

# Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother

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In recent years the name of Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, is becoming increasingly known among the people, and her Birth Centenary Celebrations have hastened the process of lifting the veil of obscurity behind which she had remained hidden so far. This knowledge has roused an amazing degree of spiritual enthusiasm in men and women, and an eagerness to know more about this great woman of our age who, as the disciple and helpmate of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna, played the roles of wife and nun and mother and *guru* in one.

What is the source of the mesmerism of this name and personality? Even a slight acquaintance with her life will make us realize that this mesmerism does not proceed from any aspects of her personality which the modern world recognizes as significant in women. To all outward appearances the Holy Mother was just ordinary, or even less than ordinary. Rustic in simplicity, almost unlettered, and shy and modest, she was far removed from the educated, self-conscious, active type of modern women. And yet her life finds powerful responsive echoes from the hearts of all men and women, rustic and modern alike. It is evident that she has captured in her life and being the fundamental value which lies at the back of the womanliness of woman and which transcends all distinctions based on mere sex and the attractions thereof. This fact alone explains her universal appeal, representing, as she does, not a mere national or racial type, but the fulfilment of woman as woman, the

realization in flesh and blood of the Eternal Feminine.

No greatness has sprung up and got reared and even flowered in greater obscurity and silence than that of Sarada Devi. She was born in the obscure village of Jayrambati in West Bengal, India, on 22 December 1853. Her advent coincided with the brightening of the family fortunes of her poor but pious parents who enfolded her in tender love and care. Even as a child she was active and hard-working, and helped her mother in her household chores. She was hardly six when she was betrothed to Sri Ramakrishna who was then 23 and who was passing through the stormy period of his spiritual *sāadhanās* and realizations. Through this betrothal, little Sarada entered into the current of the life of one who, in his God-intoxication, passed most of his life in divine ecstasies and visions, and the rest in soul-stirring conversations with earnest souls, conveying a message of radiant spirituality to the modern world.

It was a strange marriage; for it remained unconsummated in the physical plane, but found its spiritual consummation in a union of souls on the occasion of the *Shorashi-puja* in 1872. This was the culminating act of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual *sāadhanās* when he worshipped the Divine Mother of the universe in the person of his wife, at the end of which the worshipped and the worshipper entered into deep *samādhi* and realized their spiritual identity. Thenceforth they became as one soul functioning in two bodies, and Sarada Devi assumed her equal role in the fulfilment of the mission of Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna himself recognized the spiritual eminence of Sri Sarada Devi. Unlike the general run of spiritual aspirants who forsake all worldly connexions on entering the religious life, for which there is the sanction of religious law and custom behind them. Sri Ramakrishna welcomed Sarada Devi to his side when she, coming of age, came to claim her rights over him. It is a deeply moving episode in their lives, which helps to reveal the stuff of both. Sri Ramakrishna was in Dakshineswar, passing through storms of spiritual moods and experiences; except on the two occasions of his brief visits to his native village, he had not met his wedded wife these twelve long years and seemed apparently to have forgotten her.

Sarada Devi, now about 18, entered his room late at night after an arduous journey from her native village in the company of her father. She had her fears in her heart proceeding from the gossip she had heard in her village about the deranged condition of her husband's mind, and her own knowledge of his utter indifference to worldly concerns. But Sri Ramakrishna, though a bit surprised at her sudden arrival, welcomed her very cordially, and accommodated her in his own room for facility of medical attention, and arranged for the medical care of her body which had been ravaged by illness and fatigue during the long trek. She found in him the same loving divine husband whom she had known during his previous visits to the village. When she had settled down, Sri Ramakrishna one day addressed her thus:

'As for me, the Mother has shown me that She resides in every woman, and so I have learned to look upon every woman as Mother. That is the one idea I can have about you; but if you wish to drag me into the world, as I have been married to you, I am at your service.'

To this challenging question of her divine husband, Sarada Devi gave a straightforward answer:

'Why should I desire to drag your mind down to the worldly plane? I have come only to help you in your chosen path. I desire only to live with you and serve you and to learn of you.'

This reply of his pure and spotless wife pleased Sri Ramakrishna immensely and he experienced a great accession of spiritual strength. His mission in the world of calling humanity back to an awareness of its inborn divine nature is not to be a lonely struggle; he recognized in Sarada Devi a companion in this noble mission; and within a year of her arrival, he verified the truth of this exalted view of his wife through the *Shorashi-puja* experience referred to above.

From now on till the end of his life, for full fourteen years, Sarada Devi served the person of Sri Ramakrishna and the large number of disciples and devotees visiting him, with a rare devotion and self-effacement unrivalled in human history. It was also the period of her intense spiritual education under her divine husband. She has referred to this period as a continuous experience of intense bliss. Months together they lived in the same room and slept in the same bed with no trace of carnal thought in the mind of either. Their minds constantly soared in the region of divine awareness and bliss; each stood transfigured to the other; and both became instruments for the working out of the divine will. The immense store of spiritual energy—divine *shakti*—which was generated by the *sāadhanās* of Sri Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi contains the promise of the spiritual evolution of humanity which keenly feels its own tragic spiritual poverty in the midst of abundant material wealth.

## SARADA DEVI, THE HOLY MOTHER

Sri Ramakrishna passed away in 1886. Sarada Devi was 33 at the time. Having lived in a non-physical plane of relationship with her husband, she did not experience the feeling of widowhood at his death. To her he continued to be a living reality to the end of her days. And for the next thirty-four years she lived a life complex in its roles and varied in its riches, and withal silent and sweet, that gained for her the endearing title of 'Sri Ma', 'the Holy Mother', by which she is known ever since.

The Holy Mother was called upon to be the spiritual guide of the monks of the Ramakrishna Order constituted initially of Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples under the leadership of Swami Vivekananda, and to be the *guru* of an ever increasing circle of spiritually hungry men and women. Her spiritual eminence and the divine power of her personality enabled her to fulfil this mighty role with ease and naturalness. But it was in the role of a household woman, in the midst of her own family circle consisting of her worldly-minded brothers, sisters-in-law, and their children, that the Holy Mother manifested a unique facet of her character and personality. It is this aspect of her personality that provides a shining example of practical spirituality capable of inspiring all men and women. The nun shone through the householder, and both through the heart of an all-loving mother. Far from shunning a distracting world, she embraced it and enfolded it in her love. And in the midst of a thousand distractions, she preserved the naturalness of her personality.

Verification is the proof of a theory or a claim. The test of life alone proves the genuineness of a moral virtue or a spiritual value; virtues are tested more in ill fortune than in good fortune. To maintain poise and grace in good weather is easy enough; but it

is only bad weather that tests their genuineness. The calmness, poise and grace, and the spirit of unobstructed love and self-effacing service, which Sarada Devi expressed in her day-to-day life in the context of a highly distracting environment of sheer worldliness, proclaims the supremely uplifting power of godliness and spirituality. The possession of this power in a man or a woman makes him or her pure and holy. The expression of this power in life is love. Sarada Devi was the very personification of this purity, holiness, and love which is the meaning of the ideal of motherhood at its highest and best. This power lies imbedded in the heart of every woman. An ordinary woman captures in her life only a fraction of this ideal by which she shines in her loving kindness and holiness. A merely biological function becomes elevated through the infilling of a spiritual value. But this spiritual value shone in its fullness, even outside the biological context, in the personality of the Holy Mother, demonstrating thereby the ideal in its pure form. Out of the abundance of her heart Sarada Devi gave of her love to one and all without any distinction and, by so doing, justified the endearing epithet of 'the Holy Mother'.

Herself out of the ordinary in all basic values of character and personality, but hiding these under the mantle of the simple and the ordinary in social and physical make-up, the Holy Mother eludes the grasp of ordinary minds, but reveals her true form to all seekers of basic values. Did not Sri Ramakrishna say of her: 'She is Sarasvati, the Goddess of Wisdom, come to give spiritual knowledge to humanity'? And had she not also said of herself: 'Sri Ramakrishna has left me to manifest the ideal of Divine Motherhood'?

In her life and in her teachings she has left a balm for suffering humanity in search of light and peace. Her love knew no distinctions of sex, creed, or race. It enfolded and uplifted the Muslim labourer Amjad as much as the *sannyāsin* Saradananda, the gifted Sister Nivedita as much as the simple 'mother of Annapurna'. The Holy Mother's deathbed advice to the latter is typical of her universal personality and depth of insight. To the 'mother of Annapurna' sorrowing at the thought of Holy Mother's imminent passing away, she said these words of uplifting consolation and strength:

'If you want peace of mind, do not look for faults in others. Rather look out to discover your own weaknesses. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one here is an alien or a stranger, my child. The whole world is your own.'

Let me conclude this tribute with the beautiful Sanskrit verse in praise of the Holy Mother's pure nobility:

*Pavitram charitam yasyāh pavitram jivanam tathā.  
Pavitratāsvrupinyai tasyai devyai namo namah—*

'Whose character is all pure and whose life is similarly pure; who is the embodiment of purity divine, that shining Goddess I salute again and again.' ■

\* Srimat Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj happened to be the 13th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.

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'As fire, though one, filling the world, takes the shape of each object it burns, so the indwelling Self in all, though one, takes the form of each object it fills, yet transcends all.

'As air, though one, filling the world, takes the shape of each object it enters, so the indwelling Self in all, though one, takes the form of each object it fills, yet transcends all.

'As the sun, the revealer of all objects to the seer, is not touched by the sinful eye nor by the impurities of objects it gazes upon, so the one Self, dwelling in all, is not touched by the miseries of the world. For He transcends all.

'He is One, the Lord, the innermost Self of all; of one form He makes many forms. The wise man who sees Him revealed in his own soul, to him belongs eternal happiness; to none else, to none else.

'The eternal among non-eternals, the intelligence of the intelligent, He, though one, fulfils the desires of many. The wise man who sees Him revealed in his own soul, to him belongs eternal peace; to none else, to none else.'

The immortal longing of man is thus realized in his own being, which is the one Self of the universe—the God we seek. 'Town and fleet' are not eternal. They live and die. Man must live and struggle for that which is eternal in him.

We offer our deep homage to Christ, Buddha, or Ramakrishna not because of their *accomplishments* in the external world—of which they had practically none—but because of their *attainment*. They were the children of Light; they became one with the Light. ■

\* The founder of the Vedanta Society in Hollywood, the Swami was a scholar, writer and a remarkable spiritual emissary of Vedanta in the West.