

## **Sri Sarada Devi (1853 - 1920)**

Rumours spread to Kamarpukur that Ramakrishna had turned mad as a result of the over-taxing spiritual exercises he had been going through at Dakshineswar. Alarmed, Chandra Devi brought him home and arranged that he might have the best medical care available in a village. The doctors who examined him declared that there was nothing abnormal about him. Chandra Devi who studied him closely also found he was absolutely normal. As he had always done, Ramakrishna sang songs, told stories, cut jokes and made people laugh—that is all. He was interested in everything except in the financial affairs of the family.

Chandra Devi's neighbours advised that if Ramakrishna could be persuaded to marry, he might then be more conscious of his responsibilities to the family and accordingly pay more attention to its financial needs. Chandra Devi started looking for a suitable bride. She did not want Ramakrishna to know anything about her plan, for she feared that he might see marriage as a hindrance to his spiritual progress. Ramakrishna, however, came to know, and far from objecting to the marriage, began to take an active interest in the selection of the bride. He, in fact, mentioned Jayrambati, three miles to the north-

west of Kamarpukur, as being the village where the bride could be found at the house of one Ramchandra Mukherjee. The bride, six-year-old and bearing the name, Sarada, was found. The marriage was duly solemnized, the bride went back to her father's house and Ramakrishna to Dakshineswar to resume his spiritual practices.

Years passed and the bride and the bridegroom seldom met. Sarada continued to live at her father's house, helping her poor peasant parents with the usual chores of feeding the cattle, carrying food to the paddy-fields for labourers working for her parents, cooking, cleaning, looking after the younger brothers, and so on. Once famine gripped Jayrambati and its surrounding areas. Starving people went about searching for food, but there was no food anywhere. It so happened that Sarada's parents had saved some food grains that year. They decided to cook some food everyday and distribute it to the starving people, fresh and hot. Sometimes, the hungry people would burn their fingers in eating hot food. Sarada, still a tiny girl, would fan the food to help it cool. She did it on her own.

As Sarada grew older, neighbours began to gossip about her misfortune. They would say that her husband had gone mad. Sarada overheard such remarks and was naturally very disturbed. She decided to go to Dakshineswar and see for herself the condition of her

husband. She went and found her husband quite normal. She stayed with him for some time and then returned to Jayrambati. After some years, she permanently stayed with him.

In a way, Sarada Devi was Ramakrishna's first disciple. He taught her as much religion as philosophy. He taught her everything he had learnt from his various gurus. Ramakrishna must have been pleased to see that she mastered every religious secret as quickly as he himself had done, perhaps even more quickly. Impressed by her great religious potential, he began to treat her as the Universal Mother Herself. Once she asked him what he thought of her. He said, 'I look upon you as my own mother and as the Mother who is in the temple.'

Ramakrishna fell sick with cancer in the throat. He was removed to Cossipore for treatment. By now he had come to be known as a great religious teacher. Many of the Calcutta elite came under his influence, but Ramakrishna was not satisfied until he had a band of young men who were prepared to mould themselves strictly according to his instructions. Such young men came, fifteen or sixteen in number, all with a good family background and modern education. All of them are now well known for their later achievements as religious teachers, most of all their leader, Swami Vivekananda, who in fact influenced every aspect

of Indian national life. It is this band of young men who later formed the Ramakrishna Order. Before passing away, in 1886, Ramakrishna made Sarada Devi feel as if she was the mother of these young men, nay of the entire humanity. At first, Sarada Devi was shy about playing this role, but slowly, she filled that role, and even became a religious teacher in her own right.

For the thirty-four years or so that she lived after Ramakrishna's passing away, she inspired people, both monastic and lay, with the ideals that Ramakrishna himself had preached and practised. She did this in the same way as Ramakrishna—she lived those ideals. But her life was more testing and complicated than Ramakrishna's. Being an ideal monk, Ramakrishna always kept away from the cross-currents of a family life. He loved to watch the fun called life but was careful enough never to be drawn into its maelstrom. Sarada Devi, on the contrary, was at the very heart of it. She was the head of a large family comprising men and women, most of them not even distantly related to her. And what an assortment of characters they were! Some of them were great souls by any standard, but there were also some who were mean, jealous, and positively mischievous. How she managed to keep them all together without losing her balance of mind in the process is a

mystery. And each of them was convinced that she loved him or her the best. They were all of them dependent on her, not only spiritually but also materially. She was not only their 'mother' but also their guru. She gave them full satisfaction on both scores.

Sarada Devi had a hard life from beginning to end. As daughter, wife, and finally, as the beloved mother of a large community of people cutting across race and language, there were demands on her much more than a woman in her circumstances normally has to meet. She fulfilled them in a manner possible only for her. But what is remarkable is that, in the midst of all her cares, she maintained a degree of aloofness which Hinduism attributes to the highest and best among men and women. Through the skein of all the varying situations which she faced, she remained absolutely calm as if these were no concern of hers. Her fortitude, courage, and wisdom, tested again and again, amazed everybody.

But the most amazing thing about her was her renunciation, a quality she shared with her husband in a measure equal to, if not more than, his. She often found herself in a situation in which starvation seemed certain, but under no circumstances would she seek aid from any quarter. Even when her disciples had grown to a considerable number and there were people among them with means to keep her in comfort and also anxious to be

of service to her, she would never so far as even drop a hint that she had any difficulty.

She taught not by precepts but by examples. There were irritants galore in the way people around her behaved, but she was an indulgent mother who knew the best way to educate an erring child was to set an example before him, which she did. She had seen the worst side of man, but she never lost faith in him, knowing that, given affection, sympathy, and guidance, he could overcome all his limitations.

She was human, yet divine. Her divinity shone through everything she did, even if it was something entirely mundane. She was a simple woman, but in thought, speech, and action she was attuned to God. She was a true saint, but she never claimed she was. She passed as an ordinary woman, but everything about her was extraordinary.

—*Swami Lokeswarananda*

### **Sayings of Sri Sarada Devi**

- Sri Ramakrishna left me behind to manifest the Motherhood of God to the world.
- I shan't be able to turn away anybody if he addresses me as Mother.

- I can't contain myself when one draws near me and calls me Mother.
- If my son wallows in the dust or mud, it is I who have to wipe all the dirt off his body and take him to my lap.
- The aim of life is to realize God and remain immersed in contemplation of Him. God alone is real and everything else is false.
- As one gets the fragrance of a flower by handling it, or as one gets the smell of sandalwood by rubbing it against a stone, in the same way one gets spiritual awakening by constantly thinking of God. But you can realize Him right now, if you become desireless.
- Many think of God only after receiving blows from the world. But blessed indeed is he who can offer his mind, like a fresh flower, at the feet of the Lord from his very childhood. One should practise renunciation in youth.
- Through *japa* and austerity the bondage of *karma* is cut asunder, but God cannot be realized except through love and devotion.
- How can the devotees really have any caste ? Children are all equal.
- One should desire of God desirelessness. For desire alone is at the root of all suffering.
- But one may pray for devotion and detachment. These cannot be classed as desires.
- As wind removes the cloud, so the name of God destroys the cloud of worldliness.

- Only through work can one remove the bondage of work. Total detachment comes later. One should not be without work even for a moment. Work helps one to fend off idle thoughts.
- Everyone has to be accommodating. Forbear everything. God is there to judge.
- One should not hurt others even by words. One must not speak even an unpleasant truth unnecessarily. By indulging in rude words one's nature becomes rude. One's sensibility is lost if one has no control over one's speech.
- One should not trifle with a thing, though it may be very insignificant. If you respect a thing, the thing also respects you. Even a broomstick should be treated with respect. One should perform even an insignificant work with respect.
- We should give everyone his due. What is not edible for a man, give to a cow ; what is not edible for a cow, give to a dog ; what is not edible for a dog, throw into a lake for fishes to eat. But never waste.
- To err is human; but how few know to lead an erring man ?
- No doubt you must do your duties. This keeps your mind in good condition. But it is also necessary to practise *japa*, meditation, and prayer.
- Many are known to do great works under the stress of some strong emotion. But a man's true nature is known from the manner in which he does his insignificant daily task.

- It is idle to expect that dangers and difficulties will not come. They are bound to come. But, for a devotee they will pass away from under the feet like water.
- Misery is truly a gift of God. I believe it is a symbol of His compassion.
- In the fullness of spiritual realization, a person finds that the God who resides in his heart resides in the hearts of all—the oppressed, the persecuted, the lowly and the untouchable. This realization makes one truly humble.
- Love is our forte. It is through love that the Master's family has taken shape.
- Everything, no doubt, happens by God's will, yet man must work because God expresses His will through man's action. Do not relax your spiritual practices.
- The mind is everything. It is in the mind alone that one feels pure and impure. A man, first of all, must make his own mind guilty and then alone can he see another man's guilt.