

Ramakrishna *Bhāva*, Ramakrishna Sangha and Holy Mother (II)

SWAMI BALABHADRANANDA

Sangha-janani

Let us now discuss her unique role as *Sangha-janani* or Mother of the Ramakrishna Order. It has been mentioned already that the Sangha was virtually started at Dakshineswar quietly and Sarada Devi stood behind the curtain as its Mother serving all in silence. Surprisingly, however, except one or two intimate disciples of the Master none could see her. Nevertheless, Sri Ramakrishna, through his wonderful deftness, had set up a subtle but natural bond between the Holy Mother and his intimate disciples who would be sannyasins in future. And what did Mother do? She accepted them all as members of the Master's growing spiritual family. So henceforth it would be found that whenever Narendra would come to Dakshineswar and the Master would request him to have his meal there, which would happen often, the Holy Mother would immediately start preparing thick chapatis and heavy gram dal, as those were Narendra's favourites. Saradaprasanna (later Swami Trigunatitananda) would come to Dakshineswar though his father disliked it. Naturally he would be short of money to bear the expense of share-carriage. So Sri Ramakrishna instructed him to collect the fare from 'Nahabat' before leaving Dakshineswar. But Saradaprasanna didn't have to ask anybody for the fare; everyday he would find that someone had already kept the fare at the doorstep of Nahabat. Holy

Mother would keep it there whenever she came to know that he had come. Thus she had been serving all in diverse ways, but always keeping herself in the background.

Sometimes she would not mind even overruling the judgement of Sri Ramakrishna for asserting her motherhood. Once Sri Ramakrishna resented that Holy Mother had been overfeeding the boys like Baburam (later Swami Premananda) who would become monks in future. 'Who will look after them if their future is thus spoiled?' asked Sri Ramakrishna. And she replied firmly, 'Feeding my children is my business. Please do not say anything about it. I shall take care of their future.' This way she had been protecting her children with her immense spiritual power! Unawares still though, she had already entered in her future role as the Mother of the Sangha even when Sri Ramakrishna was in mortal body.

After Sri Ramakrishna passed away we find Sarada Devi playing the dual role of the father as well as the mother just as what happens in ordinary family life when father suddenly passes away leaving behind his kids. I would draw your attention to a significant incident that had taken place during this period. In July 1890, Swami Vivekananda was about to leave Baranagore Math for a peregrination in northern India. Holy Mother was then staying at Ghushuri near where Belur Math is situated now. Swamiji along with Swami Akhandananda went to her to seek her blessings and said,

‘Mother, if I can become a man in the true sense of the term, then only shall I return; else this will be my last farewell.’ Mother blessed Swamiji and said, ‘You should not say so!’ Then Swamiji said, ‘No, no, by your grace, I shall soon come back.’ Mother then turned to Akhandananda Swami, who would accompany Swamiji in his pilgrimage, and said, ‘I give in your hand everything we have; see that Naren does not suffer for want of food.’ Mark her word—*everything*. Sri Ramakrishna was not there anymore in gross form, but his *everything* was present in Narendranath. He transmitted his entire spiritual treasure to Narendranath before his passing away, himself turning, as he said, a pauper as though and entrusted him to distribute that treasure at home and abroad. Holy Mother knew that. She was fully aware that in the absence of Sri Ramakrishna, all hopes for the budding Order rested in Swamiji. That is why she gave Akhandanandaji this instruction. Akhandanandaji also remembered the Mother’s advice and wanted therefore to shadow Swamiji always, even at times ignoring Swamiji’s annoyance.

After Sri Ramakrishna’s passing away, Holy Mother kept nurturing the fledgling Order with her love and inspiration. She kept the flame of their renouncing spirit burning and emboldened them to hold on to their resolve to actualize Sri Ramakrishna’s mission. None could understand at that time the role she was playing. Only Swamiji sensed it. That is why he said later:

We had no friends. Who would listen to a few boys, with their crank notions? Nobody. . . . Just think of it—a dozen boys, telling people vast, big ideas, saying they are determined to work these ideals out in life. Why, everybody laughed. From laughter it became serious; it became persecutions. . . . And the more we were derided, the more determined we became.⁸

Again, he said,

Nobody to sympathise with me. Who would sympathise with the imagination of a boy—imagination that caused so much suffering to others? Who would sympathise with me? None—except one [Sri Sarada Devi]. That one’s sympathy brought blessing and hope. . . . Well, that lady [Sri Ramakrishna’s wife], was the only one who sympathised with the ideas of those boys.⁹

From these few soul-stirring words of Swamiji we can guess how Holy Mother gave them support and inspiration and steered the course of their lives towards the goal Sri Ramakrishna set for them. The situation was so adverse that they could have been easily deluded. But through ceaseless prayers and her own spiritual power she prevented this from happening. That was how this wonderful Ramakrishna Sangha got crystallized. Mother prayed to Sri Ramakrishna:

O Lord, you came, disported with these few and then went away; should everything end with that? If so, where was the need for your coming down in the midst of so much misery? I have seen in Varanasi and Vrindavan many holy men who get their food by begging and shift their stay from the shade of one tree to that of another. There is no dearth of holy men of that type. I cannot bear to see the plight of my sons, who go forth in your name, roaming about begging their food. My prayer is that those who leave the world in your name may never be in want of bare subsistence. They will all live together holding to your ideas and ideals; and people afflicted with the sorrows of the world will resort to them and be solaced by hearing about you. That is why you came. My heart aches to see them wandering.¹⁰

Here, in her prayer, we hear the Mother uttering exactly the same thing which Swamiji later promulgated aphoristically while fixing the motto of the sannyasins of the Order—‘*Ātmano mokshārtham*

jagaddhitāya ca'. That the Ramakrishna Sangha has some distinctive characteristic is evident from this motto and Holy Mother's prayer. This Sangha is not exactly like other traditional monastic organizations which enjoin for monks only their own salvation (*ātma-mukti*) and leaves no room for *jagat hita* or the welfare of the world. But while only Swamiji and very few of the direct disciples could understand it, some senior direct disciples like Ramchandra Dutta even alleged them of deviating from the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna, since they upheld the ideals of work and service as parts of spiritual practice. The Holy Mother never failed to notice the unique significance with which the Sangha was born and destined to progress.

One specialty of Mother's nature was this that she was too eager to hear her children call her 'mother'. She wanted even her sannyasin children to do the same, though they had left their parents for God's sake. Can we label this eagerness a desire? No. This eagerness on her part was not to satiate any unfulfilled desire for motherhood. This was for the spiritual well-being of her children. The Master himself has said that *Mahāmāyā*, the great Enchantress, who keeps the entire universe deluded by Her magic spell, can be propitiated easily if She is recognized as one's own Mother. This makes our spiritual journey easier, because She feels ashamed to delude us if we call her Mother.

Out of Her immense grace this Mother Power has descended on earth this time assuming such a benign form that no effort is required for us, the weak human beings, to call Her Mother. That call automatically wells out from our within as we look at her face and think of her divine *lilā*. So whoever would come to her would call her Mother of their own, and, in the cases of exception, Mother herself would make that happen for

the good of them who was till then unable to recognize her as their own mother. A young monk's case was exactly this. He was not used to uttering the word 'mother' as he never saw his mother who died either at the time of his birth or shortly after. But Sarada Devi sort of impelled him to address her as 'mother', for that will quicken his spiritual progress. To another monk, at the time of initiation, she said: 'Sri Ramakrishna is your Guru as well as *Ishta* [the Chosen Ideal] and I am your mother.' The monk exclaimed: 'How that is possible? My own mother is at home.' Holy Mother said repeatedly: 'No, my child, I am your mother.' When the disciple would not believe her, she said at last, 'Now, look at me and see whether or not I am your mother who lives at your village home.' The disciple couldn't believe his eyes! He remained speechless. He found his mother was sitting there in place of the Holy Mother! In this way the Cosmic, indivisible Mother appeared as a fragmentary mother. This she did to make his spiritual path smooth, for if he could recognize the Perennial Mother or *Mahāmāyā* as his real mother, he would make quick and steady progress in spiritual life.

Holy Mother has always been standing behind the fledgling organization. There were some monks who would sometimes express their reluctance to follow the ways of life enjoined by Swamiji for the monks of the Order. To them, the Holy Mother had said time and again very firmly: The Sangha must run as Naren has visualized. Those who cannot adjust themselves with its rules and restrictions, they may quit if they like.

In those days, some sannyasins and even great devotees like Sri M., the author of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, didn't have much faith in the idea that service to *jiva* was nothing but worship of Shiva—the fundamental principle stated cryptically by

Sri Ramakrishna and later elaborated by Swamiji. But Holy Mother corroborated Swamiji and made them accept the ideal. Thus always she kept on guiding the spiritual life of the sannyasins in right direction. She told them emphatically that selfless service in the spirit of worship, as Naren wished, must be done and, side by side, japa and meditation have to be practised in order to steer the boat of spiritual life safely.

Not only that, whenever any monk would complain that work prevented them from pursuing spiritual practices effectively, the Holy Mother would ask: Whose work are you doing? Is it *your* work or Sri Ramakrishna's? You are not serving man, you are serving God, serving Sri Ramakrishna. Bear this in mind, and to keep your boat moving in the right direction, practise japa and meditation regularly and love everybody because the Master's monastic organization has evolved from love. Nothing but pure love sustains it.

In this way Sarada Devi turned out to be the Mother of the Sangha—'*Sangha-janani*', as Swamiji had christened her in the truest sense of the term and took a number of crucial administrative decisions also in that capacity. For instance, when plague erupted in Calcutta in April 1898 in epidemic form, Swamiji's great heart wanted to plunge into action immediately; but where was the money to serve the plague victims? So he decided to sell the newly purchased Math land. Holy Mother knew the largeness of Swamiji's heart and herself an ocean of motherly compassion, she also was greatly moved by the sufferings of the people. But she dissuaded Swamiji from taking this extreme step. She reminded Swamiji that Ramakrishna Mission would continue for ages serving humankind in multifarious ways; it must not end with a single relief work like this. The required fund, however,

was received from other sources and the matter therefore ended there. But the crisis revealed the glory of Mother's wonderful wisdom as well as Swamiji's great heart.

Amazing personality

Mother had an amazing personality. It was she only who could dare to give advice to Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Incredible though it might seem, it was true. Didn't she remind Ramakrishna—'You are not my Thakur only, you are everyone's Thakur'? On many occasions she guided Sri Ramakrishna, let alone Swamiji! Only Holy Mother could do this, and none else. In this way, even when Swamiji had passed away, she held imperceptibly the reins of the Sangha's administration, at least in crucial policy matters.

On 11 December 1916 Lord Carmichael, the Governor of Bengal, passed a remark in his Durbar Speech that like '*Anandamath*' of Bankim's novel having the same name, Ramakrishna Mission also was a secret revolutionary organization working against the British. He made this comment because many erstwhile revolutionaries had joined the Sangha to lead monastic life. Though they had shunned all revolutionary activities for good, police would always keep an eye on them. In this context, Governor's Durbar remarks against the Ramakrishna Mission made the monks and devotees equally panicky. Many devotees stopped coming to the Math to avoid police suspicion and some of the monks and devotees even suggested that monks who were involved in revolutionary activities might be asked to quit the Order. It was a serious crisis the gravity of which we cannot understand at the present time. But the Holy Mother rose up to the occasion. She was fearless. She came forward with two suggestions to tide over the crisis. The first

thing she said relates to the ideal of the Order. Being the Mother of the Order, her attention was always fixed on the *ideal*. She said: Those who have pledged to Thakur that they will never deviate from the path of Truth and taken refuge in Sangha, why should the Government apprehend that they would go against their pledge? Why should they have recourse to violence, even if some of them had truck with the revolutionaries in their past life? If necessary, my children will live under tree, but they will never forsake Truth. Sri Ramakrishna was firmly grounded in Truth and my boys too are devoted to Truth. None will be asked to leave. And if one has to leave the Order on this ground, everybody will leave.

Her second advice on this issue speaks for her administrative insight. She asked Swami Saradananda, the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, to meet the Governor and to apprise him of the true nature of the activities of the Mission. The swami followed her counsel and met the Private Secretary of the Governor. As a result, the Governor exonerated the Mission and its members on 26 March, 1917.¹¹ Thus Mother's advice saved the Mission.

Holy Mother had also given a clear verdict on the question of a profound philosophical significance. In January, 1901, Swamiji went to Mayavati Advaita Ashrama to console a bereaved Mother Sevier who had lost his husband, Captain Sevier. This monastery he had established in the Himalayas for the contemplation of God's nameless and formless aspect only. No dualistic and ritualistic worship was to be permitted there. But after reaching Mayavati he noticed that a photo of Sri Ramakrishna was kept in a room and monks were regularly offering flowers to it. He expressed his displeasure in strong terms, in the wake of which the monks removed the photo from

the room and discontinued to offer flowers. But they failed to understand why Swamiji was so displeased with them. After all, it was the photo of the Master, who was all for Swamiji. The question pricked them for about two years.

After Swamiji's passing away, one of them wrote to the Holy Mother narrating the incident and seeking her opinion about it. And what did she say? She could have been hurt because, after all, they were worshipping her husband, her all-in-all in life! She could have felt that Naren did it to excess—what harm the worship would cause to the Advaita Ashrama? But no, she stood by Narendra and said, 'Naren was right. Thakur, our Master, was Advaita. As you are disciples of the same Master, you are all Advaitins; I can say with all certitude that you are Advaitins.' By these words, she not only resolved the doubts of a single monk, but clarified also, once for all, the philosophical stand of the Sangha. Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna's principal ideal or *bhāva* was non-dual Vedanta. What Swami Vivekananda later preached as 'Practical Vedanta' is based on Advaita. He said, Shankara and others had kept this non-dual Vedanta confined exclusively to the caves and monasteries; he would make it accessible to all so that a lawyer will become a better lawyer, a student will become a better student, a teacher will become a better teacher, a clerk a better clerk, if they practise this Vedanta. And, surely a spiritual aspirant will have the supreme knowledge of Brahman by practice of this Vedanta. This was Sri Ramakrishna's fundamental attitude. That is why he said, 'Do as you please after attaining non-dual knowledge.'

However, the Advaita Sri Ramakrishna upheld is neither a carbon copy of Shankarite Advaita, not its repudiation. In fact, he has transcended the standpoint of Shankara and says, after *jnāna* (knowledge

of Brahman) there is a state of *vijnāna* (special knowledge) which is when you see Brahman even in *jiva* (living beings) and *jagat* (world) and therefore accept them also as real.

Sri Ramakrishna gives a beautiful simile of the roof and the stairs to make this point clear. He says, in order to go to the roof one must use the stairs but give them up one by one considering them unreal; if you stay stuck on a stair, you can never reach the roof. But as you go to the roof you discover that the roof and the stairs are made of the same substance—brick, cement, lime etc. Similarly, to have the knowledge of Brahman, you have to first discard the world as unreal. But after you have known Brahman you find the world which you had discarded before as unreal is also Brahman and, therefore, real. So you then accept the world also as true. Sister Nivedita once said to Vivekananda: Shankara says One is real, manifoldness is unreal. And Buddha says One is unreal and ‘many’ is the real. Is it correct? Swamiji replied, ‘Yes, and what Ramakrishna Paramahansa and I have added to this is that the Many and the One are the same Reality, perceived by the same mind at different times and in different attitudes.’¹² We may remember that when Swami Turiyanandaji was breathing his last, he echoed this experience of *vijnāna*. He said, ‘Everything is real. Brahman is real. The world is real. The world is Brahman.’

This is Practical Vedanta—to think and act accepting every being as God or Brahman. While discoursing on Practical Vedanta, Swamiji exhorts us to deify the phenomenal world. You have never seen anything but God. You have never met or interacted with anyone other than God. But that God or Brahman you are always taking for man, or a chair or table, or some other objects. Swamiji tells us to give up this conventional way of looking at the world

and view the world as the manifestation of God. *This giving up of the conventional attitude is true renunciation* and once this attitude is cultivated properly, it will lead us to attain true God-vision.

This is Practical Vedanta. This is Sri Ramakrishna’s cardinal teaching. And its essence is love, because Advaita Vedanta makes us one with all, compelling us to accept others’ joy and sorrow as our own. In one of his lectures on Practical Vedanta, Swamiji says that love is Vedanta, because love unifies. That is to say, the fundamental characteristic of Vedanta is love and renunciation. Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Holy Mother have collectively set up the Order of monks to make Practical Vedanta effective. While Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji have shown us how to do that in the monasteries, Mother has applied the principles of Vedanta in her busy day-to-day life. The number of monks in every age is bound to be limited and the householder devotees are to be the majority. Both Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji were monks. If only they two were there as the ideals of Practical Vedanta, householders could have argued that however good it may be as a modern-day ideal, it can be practised only by monks and nuns; that ‘Practical Vedanta’ becomes ‘Practical’ only for them, but not for the householders who are the majority and who are being continuously grilled in the hellfire of the world. But that argument cannot arise now, thanks to Mother’s exemplary life. In spite of her being an acme of renunciation, the Mother had accepted for his divine *lilā* the framework of a householder’s life—to make Practical Vedanta practicable even for householders. And her life in that household was much more challenging than any householder. In that unique extended family there were the fastidious niece Radhu,

(Continued to page 22)