

The Motherhood of God

By Swami Tathagatananda

There are good souls, calm and magnanimous, who do good to others as does the spring, and who, having themselves crossed this dreadful ocean of mundane existence, help others also to cross the same without any motive whatsoever.

—Vivekachundamani 37

The life of Sri Saradamani Devi, the Holy Mother as she is reverentially referred to, is really an enigma. She could always be found engaged in all sorts of ordinary domestic work: scouring the floor, washing the vessels, cooking the food and serving guests. Around 1877, the simple, rustic, unassuming Sri Sarada Devi had the unique capacity to stand face-to-face with a dacoit at night in a lonely meadow. Her divinity must have created a deep impact on the dacoit's mind, for he was utterly disarmed and no harm came to her—the dacoit and his wife treated her as their daughter. It is reported that the dacoit saw Kali in her, and this is no wonder, for she was worshipped by Sri Ramakrishna as Kali in Dakshineswar. Later on, the Holy Mother herself told Shibuda, Sri Ramakrishna's nephew, that she was Kali. The Holy Mother's boldness, born of her spiritual quality, was displayed in all its frankness and purity, in its highest form, for the redemption of humanity. In her aspect as a wife, while yet in the tender stage of a teenager, Sri Sarada Devi demonstrated the true idealism of sahadharmini (co-partnership in idealism). Her supreme courage of conviction is evident in her words to Sri Ramakrishna when he mysteriously gave her the option of exercising her conjugal rights, although it meant he would be pulled into the mire of worldliness: "Why should I drag you down to the path of samsara? I am here to help you in your chosen path."

To superficial observers Holy Mother appears like any other village woman. Yet mighty spiritual giants like Swami Vivekananda and Swami Brahmananda took special care to ceremonially purify themselves before visiting her and shook with pious emotion in her presence. All Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples felt like children before her. Her word was their command. Sri Sarada Devi did not command their respect merely because she was Sri Ramakrishna's wife. Her spiritual light was not at all "borrowed"—Sri Sarada Devi was the very substance of the Divine Mother. Her life's intrinsic glory and greatness combined with her natural gifts and native perfection made people adore her as the Holy Mother. Human life mirroring the Absolute—that was Sri Sarada Devi. In the record of religious biography we do not come across such a high manifestation of Divine Shakti as

was found in her. Holy Mother's divine life reads like an ancient legend and appears to belong to the realm of mythology.

The human mind normally gravitates to the material plane. Ordinary people nurtured in secular, sensate cultures find it impossible to fathom the spiritual stature of the Holy Mother. Barely can they appreciate, much less understand, such a divine character of immaculate purity. The veil covering Sri Sarada Devi's face was actually a curtain concealing the supernal splendor of her inner life. Swami Saradananda once remarked, "We could get some inkling, at least, of the greatness of the Master, but of this lady we cannot understand anything. He has drawn the veil of Maya so thick around her that none can see through it and have a glimpse of her greatness." Swami Premananda also left us some beautiful and moving remarks on this aspect of her compassionate nature and self-effacement:

Who has understood the Holy Mother? Who can understand her? You have heard about Sita, Savitri, Vishnupriya and Radharani. The Holy Mother occupies a far higher place. Not even the slightest trace of divine powers was noticeable in her. . . . What a supreme power that! Don't you see how many people are rushing on to her! The poison which we cannot digest, we just pass on to the Mother and she gives refuge to everyone. Infinite is her power! Unbounded her mercy! Victory unto the Mother! What to speak of us! We have not found even Sri Ramakrishna doing this. Infinite patience, unbounded mercy, and above all the negation of even the slightest trace of egotism!

In one of his letters, Swami Premananda wrote:

The exalted Empress has of her own accord appeared as the indigent woman. She sweeps floors, scours vessels, husks paddy and even removes the leavings of devotees after food. She has been undergoing great hardships at Jayrambati in order to teach the householders their duties. Infinite patience, unbounded mercy and above all the negation of even the slightest trace of egoism.

In truth, Holy Mother was a rare personality of tremendous inner spiritual energy harnessed within an external appearance of utter tranquility.

HOLY MOTHER IS THE CONSUMMATION OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S IDEAL

The great significance of Holy Mother's life is in the fact that the Sri Ramakrishna ideal of the Motherhood of God reached its consummation in her. Her life was the continuation and increased unfolding of the Master's message. She lived in a manner to exemplify His teachings; everything the Holy Mother said and did was founded upon them. She was God-centered and God-circumferenced. Her love for God matched her love for man. In her life, we see both husband and wife making God their joint venture. This is why the demise of the Master in 1886 temporarily cast such a deep gloom over her and left her

with no zest for life. But His ecstatic trances, visions and assurances gave her peace. For the remainder of her life, in silent sacrifice and penance of the highest order, she fulfilled the mission of the Master, who left her behind to continue to exemplify His great renunciation and catholicity.

Holy Mother wholly merged her personality in that of the Master. Beginning as His disciple, assimilating all His ideas and making them her own vitality, she was found to excel even her illustrious husband in the qualities of forgiveness, affection and renunciation and service. She became the consoler, guide and inspirer to many devotees and seekers. The Master, having a clear idea of her spiritual ministry, prepared her for her future work and commissioned her by saying, “The people round about live like worms in darkness. You should look after them.” Towards the end of his life he asked her one day, “Won’t you do anything? Am I to do all?” To her reply, “I am only a woman. What can I do?” the Master remarked, “No, no. You have much to do.” And she did much indeed, for to her, Sri Ramakrishna was always a living entity. She always advised people to take refuge in Sri Ramakrishna in the midst of all their suffering, dangers and difficulties. The Holy Mother was an eternal fountain of inspiration, the incarnation of mercy, whose flow of divine motherliness soothed the scorched hearts of the people. Everyone who came near to her went away refreshed and invigorated.

Holy Mother came to manifest the Motherhood of God. The essence of motherhood is pure and serene love. In her character, one dominant trait overshadowed all the rest: her motherly love and concern. Most striking was her readiness to help everyone regardless of caste, creed, color and merit or the lack of it. She was sweetness incarnate and grace abounding. Her simple words went right to the hearts of listeners, giving them complete solace and satisfaction. Her pure, immaculate nature radiated purity and serenity. From her character, people learned the sterling virtues of self-abnegation, humility, modesty, chastity, ungrudging endurance of pain and suffering, selfless service, maternal love and devotion to God. Overwhelmingly greater than could be understood, the events of her life give us but a tiny glimpse of her worth. Words can only partially reveal the divine, spiritual glow of her hallowed life. The beautiful poem of her life was the sum of her noble teachings.

HOLY MOTHER’S VITAL ROLE IN THE DYNAMICS OF THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION

Ours is a frail and halting attempt to glimpse the magnificent character of Sri Sarada Devi, who was a perennial source of inspiration to the monks of the Ramakrishna Order and played a significant role in the fulfillment of the Ramakrishna Mission’s work. The Holy Mother wanted the Order to cherish the living personality of the Master in all its aspects. She gave the highest emphasis to the Order as an entity of love, sympathy and affection, not as an organization built of brick and mortar. It is on the bedrock of her motherliness that the Mission stands established. During the outbreak of the plague in Calcutta in 1899, the magnitude of the people’s suffering so moved Swami Vivekananda

that he considered selling the Math property to defray the costs of the plague relief work. But when the Holy Mother came to know about it, she cautioned Swamiji not to sell the Math property because the Mission would have greater and far-reaching consequences in the future by helping humanity in many diverse ways. Swamiji, realizing his emotional reaction, immediately accepted the Holy Mother's advice. Another time, when Swamiji wanted to follow the traditional custom and sacrifice a goat before the image of Durga, Holy Mother advised him not to do it, in view of the fact that the monks should practice nonviolence.

HOLY MOTHER'S SUPPORT OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND HIS MISSION THROUGH THE ORDER

Sri Ramakrishna earmarked the role of Swami Vivekananda as the great awakener of the people. Swamiji's new and bold orientation to monastic life was not relished by all at first. The Holy Mother, visiting Nilambar's garden house at Belur in 1893, had had a vision: she saw the Master's body dissolving in the Ganga and Swami Vivekananda sprinkling the holy water on innumerable devotees, all of whom were liberated. Therefore, the Holy Mother understood the role of Swami Vivekananda in spreading the Master's message and gave all his schemes her unqualified support. It was with her blessings that Swami Vivekananda went to the West.

The monastic order of Sri Ramakrishna has been hailed as unique, containing within itself the energy and faith of both the East and the West. In its nascence, it battled with many internal and external forces. Swami Vivekananda had a dynamic philosophy of Practical Vedanta—where the sublime philosophy of Vedanta is not allowed to languish in mere speculation by the elite class of Brahmins or remain unknown by the masses. Swami Vivekananda's bold inspiration to press Vedanta into the service of the people initially encountered resistance from his co-workers, who could not understand the relevance of social service in spiritual life. They did not readily understand Swamiji's redeeming motive in wanting to transfer the emphasis in religion from metaphysics to practical righteousness, from individual salvation to the salvation of all beings. This new orientation was already disapproved of by monks of other spiritual Orders in India. In their opinion, such a novel path and one so obviously suggestive of Western ways could not be reconciled with traditional monasticism.

Conservative societies do not easily accept new ideas. Even after many years of accepting Swamiji's vision of Practical Vedanta as its creed, many devotees of the Ramakrishna Order, even some that were devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, felt that social service represented a complete departure from His teachings. One such devotee—who happened to witness the whole-hearted service being rendered to the miserable poor lying on the city pavements—cast aspersion on the selfless activities of the Benares Sevashram. Because the devotee was highly venerated by the monks and lay devotees, the Sevashram workers, charged as they were with the spirit of neo-Vedantism, were quite perplexed.

Fortunately, they referred the matter to the Holy Mother, who happened to be in Benares at the time. The Holy Mother gave her instant and unambiguous reply that the work started by Swamiji was in complete conformity with the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. She said, "It is far better to work than to let the mind be loose . . . in riotous thinking . . . My own Naren observed all this and so laid down the foundation of selfless work." Her defense of Swami Vivekananda was not based on any preferred love for him but upon his attunement with the teachings of the Master. Paying a visit to the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, Holy Mother said, "I saw the Master Himself present there, and that is why this work goes on here. These are all His work." She further gave a contribution of Rs. 10 note to the Sevashram fund as a token of her appreciation of such dedicated service to God in man. The Rs. 10 note itself is still preserved with the greatest care in the Sevashram. The Holy Mother's gift gave the workers a fresh impetus, for they were convinced that she knew Sri Ramakrishna better than anyone else did.

On January 3, 1901, after his second visit to the West, Swami Vivekananda went to the high Himalayan ashram at Mayavati, whose guidance principle was the abstinence from all ceremonial forms of worship. Eastern and Western devotees of Sri Ramakrishna were allowed to devote themselves only to Advaitic practices. To his surprise, Swamiji saw a small shrine in the ashram with a photo of Sri Ramakrishna, which was worshipped daily with flowers and incense. He severely reprimanded the Head of the Ashrama for violating the rules of the monastery. In deference to his views and without any specific advice or injunction from him to do so, they immediately stopped this form of worship. But one of Swamiji's disciples wrote to the Holy Mother at Jayrambati about the incident and asked for her advice. She wrote, answering, "Sri Ramakrishna was all Advaita and preached Advaita. Why should you not follow Advaita? All His disciples are Advaitins." The Holy Mother's words are proof of her "unerring intuition," to use Sister Nivedita's oft-quoted assessment of her spiritual depth. This was in harmony with the goals of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Some political revolutionaries dedicated to winning India's freedom and independence later joined the Ramakrishna Order with great sincerity and completely eschewed the path of politics. On December 11, 1916 Lord Carmichael, Governor of Bengal, gave a statement casting aspersion on the Ramakrishna Mission. During that crucial period of India's history, the Mission's devotees and well wishers became alarmed at the sinister consequences that might follow the governor's unfriendly opinion of the Mission. They suggested to the Mission authorities that they ask 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. She opined that those who joined the Order in the name of Sri Ramakrishna should be allowed to remain, notwithstanding the adverse remarks of the government. She suggested that Swami Saradananda could meet personally with the governor and explain the Mission's viewpoint. Accordingly, Swami Saradananda saw 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 the Mission's philanthropic activities, she was keenly interested in all the details of this work. She always inquired in depth about these activities whenever relief workers came to her. Did the Mission find out and alleviate the people's woes? The Holy Mother always wanted to know of this. She advised ordinary monks to earnestly accept philanthropic activity for their own benefit, recognizing that the ordinary monk cannot remain absorbed in meditation round-the-clock. "That is why," she said, "my Naren started all these centres for work. Our organization will function this way. Those who cannot adjust will leave."

In the Holy Mother are found the two elements that give the Ramakrishna Movement its religion and its philosophy. The religious element centers round the life and personality of Sri Ramakrishna and expresses itself through worship and ritual. The philosophical element is derived from His teachings and expresses itself by giving a rationale to spiritual life. Religion and philosophy are complimentary to each other. Philosophy is barren without religion; religion without philosophy leads to bigotry and harmful sentimentalism.

The Holy Mother respected ritual. She always carried a photo of Sri Ramakrishna and in weal and woe, it was her nature to surrender everything to the Master. To her, His picture was the living God Satchidananda. His image was both Guru and God to her—personal and impersonal. In Holy Mother were combined tradition and catholicism in light of the Master's teachings. Although she was very punctilious about tradition, especially regarding food, she never offended anyone's sentiments. She moved very intimately with Miss Josephine MacLeod, Mrs. Ole Bull, Sister Nivedita, Sister Christine and Sister Devamata, thus leading the way for members of Hindu society to absorb foreigners into their fold. Swami Vivekananda wrote charmingly about this to Sashi Maharaj: "Mother is here, and the European and the American ladies went the other day to see her. And what do you think? Mother even ate with them! Isn't that grand!" And Sister Nivedita wrote, "This gave us all a dignity and made my future work possible in a way nothing else could have done." Nivedita was given a separate room in Holy Mother's house. On November 12, 1898, the Holy Mother graced the opening ceremony of Sister Nivedita's School with her presence. On that occasion she uttered the following blessing in a low voice: "May the Divine Mother of the universe bless the school. May the girls trained here, be ideals for the society." To Nivedita, this benediction was a sublime gift. She could not have imagined a better omen. The Holy Mother approved of the utility of women's education and she encouraged many women to study at Sister Nivedita's School.

The Holy Mother received her foreign devotees with motherly affection. It has been well said that the Holy Mother, the high priestess of the power of Sri Ramakrishna, in a quiet yet dynamic way became the most potent instrument for imparting spiritual perfection among innumerable householders. Swami Vivekananda spread the message of the Master far and wide; the Holy Mother silently sent it deep into the hearts of thousands. In other words, Swami Vivekananda spread the message horizontally; the Holy Mother, vertically.

HOLY MOTHER: THE UNIVERSALLY REDEEMING MOTHER-HEART OF GOD

Sri Ramakrishna left Sarada Devi in the world to manifest 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. Holy Mother was an incarnation of Love. Her love is not exclusive. She herself said: “I am the Mother of all. I am the Mother of the good. I am the Mother of the bad, too.” In these words lies her greatest reassurance that every one of us is near to her, not far, for this assurance can only come from the Divine Mother Herself—Holy Mother was a special manifestation of the Divine Shakti. Again, in her redeeming words is found the proof of Sri Sankara’s statement, “Kuputro jayeta kvacidapi kumata na bhavati.” Holy Mother never perceived of wickedness or evil intention. She was the embodiment of renunciation and service. She was an enigma. The world has never seen anyone like her. To think of her lovingly and reverently and to try to understand her a little will make our mind purer. Let us all live with the great expectation that Holy Mother will ultimately accept us all, in spite of our lapses. May her 150th celebration be amply fulfilled in bringing enlightenment.

End Notes

Cit. from Sri Sarada Devi: The Great Wonder, A Compilation of Revelations, Reminiscences and Studies By Apostles, Monks, Savants, Scholars, Devotees (New Delhi: Ramakrishna Mission, 1984), 20.

Ibid.

Swami Gambhirananda, Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), 268.

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