

Holy Mother's Role in the Ramakrishna Order

SWAMI BHUTESHANANDA

It is very strange indeed that among the great religious leaders of the world who are considered world teachers, or as we call them incarnations of God in India, you will find practically no instance where their Holy Consorts had to play a role in the great religious movement started by them. Only in the case of the Ramakrishna Movement, the religious movement initiated by Sri Ramakrishna, do we find this strange exception. Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, never thought initially that she would have to make any contribution towards the religious movement initiated by her husband whom she looked upon as Guru, as God-incarnate. But Sri Ramakrishna's contribution does not exhaustively depict the movement of the Order which is known by his name. Actually the movement was started by the twin personalities of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother Sarada Devi.

In the beginning, as I told you, the Holy Mother was very shy. She would not even personally appear before her own devotees. She used to keep herself hidden under a veil. Even when her devotees wanted spiritual instructions from her, she used to speak to them in a voice which was almost inaudible. So there used to be two women devotees of Sri Ramakrishna [Yogin Ma and Golap Ma] who would accompany the Holy Mother and relay what Holy Mother said in reply to the

questions of the devotees. But Sri Ramakrishna knew what part Holy Mother had to play in the Movement. So, from the beginning he was preparing her so that the latter could play her role.

The task was not easy and much persuasion on his part was required in the beginning. Towards the latter part of his life Sri Ramakrishna told the Holy Mother that she would have to take an active part in spreading the message of the spiritual movement that had been initiated by the Divine Mother [Kāli] through him [Sri Ramakrishna]. Sri Ramakrishna never mentioned himself as the initiator; he used to say 'the Divine Mother is creating this movement and She is using me as Her instrument.' That was how Sri Ramakrishna looked upon himself. What was the response of the Holy Mother? She said: What can I do? I am a mere uneducated woman!

In those days, in India particularly, womenfolk were not supposed to be active in any public activity. They looked after the domestic side and men used to do all the public activities. Of course things have changed to a great extent now. Holy Mother was just like any old type woman. She said: 'I am a woman. What can I do?' Sri Ramakrishna said: No, that will not do. You will have to shake off your shyness and come forward to help me in the movement.

As for the relation between Sri Ramakrishna and his holy consort, the Mother, you will be surprised to know, at least those who are not fully aware of their relation, that Sri Ramakrishna looked upon the Holy Mother as a representation of the Mother Divine, as the supreme incarnation of God and the Holy Mother looked upon Sri Ramakrishna as the representation of God, Guru and everything. Sometimes she would look upon Sri Ramakrishna as Mother Kāli. Once when the Holy Mother was seated near Sri Ramakrishna and just massaging his feet, she asked: 'What do you think of me? How do you look upon me?' Promptly Sri Ramakrishna replied: 'The Divine Mother who is worshipped in the temple, the mother who gave birth to me and resides in the concert room and the mother who is now massaging my feet, I look upon them all as one. There is absolutely no difference. All three are to me the same Divine Mother.' Sri Ramakrishna did not say this merely to please Holy Mother. He wanted her to take that role consciously and actively. That is how the relation has to be viewed. Both of them looked upon each other as incarnations of God. Holy Mother looked upon Sri Ramakrishna as an incarnation of God, and Sri Ramakrishna looked upon Holy Mother as the representation of the Divine Mother. But as I told you, when Sri Ramakrishna wanted her to be established in that role he was at the same time preparing her for that.

What did Sri Ramakrishna ultimately do at the end of his *sādhanā*? He actually worshipped Sarada Devi as the Divine Mother. Holy Mother also, in spite of all her habitual shyness, on that day became so absorbed in ecstasy that she felt no shyness when her husband, whom she respected so

much, worshipped her as the embodiment of the Divine Mother. What was the purpose behind this worship? At that time nobody knew that there was a big meaning in that, that Sri Ramakrishna wanted Holy Mother to be a visible and immaculate representation of the Divine Mother whose role would be to enlighten the world immersed in the darkness of ignorance and to play the most prominent part in the spread of the organization. That was how Sri Ramakrishna prepared her.

From the very beginning Sri Ramakrishna taught her like that. He taught her the various mysteries of spiritual experiences and the mysteries of the spiritual world. Among other things, he taught her all the nitty-gritty of spiritual life, especially, how to recognize the different forms of ecstasies that Sri Ramakrishna himself experienced and demonstrated in his everyday life. Thus Holy Mother became conversant with all these states so that she could effectively assess the progress of other people who would come to take shelter in her, and teach them in diverse ways. That was how the Mother was meticulously groomed by Sri Ramakrishna although at that time she was not conscious of it.

After the passing away of the Master

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, the story goes that he appeared before her and told her to just step into this active role for spreading the light of religion and spirituality in the world. That was how the progress started step-by-step, and gradually the Holy Mother became convinced about the role she had to play. Sri Ramakrishna treated her with that much of respect. It was not merely as a man looking upon his wife as life's partner, not merely as

somebody to be taught about the mysteries of the world. Sri Ramakrishna knew that Holy Mother's life was meant for the revelation of the great spiritual truths to the world. He used to mention lovingly that she was Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning. She had been born to enlighten the entire world. That was his way of looking at the Holy Mother and she too gradually understood that she had to take up the responsibility as a sacred trust from her husband.

In the beginning she was as self-abnegating as Sri Ramakrishna who had effaced his ego. She always hid herself under a veil, as it were. When the organization (i.e. the Ramakrishna Math and Mission) started, she remained in the background, never coming to the forefront. But when there was no such organization as such, the disciples neither had money to maintain themselves, nor any support from anywhere. So they got scattered and went about as mendicants or wandering monks and this deeply pained the Holy Mother. She prayed to Sri Ramakrishna: Master, you lived your life for the regeneration of mankind. But your disciples, the band of workers expected to spread your message, are not yet organized. They have no food, no shelter. They are living a sort of wandering life. How then will your movement be carried on and established on a firm footing? Did you take all the trouble to come to this world only for this—that after you there would be no continuity of the movement? O Master! Let there be some provision for these boys so that they can stay together in a monastery and raise an organization that will continue for many many years, not only for the regeneration of India, but of the whole world.

That was her fixed belief at that time. And she prayed for the material comfort to some extent for the disciples whom she looked upon as her children as well as the instruments through which Sri Ramakrishna Movement will be continued and spread. That was Holy Mother's prayer. All the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, especially Swami Vivekananda, used to mention that it was the Holy Mother's prayer that ultimately brought them together as an organization, and food and shelter, the bare necessities of life, came to be gradually available to them.

It is true that without the Holy Mother there would have been no organization. There would have been individual monks moving about here and there practising austerities and spiritual disciplines. But no organized work could be possibly done. That is how the Holy Mother in a way was the originator of the organization through which the Ramakrishna Movement continued, got stability and kept on spreading further and further.

I mentioned before casually that the Holy Mother did not interfere in the administration of the organization and she always kept herself in the background. But even then, everybody knew that she was careful about the well-being of the organization and she was very attentive to that. And whenever there was any need to guide the young disciples, she never failed to do that duty. She was always available for that. And to the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna her word was the final thing in matters of administration. This we have seen.

Swami Vivekananda, in a letter to his brother-disciple, Swami Shivananda, therefore writes: 'You have not yet

understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life—none of you. But gradually you will know.' Swamiji in this letter and elsewhere again and again mentioned the fact that his monastic brothers, let alone ordinary people, at that point of time failed to understand fully what a great power had appeared as the Holy Mother. But, know for certain, he asserted, that the Holy Mother is going to play a wonderful role in the regeneration of this country, nay the entire world. That was the great faith that Swamiji had in Holy Mother. Not only Swamiji, but later every disciple of Sri Ramakrishna looked upon her as an earthly representation of Sri Ramakrishna himself.

Her life

But what about her own life? She did not live like a nun having a traditional monastic life. No. On the contrary, she was surrounded with household relations—her brothers and their families. Yet, in spite of that, how inwardly detached she remained from the fuss of the average householder's life! She did whatever was necessary for the family in the spirit of service. But then, her family was not restricted to the family living at Jayrambati where she was born. She considered the whole world her family, and looked upon everyone as her child. A wonderful outlook she had! She welcomed the Western disciples of Swami Vivekananda—Sister Nivedita and others as her own children, as her own daughters, and they also felt so in her presence. Sister Nivedita would sit at her feet often and she was so lovingly treated that she never felt she did not have a mother and was deprived of her love. Everybody felt that way. Her eyes were always equally merciful towards everyone.

There was no difference in her attitude towards a saint and a sinner. Once she remarked that Swami Saradananda, who used to take all care of her and the dacoit Amjad were both her children. Whether a man was good or bad made no difference to her. When somebody complained and requested the mother not to allow people who were not considered to be religious and whose conduct was not approved by society, to come to her and mix freely with her, she replied: My boy, please do not forget that they are all my children. My children may get smeared with dirt and dust. What is my duty as a mother? Not to shun them; but to cleanse them and then take them in my arms. That is my duty. I cannot look down upon them simply because they are defiled. I myself have to cleanse them and take them in my arms. Thus everyone could feel her boundless, unforgettable affection.

Similarly, on another occasion, there were some discussions about some people not travelling the right path, and a plea was made to the Holy Mother that they should be reprimanded. But the Mother gave her final counsel thus: 'Do not look at the faults of others. Instead find your own faults.' Do not look at anybody with a critical eye because that will disturb your peace. Moreover, 'When a man sees defects in others, his own mind gets polluted. What does he gain by finding faults in others? He only hurts himself by that.' So Holy Mother's advice is this: Never condemn anybody. Always look with forbearance at people who do not behave in a manner that is acceptable to everybody. Have patience. Have love and your love will transform them. Swami Abhedananda in one of his hymns on Holy Mother said,

*‘Snehena badhnāsi mano’smadeeyam,
Doshānasheshān saguneekaroshi.’*

—‘You, bind us at your feet with your affection and you transform our defects into good traits.’ That is exactly the influence of the Holy Mother who could change others through love. It was not by scolding or looking down upon anybody. It was always by looking at everyone with love.

Once a boy was scolded by Swami Shivanandaji Maharaj. He turned him out of the monastery because of some fault. Do you know what that young brahmacharin did? He went straight to the Holy Mother and told her that he had been turned out from the Math because of some wrongdoing for which he was very sorry and lost mental peace. Holy Mother listened to him and said, ‘Well, you come in and have your meal and take rest. Afterwards I shall talk.’ Then after feeding him she told the brahmacharin ‘I am writing a letter to Tarak (Swami Shivananda). You take that letter to him.’ So he carried that letter from Holy Mother and gave it to Swami Shivananda. The Swami read that letter and, then, with a smile said: ‘Clever boy, you have gone straight to the High Court and appealed against my order! Of course, the High Court order will prevail’. The brahmacharin was thus forgiven.

Everywhere it was like that. Nobody was there to feel that the Holy Mother had rejected him—nobody. She would not reject anybody. Everybody could be sure of her protection, love and unconditional affection, perhaps much more than what our biological mother can give us. Others would get tired but she would not. Once it so happened that a relation of Holy Mother [her mother Shyamasundari Devi], an elderly lady, remarked that Sarada was very

unlucky because there was none to call her ‘mother’. Ramakrishna heard those words of regret and replied: ‘Don’t worry. She would be called mother by so many that she will have no respite, she will be troubled by ceaseless cries “mother!” “mother!” from all directions.’ Of course, Sri Ramakrishna’s statement was true only partly because, throughout the world, her children called and even today are calling her ‘mother’, ‘mother’, but she was not and is never troubled with that. Her love, her forbearance was unending. That was her life.

She lived with many worldly relations as I told you. But in spite of that she never forgot to keep a difference between the monks and the householders as there is a difference no doubt. But then, that did not mean that any of them would be deprived of her affection. That was Holy Mother’s way of looking upon all the different classes of people. She was mother to everybody in all respects. She used to say, ‘I am your mother. It is not a kind of an assumed relationship. This relationship is eternal and abiding.’

Once someone said: Mother, we do not realize how far we are progressing in spiritual life. And she replied: ‘Don’t worry. Suppose, a person is asleep and he is carried from one place to another and when he wakes up he finds he is in a different place. Can it not happen? You may not be aware of your progress now. But rest assured that your mother is there for your protection and you will be carried to the goal. There is no doubt about it.’ She also said on many occasions, ‘Whenever you are in distress, say to yourself, “I have a mother.”’ ‘Trust me’, she used to say, ‘I shall be always protecting you under all circumstances.’

This assurance gave immense faith and solace to all who believed in her.

Throughout her life it was like that. When she was approached by devotees, at times without any consideration, she would not mind cooking for them and feeding them. When she was doing a lot of work herself, somebody said, 'Mother, why do you do all this hard work yourself? You can afford to keep some helping hands. Why don't you take advantage of that?' Holy Mother said, 'You see, it is my duty as mother to attend to the needs of my children. So I am not happy unless I do it myself.' That was her outlook.

It happened sometimes that some disciple resolved 'I won't take food unless mother feeds me.' And, lo and behold, the mother was there to fulfil his or her wish! All demands like this were met and that too without any kind of annoyance or uneasy feeling, but always with affection and love. So you see, her whole life was a type that should be emulated by other people, particularly by the womenfolk. They should try to be forbearing, patient, helpful and affectionate irrespective of what return they get. Love should always be unconditional. That was the mother's way of looking at the conduct of people.

The Holy Mother's disciples found that she would not make any difference particularly among the women disciples. She never took the exalted position of a Guru for them. She just treated them as her own children, own daughters. It so happened that some women disciples would approach her with great respect, but she would always brush aside their formal reverence and ask them to lie down on the same cot by her side just as a mother does with her daughter. So this was her conduct with her female disciples.

Another rare quality of the Mother was that when people went to ask her serious questions, she would give such simple answers that the problem would get solved at once. She did not study and was practically unlettered. Of course, she started reading the primer in early life, but the family did not approve of that, because in those days there were superstitions about giving education to women. They did not allow that. So the Holy Mother remained almost unlettered. She could not even sign her name. She could read only a little but could not write at all. That was her education. But what a store of knowledge! Sri Ramakrishna did not say for nothing that she was the embodiment of the Goddess of Learning. It was learning, it was wisdom without being covered with high-sounding words. Her simple utterances are enough to solve the problems of the whole world.

That was Holy Mother. She never looked upon anybody in any other relation than as their mother. That is why her motherhood is the most important aspect of her life. You know, in the beginning the Mother was so shy! We monks would not even have the opportunity to come in close contact with her. She used to keep the distance always, except in the case of a few disciples who were always with her. Others were always kept at a distance. But even then, they never failed to taste the bliss of love the Mother had for all of them.

Her daily life

Look at her daily life. It shows how one should live. She would rise early in the morning. During her stay at the temple of Dakshineswar she used to live in a small room. It was unthinkably small. It is a wonder how she could manage to live

there! And very early in the morning, say, at three o'clock or so, she would finish her bath and then she would sit for meditation for long hours. Then she would start her work for the service of Sri Ramakrishna—cooking food for him as well as for his disciples who used to be with him. She worked this way for the whole day. Again in the afternoon she would sit for meditation which continued for hours. And then she again cooked for the devotees. There were some women devotees who would sometimes stay with her as desired by Sri Ramakrishna and she had to take care of them.

Her austerities were famous. Very austere and self-abnegating life it was, never enjoying any kind of comfort. She lived in that tiny room at Dakshineswar, but nobody knew she was there. The manager of the temple was asked once: 'Does the Holy Mother stay here?' He replied: 'We hear that she is living here but I have never seen her.' That was Holy Mother's phenomenal shyness.

Later, we, the monastic members, also used to keep her secluded like that. After the passing away of the Master, when the Holy Mother had many disciples for herself, even then her photos were not shown to outside people. Even her disciples could find it with great difficulty. Her pictures were never circulated at that time. We thought she was just like our mother who had to be kept hidden. But as I told you, during the centenary of the Holy Mother, there was such a worldwide celebration that on one occasion in a memorial meeting I said: 'We tried to keep Holy Mother hidden but she has at last unveiled herself.' So she became known throughout the world at that time. I wonder how it could happen like that!

I will tell you one incident that took place in South India. In a shop there was a big picture of the Mother. One of our swamis happened to go there and saw the picture. He was surprised. How could the picture be there? Being quite curious he asked the owner of the shop: 'Whose picture is it?' The owner said he did not know. 'Then why have you kept it here?' asked the swami. 'We have kept it because it is an auspicious thing. If she is there we feel protected' answered the owner of the shop. So, you see how the Holy Mother protects even those who do not know anything about her! That is how she is spreading herself. Again, it is also a wonder that sometimes people find that the presence of the Holy Mother is more reassuring than Sri Ramakrishna. One disciple of Sri Ramakrishna said, the Master would usually test a person many times before accepting him as his disciple. But Holy Mother never tested anybody. Whoever came was accepted immediately.

I give you one instance of Mothers's great love for people who came and called her 'Mother'. Sri Ramakrishna was then living at Dakshineswar while the Holy Mother stayed in the tiny room called 'Nahavat', a few yards from the room of the Master. But the Holy Mother could not meet Sri Ramakrishna more than twice when she carried food to Sri Ramakrishna, once at lunch time and then again at dinner time. It so happened that one day, one lady came and prayed to her: 'Mother, today I would like to carry the food to Sri Ramakrishna.' So the Mother could not carry the food plate to him, she handed over the food plate to the devotee who took it to Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna wanted to take the food but could not take it. He made several attempts but could not touch the

food. The Holy mother got the news, came to him and with folded hands prayed to the Master: 'Please take this today. Tomorrow, I shall bring the food myself.' Sri Ramakrishna said, 'No, the food is contaminated, I cannot take it.' Mother requested him again and again to take the food, but he said, 'I will take it today if you promise that you will not send my food through anybody and everybody in future.' Again, with folded hands, the Holy Mother said, 'Thakur! I cannot give you my word that way. If anybody comes to me calling me 'Mother' and asks for the favour of bringing food to you, I cannot deny her that.' That was an event when the Holy Mother 'seemingly' disobeyed her Master. But the Master was not annoyed because that was exactly what he wanted; he was preparing the Holy Mother to assume the role of the Universal Mother.

Indeed, we all find that Sarada Devi turned out to be the acme of the ideal of motherhood. And what kind of motherhood? Not to look after the physical nourishment of her children only but also their spiritual nourishment. She was always aware of that responsibility. So, when hordes of people came to her for spiritual counsel and guidance they would find everything readily from the affectionate mother.

From her early days, when she was a little girl, even since that time she was filled with a spirit to serve others. Her family was poor. It was a hard life. So she used to look after all the other members when her father had passed away. She helped her mother untiringly. Both mother and daughter had to

work together physically for procuring food for the family.

We know many instances from her life which ordinarily would not be understood. They were miraculous. But more important than those things were the real life that people can understand, a life that was actually lived, a life that can set an example of how to live as a householder or as a spiritual person. She was always absorbed in God, yet attending to the duties of the world meticulously. The Holy Mother is a living example of this ideal. That is why she was more approachable and better understood than Sri Ramakrishna who was so far away from ordinary human beings and their earthly activities. But Holy Mother was easily reachable, easily approachable. She never behaved in such a way as to show any difference between the worldly people and herself. So they felt comfortable at her feet and always found spiritual nourishment from her. Holy Mother made it possible. That is why her influence is so irresistible today, so commonly appreciated by all people. That is Holy Mother's life in a nutshell. I did not go into the details of her life with the idea that you are supposed to have read those things from the books which are also available in English and other foreign languages. So, from the books you can find out the Holy Mother's great life that is appealing to all. And that will definitely elevate a person spiritually. What is needed is simple faith and yearning for God-realization and Mother is there to help us all in her own way. May the Holy Mother shower her blessings on us all. ■

* Srimat Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj was the 12th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. This article, abridged and edited, is based on the talk he delivered at the Hollywood Temple on 24 August 1988. Courtesy: Archives of the Vedanta Society of Southern California.