him. When he recovered, she had vowed to offer a special worship to Mother Kali in her temple to thank her for answering her prayer. Now, filled with the spirit of obedience to the command from his mother, a few days after the Kali Puja in 1901, he paid a visit to the Kali Temple at Kalighat and performed all the rituals required to fulfill her vow. Bathing in the Adi Ganga, he proceeded to the temple in wet clothes and rolled three times on the ground before the image of Mother Kali. Then he circumambulated the temple seven times. Alone, he performed the homa sacrifice in the complex on the west side of the natmandir. He returned to the Math, where he praised the Temple priests for permitting him to fulfill his mother's vow at this time, remembering their same kindness to him on a prior visit to Kalighat for worship in May 1899.

It was Bhuvaneshwari Devi's dearest wish to go on a long pilgrimage with Swamiji, and, in spite of his bad health, Swamiji long nurtured this desire to fulfill her wish as well as a strong desire that they should spend their last days together. Finally, he arranged to take his mother and other relatives on a pilgrimage to Dacca and Chandranath in East Bengal and Kamakhya in Assam, accompanying them in each place. His desire to take her to Rameshwaram in South India remained unfulfilled; the pilgrimage was cancelled due to his failing health.

Having a premonition of his early death, Swamiji requested Swami Brahmananda to take care of his mother in his absence and to settle her legal suit. He also asked him to take her to various pilgrimage centers in northern India. Swami Brahmananda regularly visited

Swamiji's mother and consoled and helped her in various ways after Swamiji's demise. Bhuvaneshwari made pilgrimages to Puri in 1900 and 1903, accompanied by a swami or brahmachari from Belur Math. In 1911, Swami Brahmananda went with her to Puri. Some time after returning from Puri, her "life of suffering and renunciation at the altar of family duties" came to an end on 25 July 1911.

We conclude our brief survey of Swamiji's devotion to his mother with one more detail of their sweet relationship:

One morning Swamiji's mother came to see him. . . . She went up to the veranda of the first story and cried aloud, "Viloo-oo," and her child came out of the room at once. The Great Vivekananda was just like a teen-aged son to his mother. He descended the stairs along with Bhuvaneshwari Devi, and then they walked in the garden path together and conversed softly on personal matters.

During the last few years whenever Swamiji was at Calcutta he would go himself to his mother. While at Belur he would occasionally visit his mother at Calcutta, but if perchance he could not go to her for a week or two, she would herself come down to Belur to see him and also ask his advice on family matters.

#### Swamiji's Praise of His Mother

It was Vivekananda's strong conviction that no child can achieve real greatness without being respectful to parents, particularly to the mother. As a true follower of Indian tradition, Swamiji glorified his mother's great character:

. . . always suffering, always loving . . . The love which my mother gave to me has made me what I am and I owe a debt to her that I can never repay . . .

I know that before I was born my mother would fast and pray and do hundreds of things which I could not do for five minutes even. She did that for two years. I believe whatever religious culture I have I owe to that. It was consciously that my mother brought me into the world to be what I am. Whatever little good impulse I have was given to me by my mother, and consciously, not unconsciously.

Swamiji never tired of extolling the virtues of motherhood and of his own mother. In "Women of India," a lecture he delivered on 18 January 1900 in Pasadena, California, Swamiji said:

From motherhood comes tremendous responsibility. There is the basis; start from that. Well, why is mother to be worshipped so much? Because our books teach us that it is the prenatal influence that gives the impetus to the child for good or evil. Go to a hundred thousand colleges, read a million books, associate with all the learned men of the world—better off you are when born with the right stamp. . . . Thus say our books: direct the



prenatal influence. Why should mother be worshipped? Because she made herself pure. She underwent harsh penances sometimes to keep herself as pure as purity can be. . . . My father and mother fasted and prayed, for years and years, so that I would be born. . . . She was a saint to bring me into the world; she kept her body pure, her food pure, her clothes pure, her imagination pure, for years, because I would be born. Because she did that, she deserves worship.”

In that same lecture, he indicated the early spiritual practice of reverence for the mother that he experienced: “As children, every day, when we are boys, we have to go early in the morning with a little cup of water and place it before the mother, and mother dips her toe into it and we drink it.”

Swamiji was a “Condensed India.” The eternal spiritual heritage of India found in him an inspired champion of Mother-worship in and through the human mother. Literature all over the world glorifies mother-love as the most sacred form of dedication. If we add to that the Indian ideal of Mother-worship, we get a perspective of his extraordinary devotion to his mother. Conditioned from birth by the spiritual idealism of the race, he represents an ideal and philosophy and is himself a model of that idealism. Great souls like Bhuvaneshwari Devi and Swami Vivekananda are not born in a day. They are the product of the eternal Hindu culture. As the living gospel of practical Vedanta, Swamiji has left us the rich legacy of his exemplary devotion to his mother for the benefit of the entire humanity.

## REFERENCES

- Christopher Dawson, Religion and Culture (London: Sheet and Ward, 1948, pp. 49-50.*  
*Swami Vivekananda, Lectures from Colombo to Almora, “The Mission of the Vedanta,”*  
*C. W., III: 182.*  
*Swami Vivekananda, Lectures from Colombo to Almora, “The Future of India,” C. W.,*  
*III: 291.*  
*A. L. Basham, The Wonder That Was India, 1967, p. 489.*  
*C. W., IX: 202.*  
*Letters of Sister Nivedita, S. P. Basu, ed., 2nd ed.), p. 221.*  
*C. W., III: 472.*  
*C. W., III: 509.*  
*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 9 volumes (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, I-*  
*VIII, 1989; IX, 1997),*  
*IX: 108-9.*  
*C. W., IX: 110.*  
*Arun Kumar Biswas, “Khetri in the Ramakrishna Movement,” Prabuddha Bharata 89 / 2*  
*(February 1984), p. 69.*  
*Sailendra Nath Dar, A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda (Madras:*  
*Vivekananda Prakashan*  
*Kendra, 1976), p. 1027. [Hereafter Comp. Bio.]*  
*Benishankar Sharma, Swami Vivekananda—A Forgotten Chapter of His Life (Calcutta:*  
*Oxford Book and*

*Stationary, 1963), p. 118.*  
*C. W., V: 141-2.*  
*Ibid., V: 143.*  
*C. W., IX: 110.*  
*Ibid., IX: 118-19.*  
*C. W., VIII: 489-90. See also M. L. Burke, Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1987) Vol. 5, A New Gospel, p. 237.*  
*Ibid., VIII: 496-7.*  
*C. W., IX: 137.*  
*His Eastern and Western Disciples, The Life of Swami Vivekananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000), p. 4.*  
*[Hereafter Life]*  
*Comp. Bio., SV, p. 6.*  
*Ibid.*  
*Sister Christine in Reminiscences, p. 184.*  
*Manu Samhita, 2: 145.*  
*Life, p. 10.*  
*Ibid., p. 11.*  
*The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979)*  
*Revised and enlarged Volume I, pp. 8-9. [Hereafter Life of SV by Disciples]*  
*Life of SV by Disciples, Vol. I, p. 34.*  
*Sister Christine in Reminiscences of Vivekananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2004), pp. 174-5. [Hereafter Reminiscences]*  
*Bhupendranath Datta, Swami Vivekananda, Patriot-Prophet, A Study (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1954), p. 107. [Hereafter SV, Patriot-Prophet]*  
*Ibid.*  
*SV, Patriot-Prophet, p. 111. See also S. N. Dhar, A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda (Madras: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, 1975), Part I, 10. [Hereafter Comp. Bio., SV]*  
*SV, Patriot-Prophet, p. 139.*  
*Comp. Bio., SV, Part I, p. 11.*  
*SV, Patriot-Prophet, pp. 103-4.*  
*Comp. Bio., SV, Part I, p. 12.*  
*SV, Patriot-Prophet, p. 123.*  
*Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna, The Great Master, trans., Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1984), p. 840.*  
*SV, Patriot-Prophet, pp. 112-13.*  
*Manmatha Nath Ganguly in Reminiscences, p. 345.*  
*Swami Vivekananda Vani O Rachana, 10 vols (Kolkata: Udbodhan Office, 1996), 6: 228. (The relevant portion of this letter has not been translated into English.)*

*Life of SV by Disciples, Vol. I, pp. 380-1.*  
*C. W., VIII: 297-8.*  
*C. W., VII: 462.*  
*Life of SV by Disciples, Vol. I, p. 516.*  
*Ibid.*  
*Brahmavadin, 16/7 (July 1911), p. 306.*  
*Shankar, Achena Ajana Vivekananda (Kolkata: Sahityam, 2004), p. 82.*  
*Swami Prabhananda, Brahmananda-Charit, p. 279.*  
*Comp. Bio., SV, Part II, p. 1391.*  
*SV, Patriot-Prophet, p. 114.*  
*Comp. Bio., SV, Part II, pp. 1391-2.*  
*Manmatha Nath Ganguly in Reminiscences, p. 345.*  
*M. L. Burke, Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries, Prophetic Mission, Vol. II, p. 239. Cf. C. W., IX: 202-3.*  
*C. W., VIII: 60-1.*  
*Ibid., VIII: 57.*