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PRABUDDHA BHARATA

DECEMBER 2005

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Cover: The Renovated Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House and Cultural Centre; inset: Swamiji's Birthplace

उत्तिष्ठत
जाग्रत
प्राप्य
वरान्निबोधत ।

PRABUDDHA BHARATA

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

Vol. 110

DECEMBER 2005

No. 12

Traditional Wisdom

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S PRAYER TO THE DIVINE MOTHER

मातः सदा ते शरणागतोऽहं न देहसौख्यं ह्यणिमादिकां वा ।
तामष्टसिद्धिं न च लोकमान्यं याचे तु नाहं शरणागतस्ते ॥

'O Mother, I throw myself on Thy mercy; I take shelter at Thy Hallowed Feet. I do not want bodily comforts; I do not crave name and fame; I do not seek the eight occult powers.

श्रीपादपद्मे भवताद्यथा ते भक्तिश्च शुद्धा कुरु मे तथैतत् ।
अहैतुकी सा ह्यमलापि शश्वन्निष्कामरूपा जनि केवलं त्वम् ॥

'Be gracious and grant that I may have pure love for Thee, a love unsmitten by desire, untainted by selfishness—a love craved by the devotee for the sake of love alone.

मातर्यथा ते भवितास्मि नाहं कदापि मुग्धो भवमोहकर्या ।
भ्रान्त्या न मे स्याद् भ्रमिसंसृतौ ते न कामिनीकाञ्चनसक्तिरस्याम् ॥

'And grant me the favour, O Mother, that I may not be deluded by Thy world-be-witching māyā, that I may never be attached to the world, to "woman and gold", conjured up by Thy inscrutable māyā!

मातर्न चास्तीह ममेव कश्चिदृतेऽपि च त्वामुन भक्तिहीनः ।
अहं स वै साधनहीन एवास्मि ज्ञानहीनो भजनादिहीनः ॥

'O Mother, there is no one but Thee whom I may call my own. Mother, I do not know how to worship; I am without austerity; I have neither devotion nor knowledge.

श्रीपादपद्मे कृपया च भक्तिं मामेव देह्याम्ब परां तु सद्यः ।
कृपाकटाक्षं कुरु देवि नित्यं याचेऽहमेतच्छरणागतस्ते ॥

'Be gracious, Mother, and out of Thy infinite mercy grant me love for Thy Lotus Feet.'

(Sanskrit rendition: Swami Purnananda)

☪ This Month ☪

The maternal archetype that has played a seminal role in the shaping of civilizations is not a homogenous entity but a conglomerate of psychosocial forms. The editorial, **On Being a Mother**, examines some of these.

Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago presents a *New York Daily Tribune* report on 'What Vedanta Teaches' summarizing the Vedantic precepts that had freshly arrived on American shores.

Observers and scholars have noted the many similarities between the tastes, temperaments and cultures of the Latin American and South Asian peoples. The worship of the Goddess by the native Amerindians and the veneration of Virgin Mary mark one point of similarity—reverence for the Divine Feminine. In his insightful essay, **Divine Mother's Worship in Latin America**, Swami Madhuranandaji of Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Morabadi, Ranchi, points out how the Vedantic dimension of the life and teachings of Sri Sarada Devi can fruitfully enrich this vibrant spirituality.

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's was a ministry of remarkable spiritual power, vast human sympathy and unstinted love and service, all shrouded under the veil of an unselfconscious modesty. This is charmingly portrayed by Smt. Sudesh in her article **The Veiled Divinity**. The author is a devotee from Ambala.

Sri Sarada Devi's life was a ceaseless march of unwavering spiritual discipline. Japa, prayer and meditation were seamlessly woven in with austerity, forbearance, service and devotion, and coloured by a faultless vision to generate a fabric that could not only

be tailored to diverse needs but also serve as protection for the weak and the faltering. Dr B T Advani, General Secretary, Shri Ramakrishna Samskriti Peeth, Kamptee, calls our attention to these aspects in his essay, **Ma Sarada and Sadhana: Holy Mother and Spiritual Disciplines**.

Reminiscences of Holy Mother by Swami Parameshwaranandaji is a translation of the Bengali text originally published in *Udbodhan*, Jyaishtha, 1353 BE.

Smt. Deepali Sinha, Secretary, Sri Sarada Sangha, Cuttack, has succinctly highlighted the theoretical perspectives, historical development and agenda for action involved in efforts to secure for women a greater control over their lives in **Women's Empowerment**.

Pravrajika Sevapranaji concludes her inspiring article, **All This Is Verily Brahman**, with a discussion of the many ways by which we could actually recover a vision of the all-pervasive divinity and make our lives authentically spiritual. The author is serving at Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, Varanasi.

Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita, as recorded by M, has been described as 'one of the world's most extraordinary religious documents'. Swami Chetananandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, traces the history of this work and its author in **The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna according to Mahendra Nath Gupta**.

This month's **Glimpses of Holy Lives** concludes the story of Sadhu Kishandasji—of his remarkable humility and spiritual grandeur, both in life and in death.

On Being a Mother

EDITORIAL

This incident took place some years back. The Principal of a Ramakrishna Mission college in West Bengal received a phone call from the local police station informing him that one of his students had been picked up on charges of eve-teasing. The officer insisted that the boy would be released from police custody only if the swami himself came to the police station to secure his release. On reaching the station the swami found the boy as well as the girl awaiting him in the officer's room. The officer proceeded to settle matters without delay. He first asked the boy to touch the girl's feet, as she was older than him, and beg her pardon for his misbehaviour. This he had to repeat with the swami and the accompanying teachers. He then reminded the boy that he was being let off with just a warning as this was his first offence, but if the act was repeated his baton would ensure a few broken bones. After having dismissed the boy the officer turned to the girl and said, 'You see, mother, you get into this sort of trouble because you think yourself a girl. Learn to think of yourself as a mother.' As the young collegian gaped at the officer, trying to make sense of what he was saying, the latter added, 'Why, don't we have young unmarried aunts at home? We address them as mothers—*aunt-mothers*—and they too behave with us like our mothers, though they may not be much older to us. So, if you too think of yourself as a mother you too will be able to elicit an appropriate response from others and will not land in such problems.'

Before we can judge the efficacy of the policeman's decidedly unconventional, if not controversial, advice we need to give it a closer look. At a time when emancipation and empowerment seem to be unavoidable terms

in any talk on women's issues, advising a young girl to play the mother may appear awkward moralizing. But if we remember that in making his statement the officer was not only using key cultural constructs but also some fundamental psychological insights, we should be able to see his remarks in a better perspective.

Feminine Roles

During his stay in the West Swami Vivekananda was often called upon to speak about the 'Women of India'. During one such lecture at the Shakespeare Club in Pasadena he observed, 'The ideal woman in India is the mother, the mother first and the mother last. The word woman calls up to the mind of the Hindu, motherhood; and God is called Mother. ... To the ordinary man in India, the whole force of womanhood is concentrated in motherhood. In the Western home, the wife rules. In an Indian home, the mother rules.'

Women find themselves in four basic social roles: daughter, sister, wife and mother. Of these, the first two are essentially passive in the sense that one is a daughter by virtue of the very fact of being born a girl, and then a sister if the parents happen to have another child. Wifehood and motherhood, on the other hand, presuppose a conjugal relationship into which one is presumed to have entered voluntarily. These roles therefore also imply a sexual component unlike the purely gendered character of the daughter and sister. The difference between the two lies in the primacy accorded to a specific social relationship—in case of wifehood it is the wife-husband relationship and in motherhood the mother-son/daughter relationship.

In traditional psychoanalytic parlance

the aforementioned binaries also specify how one's libido is directed or the way one's sexual identity is fulfilled. But the way wifehood or motherhood is conceived in the Indian tradition is what gives these concepts the unique flavour that our police officer was exploiting.

Wife as Mother

Let us recall the well-known legend of Shakuntala, the foster daughter of Kanva muni, who had undergone a *gandharva* marriage with King Dushyanta in her father's hermitage and had borne him the princely son Bharata. Several years after their marriage, when Shakuntala, accompanied by Bharata, approaches Dushyanta in his court, the latter refuses to recognize her. Filled with anguish and anger Shakuntala proceeds to admonish Dushyanta in various ways. She reminds him that the Puranas and the sages say that it is the husband himself who, having entered his wife, is born as the son. It is for this reason that the wife is called *jāyā*. It is also for this very reason that a man is to look upon the wife who has borne him a son as his own mother (*tasmāt bhāryāṁ naraḥ paśyēt mātṛvat putramātaram*).

These words of Shakuntala's are not merely the emotional outbursts of a wronged woman. The thought she expresses can be traced back to the Vedic concept of marriage and wifehood. In the famous 'Sūryā Vivāha Sukta' of the Rig Veda (10.85), which remains a prototype of the Hindu marriage to this day, the rishi invokes Indra to bless the bride with good fortune and virtuous sons, and adds: 'Let her bear ten sons, and make her husband the eleventh; *Daśāsyaṁ putrānā dhehi patim-ekādaśam kṛdhi*.' Mothering was thus extended not only to the sons but also to the husband.

Even the Vaishnava spiritual discipline of madhura bhava, which spiritualizes the attitude of a wife or lover, includes the attitude of the mother, for 'the loving woman serves her lover like a slave, gives good counsel under all circumstances like a friend, feels happy at his happiness and miserable at his afflic-

tions, engages herself like a mother in nourishing his body and mind, and thinks of his welfare in all respects'.

Thus the wife-mother dichotomy seems to have been resolved in the Indian tradition in favour of the mother.

Motherhood as Power

Psychoanalytically oriented thinkers have been inclined to read only wishful Victorian thinking in the concept of motherhood. They argue that the universality of libidinous desires is a formidable barrier to any expression of selflessness that the idea of motherhood presumes. In fact it is this play of libido in a mother-son relationship that forms the basis of the Oedipus complex, a key construct in psychoanalysis.

In the rich mythological tradition of India, however, there is little attempt at prudery or suppression of the less edifying side of humans. The characters in the Mahabharata or the Ramayana, for instance—both women and men—are revealed in myriad starkly realistic outlines, warts and all. Sri Ramakrishna's assertion that lust and greed are the prime movers in virtually every worldly activity is seen corroborated in almost every myth, legend and recorded bit of history. Yet, juxtaposed against this background are characters who drive home, with no less stirring effect, the ideal of motherhood and also reveal the remarkable power this concept has wielded in moulding the character and conduct of humans down the centuries.

Take, for instance, Arjuna's encounter with Urvashi, the apsara, at the celestial court of his father Indra. Finding Arjuna gazing at her, she presents herself seductively to him. Taken aback by her advances, Arjuna proceeds to explain his behaviour. 'Lady,' he says, 'let me tell you why I was looking at you in my father's court. You were married to our ancestor Pururava. It is to you that our Paurava clan traces its source. So you are a guru and a mother to me. I looked at you as one would

look upon one's mother whom one has not seen before. I bow down at your feet, for you are as much an object of my worship as are Kunti, Madri and Shachi, and I too deserve your protection as a son.'

This episode has its reflection in the lives of many eminent personalities in Indian history and legend, including Sri Ramakrishna's own well-known attitude towards women. But this represents only one end of the spectrum of attitudes that are subsumed under the concept of motherhood. At the other end of the spectrum is the divine act of cosmic creation as conceived in the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*:

In the beginning, this (universe) was but the self (Viraj), of a human form. ... He was not at all happy. Therefore people (still) are not happy when alone. He desired a mate. He became as big as man and wife embracing each other. He parted his very body into two. Therefore, said Yajnavalkya, this (body) is one-half of oneself, like one of the two halves of a split pea. Therefore this space is indeed filled by the wife. He was united with her. From that humans were born. She thought, 'How can he be united with me after producing me from himself? Well, let me hide myself.' She became a cow, the other became a bull and was united with her; from that cows were born. The one became a mare, the other a stallion; ... Thus did he project everything that exists in pairs, down to the ants.

So the Upanishad asserts: 'This Self has entered into these bodies up to the tip of the nails (*ānakhāgrebhyo*)—as a razor may be put in its case (*yathā kṣura kṣurādihāne avahita syāt*), or as fire, which sustains the world, may be in its source (*viśvambharo vā viśvambharakulāye*).' If the aforementioned imagery appears too paternalistic, we have a perfect counterfoil in the Vedic 'Devi Sukta': 'I am the empress of all that lives, the power in everything.' 'Power', Swami Vivekananda points out, 'is the first of our ideas. It impinges upon man at every step; power felt within is the soul; without nature. And the battle between the two makes human life. ... Man saw that the sun shines on the

good and evil alike. Here was a new idea of God, as the Universal Power behind all—the Mother-idea was born.' "'I am the Power that manifests everywhere"', says the Mother—She who is bringing out this universe, and She who is bringing forth the following destruction.' Not only does the human mother symbolize the creative faculty of the Divine Mother and the power that moulds the fate of Her children, but she also represents the unconditioned nature of this power, for 'mother represents colourless love that knows no barter, love that never dies.'

Thus even the procreative act is seen only as a tiny component of cosmic creativity, and the joy therein a small expression of the joy that is the Self—and is therefore worthy of being celebrated as such. It is this joy of the Self that is accessible to that very degree that one is able to realize the Mother that is in oneself.

Wasn't the Policeman Being Chauvinistic?

This is not an unlikely question. Moralizers are known to revel in giving advice while holding themselves above compulsions. But motherhood in Indian culture has been inextricably linked with sonship, with its implicit restraint and reverence for women as exemplified in Arjuna's reply to Urvashi. It is in realizing this ideal of sonship in their own lives that men have honoured motherhood and kept this ideal alive to this day. It would only be to the extent to which he himself exemplified this ideal that the policeman could expect his advice to have the intended effect on its recipients.

As we celebrate the 152nd birth anniversary of Sri Sarada Devi this month, our contributors take a look at some aspects of the motherhood that she personified—in its human as well as divine forms—and also at her appeal that has long transcended the barriers of time and place. In so doing they pay homage to the ideal of motherhood that is an essential component of the Indian ethos.

~

Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago

December 1905

What Vedanta Teaches

What, then, is the message which these native Hindu teachers ... bring to the Vedanta Society? They bring, first of all, the lesson of universal toleration—that there is truth in all religions. ... It [Vedanta] points out that all are true for their day and generation. No other position, they say, will stand logical analysis. For, if what we believed yesterday be false because we think differently to-day, then our to-day's belief is equally false because we shall certainly advance from it to another belief hereafter. ...

The Vedantists say that each successive modified belief is part of a main stairway ... of progress toward the ideal, of which each particular stair is as necessary as every other. ... Each individual step, from the lowest to the highest, is necessary and important and true.

.....

One of the most striking and essential features of the Vedanta philosophy is what they call the law of Karma, or the law of causation. ... There can be no cause whatever without an effect, nor effect without cause. Thus, every thought of our mind, every act of our body, has its cause and will in turn be a cause. ... And what one is to-day is nothing other than the sum of the thoughts, desires and aspirations of one's past.

And this leads into that other broad doctrine ... of reincarnation. ...

... Cause and effect are equal. ... Both terms of an equation must be equal. There is no escape. The law is absolute. If man is immortal and is to continue for an infinite time to come, he must have been in existence for an infinite past time, else there is an equation that does not balance. ...some human beings live one hundred years, others only a few days. The average life is only thirty-five years. Vedanta says it is a violation of all knowledge of the law to assume that such an ephemeral existence, such a fleeting evanescent cause, could produce an infinite effect. *Ex nihilo nihil fit.* ...

... Vedanta teaches that reincarnation is the most logical explanation of the riddle of life.

Vedantists do not ask one to believe it blindly. They have no dogmas. They suggest merely ... that it be studied.

Understanding these great basic facts of Karma and reincarnation as understood by them, one can better appreciate the great teachings of Vedanta—

That each man has a soul which is potentially divine.

That his soul had no beginning and will have no ending.

That it is now and always has been a part of the infinite Spirit of the universe.

That the destiny of man is to manifest this infinite nature which is within him, and that is what all are struggling to do, whether they are conscious of it or not.

That there is no such thing as sin, so-called. One makes mistakes, they say, but only through ignorance, and even these are often valuable and beneficent. Adversity is accounted a better teacher than prosperity.

That all these petty doings of men ... are only part of the diversified curriculum ... which all must learn ... before ... coming closer and closer to that eternal verity, which is one's self.

—*The New York Daily Tribune*

Divine Mother's Worship in Latin America

SWAMI MADHURANANDA

There is a prominent tendency in the religious feeling of both Indian and Latin American cultures towards the worship of the Divine Mother. This natural inclination is manifested in different ways according to their respective traditions. India has developed this kind of worship through thousands of years, while Latin America is faithfully developing it. The present article is an attempt to briefly present the evolution of the worship of the Divine Mother in Latin America and to show, also briefly, the great possibilities for further development that this form of worship has through a wise interaction with India's rich spirituality.

A Bit of History

Where the first settlers of the Americas came from is still a mystery. One of the theories, which is gaining ground nowadays, postulates that they came from India and South Asia. Still stronger is the theory that there was indeed a fluent interaction between the two continents long before the arrival of Columbus.¹ These first settlers developed into three great civilizations, Aztec, Maya and Inca. The influence of the first two extended over what is today southern USA, Mexico and Central America, and that of the latter over a great part of South America. There were many other smaller tribes as well, generally subjugated to the main ones, which played an important role in helping the Spanish during their period of conquest.

One of the most important rituals performed by all those big civilizations was the worship of the Earth Mother, a worship that involved an entirely different concept than the Greeks, Romans or Egyptians had with respect to their goddesses. The *Encyclopaedia Bri-*

tannica points out a difference that helps us understand this point:

Mother goddesses, as a specific type, should be distinguished from the Earth Mother (*q.v.*), with which they have often been confused. Unlike the mother goddess, who is a specific source of vitality and who must periodically undergo intercourse, the Earth Mother is a cosmogonic figure, the eternally fruitful source of everything. ... She is simply the mother; there is nothing separate from her. All things come from her, return to her, and are her.²

The Mayas and the Aztecs worshipped the Mother of Gods, a personal-impersonal Divine Mother associated with mountains and the earth. She was the mother of several deities, chief among which was the sun god. While the rituals connected with these were often cruel, that pertaining to the Mother of Gods was of a different nature. They worshipped her with the intention to propitiate the forces of nature that fed and protected them. The Inca civilization worshipped Pachamama (*pacha* = earth, *mama* = mother); she was not the main deity but was the most widely worshipped one. The ritual offered to her was, to put it in Hindu terminology, a kind of *bhumi puja* with tantric aspects. This is the only ritual of those civilizations that has survived intact till the present day among some of the aborigines of South America.

While reading the descriptions of rites and places of pilgrimage in the pre-Columbian Americas, we are forced to conclude that there was a particular veneration for the cosmic aspect of the Divine Mother in the religion of the local inhabitants, though she was worshipped through some of the basic elements of nature in a somewhat primitive way.

After the arrival of the Europeans, the Spanish, mainly, who were a growing power

at that time, began to colonize as much as they could, bringing with them an altogether different religion. Though this new religion, Roman Catholicism, was in the beginning imposed by force, the local people had less trouble accepting the image of Virgin Mary—not as a goddess but as a human representation of that rudimentary sentiment for a universal Divine Mother already present in them.

Especially in the period when language was a barrier to understanding, indigenous people would appreciate and identify more with the images of the human Mary than with the Christ of an abstract and figureless cross or the even more abstract and distant God the Father. The crucifix, featuring the agonizing body of Christ, was more emotionally evocative than the simple cross but certainly³ not as welcoming as the figure of the Virgin.

Regarding the development of the Virgin Mary cult in places of Incan influence, it is said:

The Andean sources for the veneration of Mary were principally two. First and very important, the pan-Andean earth goddess Pachamama influenced and became integrated into many of the local and regional cults to the Virgin. ... Many attributes of Andean depictions of Santa María [Holy Mary] could be related directly to native manifestations of the sacred. One of the most important was the connection with mountains, an association directly linked to Pachamama, the earth mother. A consistent feature of Andean representations of Mary is the triangular shape of her dress, a reference, according to Carol Damian, 'to the shape of a mountain and, especially, her role as Pachamama, the Earth Mother' (138, 140).

In places of Mayan and Aztec influence we find that

Mexico was also the site of many pilgrimages during the pre-Spanish era. Tepayac [the place where today stands Our Lady of Guadalupe] itself was reported by the Spanish to be a place of reverence for indigenous peoples, and Friar Bernardino de Sahagún reported in the 1570s that it was the site of a pre-Columbian temple dedicated to the 'mother of gods', where 'the

gathering of people in those days was great and everyone would say "let us go to the feast of Tonantzin"', the latter term being the word for 'Our Lady' in Nahuatl. Sahagún's concern was that the devotion for Guadalupe that had developed by that time was simply a cover-up for the earlier devotion and therefore highly 'suspect'. He viewed with alarm the fact that 'they come from distant lands to this Tonantzin, as they did in former times'. Though the reverence for Guadalupe seems to have been primarily Spanish in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is certainly possible that pilgrimages to her site are in some way related to that earlier reverence (266-7).



Our Lady of Guadalupe

Today Guadalupe is a place of world pilgrimage, as we will see later.

The Marian phenomenon (worship of Mother Mary) in Latin America has been extensively studied, especially in the last fifty years. We have chosen for reference the book of Linda B Hall, a professor of history at the University of Texas, because it is the latest and perhaps the most complete work available in English. Besides, though the author is neither Latin American nor was born in a Catholic family, she has studied the subject not only objectively but sensitively. She writes:

The cult of Our Lady became firmly established in Latin America during the colonial period, that time between the Discovery and Conquest in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the wars of independence in Latin America in the early 1800s. At the same time, she became associated and conflated with, as well as changed by and changing, indigenous notions of the sacred. The Spanish brought the Virgin Mary to their New World as a comforting presence, a focus of reverence, an emblem of Spanish nationalism, a war leader who inspired them to victory against the Muslims. They had placed Mary's image in Muslim sacred spaces, and they did the same in native holy spaces in the Americas.

But the Virgin, and Christianity more generally, had competition. In Mexico and Peru ... there were already strong notions of the sacred feminine.

But Hall goes a step further and says:

Yet it would be a mistake to imagine that the Virgin interacted only with notions of the feminine. Rather, reverence for Mary was intermingled with larger cosmic and sacred schemes, regardless of how or if they were gendered in the pre-Columbian world (81).

Mother Mary Today

With the passage of time, the intermingling of aborigines, African slaves and Europeans gave birth to new races called mestizos and mulattos. These new races, together with the remnants of pure aborigines and pure Spanish and the many waves of immigrants from around the world, comprise the population of Latin America today. And, interesting to note, all these different ethnic groups with their different cultural backgrounds, once settled in these lands, evinced a spontaneous common feeling of devotion to Virgin Mary, a Mary who is apparently passive and silent, as depicted in the Bible, but who grants many things through miraculous manifestations.

Her influence in all spheres of life of the Latin American people is overwhelming and she has become part of the national or racial identity. There are more Catholic temples dedicated to Virgin Mary than to Jesus Christ or any other saint. For instance, all over Mexico 37% of the Catholic temples are dedicated to Virgin Mary, while 14% to Jesus, 37% to different saints and 13% to others. Mexico is, of course, a country where a large part of the population has aboriginal roots, either pure or mixed. Even if we go to the other extreme of Latin America, to Buenos Aires Federal District in Argentina, an elite city traditionally considered the most culturally advanced place in Latin America where the aboriginal population is almost nil and where there was always a more or less stable middle class, we

will find similar figures: 41% of the Catholic temples dedicated to Virgin Mary, 12% to Jesus, 42% to different saints and 5% to others.⁴ If one takes the train from downtown Buenos Aires to the local Ramakrishna Ashrama on the outskirts of the city, one can see in each of the thirteen intervening stations, a beautiful *murti* of Our Lady of Luján placed in a showcase in a prominent spot and adorned with fresh flowers changed daily!

Similar statues can be found on highways, in airports, hospitals—even in police stations and military cantonments! There is a long story behind the installation of these images, but the fact remains that they are there, well preserved and in many cases nicely decorated—alive in a Latin America that has changed so much in the last twenty years.

When processions are held Mother Mary draws the largest crowds (even more than the politicians!). The one-day peregrination to the Basilica of Luján in Buenos Aires, a challenging 60-km walk, gathers annually more than 1 million people in a country of 35 million Catholics, that is, approximately 3% of the



Our Lady of Luján

Catholic population. To get an idea of what that means, we can compare it with the largest human gathering on a single day that occurred during the Maha Kumbha Mela in Allahabad, India, on 24 January 2001, which drew 30 million in a country of 820 million Hindus, roughly 3.6% of the Hindu population.⁵ The present writer has participated twice in the peregrination to the Basilica of Luján as well as in the 2001 Maha Kumbha Mela of Allahabad, finding in both cases people of all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. In the former case, devotees come to 'ask' something of Mary, and in the latter, they come with the hope of gaining some punya (merit) by taking a holy bath in the confluence

of two sacred rivers.

However, the most important Mary of the Americas is Our Lady of Guadalupe:

The acknowledgment of Guadalupe's special status by Rome and the extension of her dominions in establishing her as patroness of the continent not only enhanced her cult but also Mexican national pride. Millions of pilgrims come annually to her basilica in Mexico City; it is the most visited Catholic site in the world, with the exception of the Vatican.⁶

With the same spiritual urge that Hindus go to Puri, Catholics go to Guadalupe, unlike to the Vatican, where many go for purposes other than religious ones. There is a vast literature about Guadalupe, but here we feel obliged to mention only our experience, namely, of having witnessed devotees approaching the Basilica from long distances walking on their knees, and also of having seen them in authentic ecstatic states standing below the 500-year-old original tilma (maguey-fibre cloak) on which the image of Mother Mary was miraculously imprinted, as the story goes. Overall, there is a spiritually charged atmosphere in the Basilica of Guadalupe. Of course, these statements are subjective, but it should be said that when such experiences occur in the case of many it is no longer a subjective matter, it is a solid phenomenon. Nevertheless, these places are open to all for personal verification and further friendly discussion.



Our Lady Aparecida

The people's massive devotion to Nossa Senhora (Our Lady) Aparecida in Brazil is also quite an interesting case. Unlike the rest of Latin America, where the influence of the Catholic Church backed by governments was generally very strong, Brazil became a secular state as early as 1890. So

the efforts of the Church to impose Aparecida as the greatest symbol of national Catholicism were stronger. In 1931 she was consecrated patroness of Brazil in an attempt to smooth the frictions between State and Church. In spite of this, Nossa Senhora Aparecida is worshipped today as *mãe do povo* ('mother of the people'), a symbol that stands alone, somehow dissociated from both State and Church.⁷

One more instance of a country that has, for good or for bad, swept away all 'official' influence of any kind of church on its population:

In the case of the Virgen de la Caridad [Virgin of Charity], for Cubans, she provides additionally a strong and close tie with their unattainable homeland, so close to Florida spatially but so inaccessible. This bond transcends loyalties to the hierarchical Roman Catholic Church; Cubans, both in Cuba and in Miami, do not have a high level of participation as practising Catholics but believe in the Virgin. A characteristic comment is this one recorded by a woman praying outside the Virgin of Charity's shrine in Miami: 'I take communion not in my mouth but directly from God ... and I take it alone.... The Virgin, not the Church, helped me leave Cuba last year.'⁸

Another Mother Mary who attracts millions of devotees throughout the year is Our Lady of Copacabana, shared mainly by Bolivia and Peru. This is the Virgin that has incorporated more elements of the local aborigines than any of the others. Like Guadalupe, she is represented with tribal features, while Aparecida is black and Luján very European.

We have mentioned here just the most visited Virgin Marys, but the goddess radiates the same appeal throughout Latin America. The same Mary is represented and worshipped in each country, state or district according to the local customs, a practice that resembles so much the worship through different images and different rites of the same Divine Mother in India.

As the twentieth century has drawn to a close and the twenty-first has begun, Marian devo-

tion continues as strong as ever. Celebrations of the Virgin's majesty are widespread ... The connection between the celebrations of Mary and issues of identity are just as clear as they were in the time of Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Hernán Cortés; these identities may be national, local, or highly personal. The rituals are beautiful and affecting, even for those who are not personally devoted to the Virgin in one or another of her avocations. ... I have observed the intense identification of the crowd with the figures of Mary; the shared understanding that she is a person and that she is personally present within the image, despite what the theology dictates; and the interaction between the observant, believing crowd and Our Lady (243).

The Mary cult is also important in other places of the world, especially in Spain and Italy, and up to a certain extent in France and some central European nations. But why is it more profound in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking areas of USA? In the cases of Brazil and Cuba we have seen that the power of the Church through the State cannot be the only answer. The emotional tendency in the Latino temperament seems to be an attractive conclusion, especially in filial relationships projected on the Virgin, but we also find great fidelity in the devotion to Mary in groups settled in the Americas coming from more rational cultures; even some Protestant churches in USA are recently showing inclination towards the Mary cult.⁹ Still, there is one more point, as we stated in the beginning of this article: while the Mediterranean cultures evolved their Mary cult from goddesses who procured enjoyment, Latin America developed its devotion to Mary from a more cosmogonic and more intimate Mother Earth. Whether such a Mother was brought from India or not only time will confirm. But even if that is the case, it cannot be taken as the sole cause, since several Marys in Latin America have no aboriginal background, as in the case of Luján. Whatever may be the combination of reasons, one thing is sure: Latin America, which comprises more than one-fifth of the

world's total land area and has about 400 million people, is the only place in the world where huge masses of people worship the Divine Mother in nearly the same way as She is worshipped in India. Why do we say 'nearly' and not 'exactly' the same?

The Divine Mother of Vedanta

Let us remember that in the Roman Catholic theology (officially, 85% of Latin America subscribes to the Catholic faith, regardless of the level of participation), Virgin Mary has not the same divine status as that of the Father, the Son or the Holy Ghost, who are considered one and the same. She is the Mother of God but never God Himself. She is an intermediary between the devotee and his object of worship, but never the final goal of the worship. She 'prays for us', but she is not 'the redeemer'.

This theological dogma is seriously being revised, inside and outside the Church, by a Western world that more and more longs to see the maternal face of God. For example, there is a worldwide movement requesting the Pope to make Mary co-redeemer with Christ, which means putting her on an equal footing with Christ. This movement today involves written petitions of 550 cardinals, archbishops and bishops (half of them from Latin America!), supported by 7 million signatures of lay Catholics throughout the world.¹⁰

These kinds of movements reflect in Mary's devotees a subtle conflict between their inner feeling and its external expression, between their natural inclination to be deeply related with God as Mother and the lack of proper legitimation of that inner feeling by the dogma that underlies the worship of Virgin Mary. It is true that a great number of Mary's devotees have a personal relationship with her 'despite what the theology dictates'. Still there is a basic need in every person and in every society to be represented by a religion that matches their inner aspirations. Generally, societies and races do not change the religion that has become part of their tradition and has

guided them for a long time. But religions adjust themselves, and in many cases evolve, according to the changing needs of the people they guide. This has been the case with the Mary cult in Latin America from its very inception. And it is in this sense that the ancient philosophy of India, revitalized by the advent of Sri Ramakrishna, that ideal worshipper of the Divine Mother, has something to contribute to the present situation in Latin America.

According to Vedanta, the Godhead is both the efficient and the material cause of the universe. Shakti, or Power, is that aspect of the Godhead that projects the universe, and is usually represented as Its feminine or maternal side. Both are inseparable. Therefore, in the Indian tradition, God can be freely regarded as Father and/or as Mother, according to the natural tendencies of each person. There is a great psychological advantage for spiritual development in having a wide range of approaches to God, especially in approaching God as Mother, for many the dearest of all earthly relations.

Another important concept, basic to Vedanta, is that every human being is essentially divine, that there is a divine spark in all beings that can be developed to full manifestation in this very life. The notion, even in conceptual form, that there is an identity between the inner Self and God (the Atman-Brahman identity), helps the aspirant to gradually develop godly qualities. If the object of worship is God as Mother, then full identification with Her and Her divine motherly qualities gradually takes place in the worshipper. The realization that 'I am She', at the individual and universal levels, is the essence and culmination of Shakti worship. At the individual level the development in oneself of a divine motherly heart helps in 'making the world one's own', and this feeling finally results in the universal experience of oneness with

all.

This truth is having increasing appeal to people in many parts of the world, that, behind this universe, there is a pulse of the Mother-heart; the pulse of the energy of compassion, love, and protective attitude—all that is associated with the idea of Mother.

If the mother-heart is a truth of life within an individual, and if its expression in life makes for fearlessness, Vedanta says, it is also a truth within the cosmos as a whole. That is the vision of God as Mother, and Vedanta therefore calls her *Jagadambā*—*Ambā*, i.e. mother of the *jagat*, world. ...

... That *mother-heart*, as said earlier, is not confined to the feminine only, but is the prerogative also of the masculine, as much as that of the feminine. Genetic motherhood alone is exclusively a feminine privilege, but spiritual motherhood is the privilege of all humanity.

The *Devī Māhātmyam* (V.14-34) gives us this universal dimension of the Divine *mother-heart* pulsing in various forms in the hearts of all men and women. Verse thirty-three sings thus:

*Yā devī sarva bhūteṣu
matṛ rūpeṇa sansthītā;
Namastasyai namastasyai
namastasyai namo namaḥ.*

'That *Devī*, who exists in all beings as mother, I salute Her again and again.'

A father has the *mother-heart*; a mother has the *mother-heart*. But there is a speciality in its manifestation in women. That *mother-heart* in its universal dimension is the Divine Mother of the Universe. ... Love and care and service outside one's genetic relationships alone shows the presence of this spiritual *mother-heart* in its true form, ever free and ever expanding.¹¹

These high philosophical concepts are better understood and become more accessible when they are fully embodied in human form. And in this respect, India also has a unique historical character to offer, a contemporary saint-goddess, extremely active outside and full of *sattva* inside, involved in almost all the common affairs like any other



Holy Mother
Sri Sarada Devi
at Buenos Aires

human being but dealing with them in an ideal way. Much has been written about her, Sri Sarada Devi the Holy Mother, and a great deal of first-hand information regarding her life and teachings has been preserved. We would like to just remind the reader of her own statement: 'Sri Ramakrishna has left me behind to manifest the motherhood of God to the world.'¹²

The Turning Point

To conclude, we find in the main religious sentiment of Latin America a transition from the concept of a rudimentary, though strong and authentic, Divine Mother, worshipped through one of the elements, the earth, with its natural characteristic of *tamas*, to a more developed concept of a Divine Mother in human form, a Mother Mary who manifests power in miraculous ways, which is a particular expression of *rajas*. Her worship has extended far beyond the local aborigines, embracing all new groups that have settled in the Americas.

Now, we believe, the time is approaching for a new transition in Latin America towards a more *sattvic* worship of the Divine Mother. There are some historical and social factors that show the time is ripening, but an analysis of them goes beyond the scope of the present article. We have considered here a few points concerning religion, and in this field the ancient philosophy of India through the extraordinary life and character of Sri Sarada Devi, coupled with the earnest devotion for the Divine Mother that Latin American people have, will be of great help in the development of spirituality in that part of the world. How will that happen? Whether the present way of worshipping Virgin Mary will evolve to higher levels within the Catholic Church through an imperceptible influence of Vedanta, or whether Mother Mary will blend with Ma Sarada in a harmonious way, She only knows. Perhaps, some day in Latin America there will be a massive and appealingly vibrant worship

of 'Our Lady of Jayrambati'. ~

Notes and References

1. There are many researches on this subject. From the Western point of view, traditional are the works of Robert Heine-Geldern and Gordon F Ekholm. Those acquainted with Indian shastras and Puranas may find interesting the scholarly presentation in five volumes of Dr B Chakravorty, *The Indians and The Amerindians* (Calcutta: Self-employment Bureau). A good summary that combines both approaches is presented in D P Singhal, 'Red Indians or Asioamericans—Indian Settlers in Middle and South America' in *India's Contribution to World Thought and Culture* (Madras: Vivekananda Rock Memorial Committee, 1970).
2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 8.361, 4.321.
3. Linda B Hall, *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 108.
4. Data obtained through the archbishoprics of Mexico and Buenos Aires respectively (in both cases the figures are approximated).
5. The figures showed 70 million visitors during the whole 43-day Kumbha Mela, with the highest participation on 24 January. See *Hinduism Today*, May-June 2001, 27.
6. *Mary, Mother and Warrior*, 197.
7. Abridged and translated from Eloísa Martín, 'La Contrucción de Aparecida y Luján como Patronas Nacionales: Un Análisis Comparativo' in the newsletter of Asociación de Cientistas Sociales de la Religión en el MERCOSUR, June 2000, 4-8.
8. *Mary, Mother and Warrior*, 276.
9. See David Van Bienen, 'Hail, Mary' in *Time* (Asian edition), 21 March 2005.
10. On 4 June 1997, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, published a statement from a theological commission which had studied proposals to define the dogma of the Virgin Mary as Mediatrix, Coredemptrix, and Advocate. The commission, which in-

cluded both Catholic and non-Catholic theologians, recommended against a papal or magisterial definition of the dogma at the present time. Immediately after this, the whole issue reached larger audiences through an article published in *Newsweek* (European edition), 25 August 1997, and afterwards through different media. (A good coverage can be found in an article written by Jan Jarboe Russel in *The New York Times*, 23 December 2000.) But the information presented in this ar-

ticle was obtained in April 2005 from the very source, Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici (www.voxpopuli.org), the main organization behind the movement, which is issuing a new petition to the present Pope.

11. Swami Ranganathananda, *The Indian Vision of God as Mother* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992), 6, 40, 42-3.
12. Her Direct Disciples, *In the Company of the Holy Mother* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1977), 13.

Worshipping Pachamama

On 1 August 2003, the Quebrada de Humahuaca ('the Gorge of Humahuaca', in the Jujuy state in northwest Argentina, in the Los Andes mountain range) was declared a 'Natural and Cultural Heritage of Humanity'. That area is the only place in Argentina where there are still some pure descendants of the Incas, who still worship Pachamama (Mother Earth).

The president of the country, together with his wife, the vice-president, the former president and governors of four states, presided over the function. But the surprising thing is that for the first time in the history of that country, all these politicians offered worship to Pachamama! And there was no vote-seeking intention behind, since the tribal population there is almost nil.



In the picture, Eduardo Alfredo Fellner, Governor of Jujuy, is making an offering with the main priest to his right and the assistant priest to his left (note the priests' Indian features). Standing behind is the present President of Argentina, Néstor Kirchner. Seen standing behind the lady is the Vice-president, Fernando Scioli; and immediately behind the assisting priest is former President, Eduardo Alberto Duhalde.

Especially noteworthy is the resemblance to the Indian way of worship in general and to *bhumi puja* in particular. Observe the many offerings (*upakarana* and *naivedya*) arranged in circular fashion and the offerings made as *anjali*.

Ancient Peru had various polytheistic and pantheistic religions. The most important gods were Viracocha (Lord, Creator, and Father of Men) and Pachamama (Earth Mother).

Mama Quilla (Mama-Kilya), wife of the sun god, was Moon Mother, and the regulator of women's menstrual cycles. The waxing and waning of the moon was used to calculate monthly cycles, from which the time periods for Inca festivals were set. The Pleiades were called 'Little Mothers', and festivals were celebrated on their reappearance in the sky. Earth was called Pachamama or Earth Mother. The sea, which was relatively remote to the Incas until after 1450, was called Cochamama (Mama Qoca), Sea Mother.

The common people's display of great devotion to Mother Earth (such as the practice of laying down newborn babies on the earth and many other rites) partially reflects older cults that have remained relatively free from warrior and nation-building peoples with their emphasis on war (as in western Sudan, pre-Aryan India, and the Indian agrarian area of northern Mexico). The Andean earth-mother figure, Pachamama, worshipped by the Peruvians, stands in sharp contrast to the sun religion of the Incas (the sun is the conquering lord of the Andes region). Earth deities are most actively venerated in areas in which people are closely bound to ancestors and to the cultivation of grain.

The Veiled Divinity

SUDESH

Her life was not a life like Sri Ramakrishna's—inebriated with divine joy; singing, dancing, laughing and weeping; talking with the Divine Mother in ecstasy; and standing still in samadhi, oblivious of the external world. Nor was it like Swami Vivekananda's, which stirs us out of our slumber of ignorance with its Vedantic roar. It was the simple and unostentatious life of Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, that, like the soothing moonbeams, gently and imperceptibly entered into the consciousness of not just a few individuals, but of millions throughout the world. It was the power of her inner divinity and universal Motherhood that drew others to her. Swami Tadrupananda wrote:

What inspires the present writer most in the Holy Mother's life ... is the natural and informal way she enters the consciousness of a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. At the beginning of one's acquaintance with the Master she hovers like a shadow at the mental periphery, as she used to do at Dakshineswar during his lifetime. 'Who is that woman there?' One begins to wonder. By the time the wonder wanes, the peripheral woman will have become the central Mother. She claims half the berth reserved for the Master and very casually occupies it!¹

The Veil of Modesty

Beyond the ken of ordinary human conception—inconceivable and incomprehensible—was Mother's divinity. She is often referred to as 'the veiled Divinity'—the veil over her face signifying the divinity hidden within. The Master said about her in fun, 'She is a cat under ashes'. Swami Abhedananda in his 'Hymn to Sri Sarada Devi' has addressed her thus: '*Lajjāpatāvṛte nityam sārade jñānadāyike; O Sarada, covered always by the veil of modesty and bashfulness, and the giver of Knowledge.*'

Holy Mother was the humble and bashful wife whose greatest joy was to serve her husband, his aged mother and his innumerable devotees. It was difficult to gauge Mother's spiritual magnitude in the midst of her utter humanity. To the superficial observer she appeared a rustic woman—engaged in cooking, cleaning and scouring—rather than an ascetic. So imperceptible was her transcendent glory that even for the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna it took some time before it was revealed that Sri Sarada Devi was not just the wife of their guru, but the Goddess Herself. She was the Cosmic Energy released into the world to lead many to Life Eternal; the Universal Mother descended on earth to soothe numberless hearts by absorbing their sins and woes into her bosom. Again, how often people failed to recognize the divinity veiled in the garb of motherly affection! Yet the veil was so thin that one cry from her babe and the veil would be off; the Divine Mother in her, the bestower of worldly welfare as well as salvation—*bhukti-mukti-pradayini*—would stand revealed. In such moments of grace the boy Govinda was cured of persistent itching by a paste of margosa leaves and turmeric made by Mother herself, Brajeshwari was cured of her epilepsy, and a European lady's ailing daughter snatched back from the jaws of death! Overwhelmed by Mother's love, that European lady became devoted to her and was initiated by her.

Unable to bear the sufferings of humanity, Holy Mother gave spiritual initiation to all who eagerly sought it. To a pure soul she gave the mantra of her own accord, even without being asked. No external factors like fitness of place, time or circumstance could stand in the way. She initiated a youth, just released from

police vigilance, in an open field; a porter, who wept holding her feet, on a railway platform. Her divine grace fell on the virtuous and the sinful alike. She even initiated a woman who had led a sinful life but had later become penitent. The woman stood at the doorway with a sense of guilt, hesitating to draw near Mother, who was purity incarnate. The benign Mother threw her arms round her neck and said: 'Come, my daughter, come in. You have realized what sin is, and you are repentant. Come, I shall initiate you. Lay everything at the Master's feet; and cast away all fear.'² Mother could not drive away anyone. Her life had to be a solace to thousands of sinners and seekers after truth. She opened the door of freedom or mukti to many eager souls by initiating them into spiritual life. Who else but the Mother of the universe could give this abiding assurance to all her children: 'Free yourself from all anxiety by entrusting your future to me. And remember this always, that there is one behind you who will come to you at the right moment and lead you to the everlasting domain' (403).

Spiritual Effulgence Shrouded in Simplicity

Outwardly the utter simplicity of Holy Mother veils from us her spiritual effulgence. Yet here and there we get a few glimpses of her divine brilliance. Sri Ramakrishna worshipped Mother as Shodashi or Mahavidya—the highest manifestation of divinity. It has been said in one of the Tantras, '*Seyari sāmrajñī, seyari sarveśvareśvari*; She is the Empress, She is the God of all other gods and goddesses.' Swami Abhedananda said, 'She, who

is the Primordial Power Kali, she incarnated Herself in this age in the form of Sri Sarada Devi. ... When the Mother is propitiated, Sri Ramakrishna being pleased showers his grace on the devotee.'³ Kalipada was one such recipient of Sri Ramakrishna's grace because his wife had propitiated Adyashakti in the form of Holy Mother.

Kalipada was a drunkard and a bohemian who starved and tormented his family. His wife approached the Master once, seeking some sort of charm that would change her



husband's tendencies. The Master sent her to Holy Mother at the nahabat saying that there dwelt a woman who knew such charms and mantras. In that matter her power was greater than his. Mother, taking it to be a joke, sent her back to him. The Master again sent her back to Mother. Finally, when the lady had thus been tossed between them thrice, Mother took compassion on her. She wrote the Master's name on a bilva leaf that had been offered to the Lord. She gave it to Kalipada's wife and asked

her to chant the holy name. For twelve years that lady chanted the Lord's name. What indeed are a few years in comparison to eternity?

Eventually Kalipada visited Sri Ramakrishna in the company of Girish Chandra Ghosh. The Master asked him: 'What do you want?' Kalipada retorted shamelessly: 'Can you give me a little wine?' The Master smiled and said, 'Yes, I can. But the wine I have is so intoxicating that you will not be able to bear it.' Kalipada took him literally and said, 'Is it real British wine?' 'No,' said the Master, 'it is completely homemade. ... If a person tastes this

wine even once, British wine will seem insipid to him ever after. Are you ready to drink my wine?' Kalipada thought for a moment, and then said, 'Please give me that wine which will make me intoxicated my entire life.' The Master touched him, and Kalipada wept and wept.⁴

Such was the impact of the Master's touch and words that Kalipada became one of his staunch followers! The Master could awaken a person's dormant spiritual power by mere touch. So great was Kalipada's devotion that he extracted the boon that at the time of his death, when he would be surrounded by terrible darkness, the Maser would himself come as his saviour, holding a light in his left hand and hold him with his right.

Sri Ramakrishna sent Kalipada's wife to Mother thrice. The incident appears so very ordinary. At best it amuses us. Yet every action and incident in the lives of divine incarnations sheds extraordinary light. The Master used to say, 'One must propitiate Adyashakti.' Was he not thus practically getting it done through Kalipada's wife? He himself had to propitiate Radha to obtain the vision of Krishna.

Mother had no direct obligations. There was nothing to compel her to stay in the world. The only compulsion she felt was the desire to relieve human suffering. One is reminded of Swami Vivekananda's childhood days when he used to jump into the open drain filled with dirt and mud to tease his sisters; the drain apparently did not affect him. Holy Mother too, out of her benign grace, descended to this world to purify the impure, enlighten the ignorant, and soothe the miserable. The Creatress of the universe, with Her heart caught up in infinite compassion, Mother would forgo her rest and sleep and pray or perform japa for the welfare of all. As a consequence, when others were resting she knew no repose.

Is it, O Mother, to restore again
This Universe's broken harmony

That Thou, without cessation, art at work?⁵

Tormented by her insane sister-in-law, Holy Mother once remarked, 'My mind is eager to soar high into a spiritual plane. I feel compassion for them and keep it down. And what do I get in return? Only abuse and insults.' Another day she said to the crazy Surabala: 'Many saints and ascetics do not obtain my favour through austerities. And here I am with you and you do not know it.'⁶

What agonizing tortures Radhu and her mother subjected Mother to! Yet what inexhaustible strength of endurance! It was only because she was constantly in communion with the inner Bliss that she could put up with all these eccentricities calmly.

It was the year 1919. The curtain was about to fall on the fascinating divine lila of Sri Sarada Devi. In spite of all the tender love that Mother bestowed on Radhu, her oppression increased apace. Often Radhu would take food in her mouth and spit it on Mother. Pravrajika Bharatiprana has recorded in her reminiscences of Holy Mother that one day, revealing her divine nature, Mother said to her, 'Look, my dear, know this body (showing her own) to be a divine body. If it is not a divine body, can any human being endure so much? ... As long as I live, none of these can know me.'⁷ Once while going to Jayrambati with Shivram she revealed to him that she was Kali, and to another devotee she revealed herself as Mahamaya. How well the English poet Shelley's lines describe Mother's glory:

Seraph of Heaven! too gentle to be human,
Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman

.....
Of light, and love, and immortality!
Sweet Benediction in the Eternal Curse!
Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe!⁸

Divinity in Practice

A man takes to monasticism and retires to a solitary retreat, so that freed from all encumbrances he may adhere to God alone. Holy Mother too could have donned the garb

of a sannyasini and retired to lead a life of contemplation after Sri Ramakrishna passed into mahasamadhi. But what would be her glory then? Just another saint added to India's rich galaxy of saints? The monks would have marvelled at Mother's life of purity and renunciation, but the householders would have doubted if she was aware of the troubles and turmoils of this 'seething cauldron' of the world. Mother has given us a new light by entering our homes—nay, by accepting and undergoing our day-to-day problems and responsibilities in toto. She has taught us that a householder observing inner sannyasa—that is, leading a life of detachment and self-control, forgiveness and fortitude, and love and sympathy for all—can be as good a pilgrim to the realm of Light as a monastic. Moreover, the stability and uplift of any society or nation as a whole depends on the householder. The student, the hermit, the mendicant—all depend on the householder. Manu calls the *grihastha ashrama* the highest. The Indian sages laid great emphasis on building an ideal home. More than the father it is the mother who is the central force of the home.

The dry Vedanta practised by sannyasins of yore, who severed all connection from society and practised austerities for their own liberation, was made practical, with warm human love, by Sri Sarada Devi. She hugged all in the cosmic sweep of her motherly love. She identified herself with the sorrows of the whole world. She was much agitated when she heard about the torture of a young pregnant girl, Sindhubala, by the police. She was the bereaved mother who wept with a mother who had lost her young earning son. Again,

Mother suffered the agony of the labourer's wife, who was being mercilessly beaten up by her husband.

Sister Nivedita once said of Mother, 'Her life is one long stillness of prayer', and the external part of her prayer was self-sacrifice and service to fellow beings. Sri Ramakrishna no doubt enjoyed bliss in the company of devotees—singing, dancing, and conversing about, and with, God. But to give up that bliss in order to serve others and to derive the same joy in the drudgery of uninteresting duties—is that not tapasya? There were no external manifestations of spirituality—through which



alone common men can measure spiritual heights—in Holy Mother's life. Yet her whole life was a series of austerities and spiritual fulfilment within the household. Hers was a practical outlook. She said that life in the world was not separate from God. The infinite horizon of the Divine could be reached through various avenues. One of the ways could be through sublimating one's worldly duties into worship, keeping

up one's spiritual practices at the same time. One must sit for meditation and japa at least once in the morning and once in the evening, said Mother.

A man of utmost renunciation, Sri Ramakrishna once showed his annoyance when Gopal Ma accepted a few pieces of cloth and some utensils gifted to her by Balaram Bose. On reaching Dakshineswar, Gopal Ma anxiously told Holy Mother that she would distribute those things as 'her Gopala' was angry. But Mother consoled her and said: 'Don't worry, mother. Let him say what he will. There is none in the world to help you. It is be-

cause you require these things that you have accepted them.⁹ How practical! And what penetrating insight! Even to lead a spiritual life in the world one needs to cook and eat, and for that one needs a few pots and pans. True, one should not hoard things out of greed. Mother herself had a few utensils in her small room. Once when she was away, M (Mahendranath Gupta) intended to spend the night in the nahabat. It was near the Ganges and presented a beautiful view, which suited M's poetic temperament. Sri Ramakrishna asked him to sleep in his room instead: 'There may be a few pots and pans there. Why not sleep here in this room?' The Master had the leisure and could keep up his 'mart of joy' only because of Mother's selfless and devoted service.

It is commonly believed that one's morning prayer and meditation should be finished before one has breakfast. Shauryendra Mazumdar, one of Mother's initiated disciples, could not sit for his japa and meditation until he had had his morning tea. When he expressed his difficulty to Mother, she said that a mother could not be stepmotherly. He could eat first and then sit for his japa. Mother herself did not eat rice on *ekadashi* days, but she took a few puris. She was heard to say, 'Call on God when the body is calmed after eating.'¹⁰ Her companions, Yogin Ma and Golap Ma, also did not observe total fast on those days. In all matters hers was an unerring divine vision, and so very practical. The idea of fasting on *ekadashi* is to keep up uninterrupted remembrance of God. For those who cannot observe a complete fast, it is much better to take some simple sattvic food. Of what avail would it be to fast just for the sake of custom if one were to contemplate all the while on the delicious dishes one would eat later on, thus starving both body and spirit! Holy Mother herself ate a little on *ekadashis*, as if to suggest that spirituality cannot be washed away by taking a few puris, or a cup of tea before morning meditation. One could even eat and then meditate. Spirituality was a matter of inner purification

rather than mere meticulous observance of social conventions. In all her utterances and deeds the touch of spirituality was unmistakable throughout.

It is not given to us ordinary mortals to comprehend the fact that hidden within that unlettered, modest, and artless woman was a tremendous spiritual power. Only when Mahamaya herself steps aside can one recognize her as the Cosmic Mother, having the power to snap in twain the shackles that bind one to the world. Only through her immense grace can one see through this veil of maya and cling to her as the only Reality, one with Brahman. Even if one does not understand Holy Mother's spiritual grandeur but just supplicates her with prayers and tears addressing her as *Mother*, one would surely feel her protective hand on one's head. In every crisis and misery we would find her standing by our side—guiding, healing, consoling, reassuring.

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Ma Sarada and Sadhana: Holy Mother and Spiritual Disciplines

DR B T ADVANI

Sri Ramakrishna is the divine incarnation of this age, and Holy Mother Sarada Devi is his shakti, primordial power. Sri Ramakrishna entrusted to her the mission of looking after people immersed in worldliness. Thinking herself a mere woman, she had hesitated, but Sri Ramakrishna insisted, 'No, no, you will have to do a lot'. Holy Mother literally accomplished this with her divine grace, motherly compassion and spiritual ministrations. She also appeared to many in their dreams and imparted mantras to them, sometimes writing them on their tongues. Some aspirants had their consciousness awakened just by being in her presence, and some others were transformed by her look or touch. This was the divine grace of Parama Prakriti.

Holy Mother showered upon the vast masses of her devotees her motherly compassion, regarding them as her own children. She felt that being their mother she had to do everything for them. She did not need to perform worship, practise prayer, japa and meditation, go on pilgrimages, or undergo such hard austerities as the *panchatapa*; she did all these for our sake. She has assured us again and again: 'Whenever you are in distress, say to yourself, "I have a mother"; 'Suppose one of my children has smeared himself with dirt. It is I, and no one else, who shall have to wash him clean and take him in my arms.' Low and high, rich and poor, sinners and saints, all were blessed by her universal motherhood. Her redeeming consolation and solace are eternal and continue to be experienced by many even today.

This is not to say that Holy Mother's compassion allows us to indulge our indolence. It is an inspiration that awakens in us the urge to

seek knowledge, devotion and dispassion, and sharpens our *mumukshutva*. In fact, she exhorted the devotees to practise spiritual disciplines, without which mere blessings and minor spiritual experiences were of no consequence. Of course, she would still come running to rescue us from danger even if we just cried to her for help, without practising spiritual disciplines. Yet it is our duty to become deserving children and earn her grace by living a sattvic, spiritual life, for we know that she had to endure great pain whenever she blessed worldly-minded people.

Seva Yoga: Service

Holy Mother taught us first by love and personal example and then by instruction as and when opportunities and occasions arose. Parents, teachers and leaders of society would do well to imitate her model. When we meditate on Holy Mother's life we understand that work was the most important channel through which she manifested her divinity. In her childhood she worked hard at household chores and made herself useful to her family and neighbours. In her youth she cared for her divine husband Sri Ramakrishna. Later, up to the end of her life, she looked after the devotees, disciples and visitors, be it at Dakshineswar, Cossipore, Baghbazari or Jayrambati. She kept herself constantly busy for the physical and spiritual well-being of all who came into contact with her. Thus industriousness (*udhyoga*), cooperation (*sahayoga*), selfless action (*karma yoga*) and service to others (*seva yoga*) were all fully demonstrated in her life. And she advised her disciples to always avoid idleness and occupy themselves with some

worthwhile work in order to ward off evil thoughts. This is the first kind of sadhana taught by Holy Mother: constant selfless action for the welfare of all. Her own life is a commentary on scriptural ideals such as *yogah karmasu kauśalam, dayā bhūteṣvaloluptvam, samam sarveṣu bhūteṣu* and *sarvabhūtahite ratāh*. We too must try to practise these in our lives.

Prayer and Worship

The second kind of sadhana that we see in Holy Mother's life is prayer: prayer for purity of heart, prayer for purity of mind, prayer for Sri Ramakrishna's devotees—monastic and lay. It is due to her prayers that we are living in comfort and prosperity. Mother underlined the efficacy of prayer in achieving everything, dharma, artha, kama and moksha. She also said that prayer could remove difficulties and minimize the effect of *prarabdha karma*.

Ritual worship was Holy Mother's third mode of sadhana. In this respect Holy Mother followed the traditional conventions to the minutest details with devout enthusiasm, be it simple daily worship in the shrine or annual workshops that were conducted on a larger scale, like Durga Puja, Kali Puja or Jagaddhatri Puja. However, in keeping with changing times she would prescribe just a minimum of external ceremonials and lay stress rather on the spirit underlying them.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage may be counted as the fourth variety of Holy Mother's sadhana. She went to the famous shrines of Puri, Varanasi and Vrindaban not sitting in a palanquin but walking like the humblest devotee with great reverence. While in Varanasi Mother also paid visits to the renowned saints Trailanga Swami and Bhaskarananda. At Rameswaram she offered one hundred and eight bel leaves made of gold to Lord Shiva. But her first and most significant pilgrimage was to Dakshineswar to meet Sri Ramakrishna. It was a meeting of Prakriti with Purusha, of Shakti with Brah-

man. In the context of pilgrimages, Holy Mother used to tell her devotee-children that 'one should carry out all pious intentions as early as possible'.

Respect for Tradition

Faith in and respect for religious traditions was the fifth kind of sadhana practised and advocated by Holy Mother. For instance, once when she was suffering from an attack of dysentery she lay before the goddess Simhavahini determined to starve to death if no divine remedy was revealed. She also kept with her some earth taken from the basement of the shrine as it was believed to have curative properties. Again, during Sri Ramakrishna's last illness Holy Mother went to Tarakeswar and fasted for two days in the temple with the intention of gaining Shiva's blessings for the recovery of her ailing husband.

Austerity and Forbearance

The *panchatapa* austerity that Mother underwent at Nilambar Mukherjee's garden house was her sixth sadhana. In order to mitigate the intense sorrow she suffered on account of her separation from Sri Ramakrishna, for seven days Mother sat in meditation within a square of four big fires under the blazing summer sun.

However, compared with the *tāpa* of Holy Mother's day-to-day life even the *panchatapa* was merely symbolic! A fraction of the immense hardships, physical and emotional, that she bore would have broken the strongest of men. But for Mother endurance (*sahishnuta*) had become a sort of sahaja yoga, a natural way of life. In her eyes, forbearance had great spiritual value and she accepted suffering as naturally as she accepted breathing. True, for a lofty spiritual personality who is established in perfect equanimity amidst the conflicting opposites of the world—pleasure and pain, honour and dishonour, praise and criticism—and who has totally surrendered herself to the Divine, the quality of endurance

may only be natural, but it is certainly a great example for us to follow. This uncomplaining forbearance was indeed Holy Mother's seventh sadhana.

Navadha Bhakti

Besides all the above-mentioned sadhanas, the various aspects of devotion (*navadha bhakti*) also found complete realization in Holy Mother, for she was a perfect adept in each of them. She had great devotion for the Gita, Ganga and Gayatri, the mainstays of traditional Hinduism, and she cherished holy company (satsanga). All the religious traditions developed over the centuries had a place in her noble life and she reinforced and revitalized all of them. Every bit of work that she did she converted into yoga, be it dressing vegetables, cooking food, serving prasada, performing worship or giving initiation. For she did all these without the least attachment amidst constant prayer, japa and meditation. She was Yogeshwari. Yoga means 'to be one with'. Holy Mother was one with God, one with everybody, one with the whole world.

Japa and Meditation

Of all the established forms of spiritual discipline, Mother emphasized japa, the repetition of the name of the chosen deity. It should preferably be the diksha mantra given by one's guru, but one might also use one's family mantra or one that has been obtained in a vision or such other experiences. Japa should be practised regularly every morning and evening, and if possible, before going to sleep. It would be helpful to decorate the image of the chosen deity with flowers, light a lamp and burn some incense before it as these things create an atmosphere. The minimum number of repetitions should be fixed and strictly adhered to. This regulates the mind and prevents it from becoming lax. In this matter, Holy Mother's prescription varied according to the capacity of the aspirant. She herself used to repeat her mantra a hundred thousand times a

day and she encouraged the devotees to practise japa as much as possible. In fact she urged her disciples to mentally repeat the mantra at all times, under all conditions, even when they were outwardly engaged in work. One must persist with japa even when the mind is unwilling. Just as a cold bath cools the body whether one wants it or not, so does japa cleanse the soul whether one knows it or not. By constant practice, the wheel of japa keeps turning continuously even without any effort on the part of the aspirant. This is called *ajapa japa*.

The methods, techniques and rules of japa are various. For example, japa may be counted on fingers or with a rosary, and if it is counted on fingers, the fingers must be kept close to each other and not set apart, and so on. Yet all this is secondary. Of primary importance are the aspirant's love and devotion, sincerity and earnestness. The mind has to be kept on God constantly, even while engaged in work, with an attitude of utter self-surrender, prayerfully waiting for His grace. To work for the welfare of all with the mind on God is the greatest austerity—and japa is the best way to do this. This was Holy Mother's conviction based on her own experience.

Meditation may also be done along with japa. The practitioner must meditate on the form of his chosen deity, beginning from the feet upwards and then on the whole form. Holy Mother recommended the heart as the best place for this kind of meditation. As the aspirant gets absorbed in japa that itself leads him to meditation. Meditation can be of three types: *lila dhyana*, *charitra dhyana* and *upadesha dhyana*. The first consists in thinking of incidents connected with the life of the *ishta*; the next involves contemplation of His qualities; and the last includes deliberation on His teachings. In addition to japa and meditation, Holy Mother used to tell her devotees to assess their spiritual progress on a daily basis before retiring for the night. This would also help them in meeting the challenges of the coming day with firm determination (*dridha sankalpa*).

When prayer is combined with japa and meditation sadhana becomes thrice efficacious, thrice blessed. But we must only pray for concentration and absorption in our spiritual practices and for a vision of the divine form. In this way, the fluctuations of the mind are stabilized and it remains near the chosen deity in constant prayer, japa and meditation. Gradually we gain in devotion, discrimination and dispassion, and steadily move towards the goal of God realization.

A little pranayama before japa and meditation is of great help in calming the mind. Here the practitioner must exercise caution. It is better to keep pranayama simple—just a short spell of deep, even breathing—since too much of it tends to heat up the brain.

Practised rightly, japa helps in the restoration of the vital energy, awakens the kundalini and brings many other attainments. Japa must be performed easily and comfortably, without taxing the system too much with austerities like fasting. Slowly, as we progress, our mind itself will become the guru and guide us from within. That is why it is said, '*Japāt siddhiḥ*; Success comes through japa'. Lord Krishna also has said in the Gita, '*Yajñānām japaयajño'smi*; Of sacrifices, I am the sacrifice of japa.' So japa is the highest auster-

ity, it is God Himself.

The Faultless Vision

Finally, the highest sadhana is embodied in Holy Mother's last message to us: 'If you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; this whole world is your own!' This is the last word in spiritual life, the very essence of Vedanta—'*Sarvam khalvidam brahma*; All this is verily Brahman.' To try to realize this non-duality in our everyday lives is indeed the highest sadhana. The one purpose of all other disciplines is to make us fit receptacles of this supreme blessing. ~

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Work and Meditation

Disciple: 'Some say that one achieves nothing through work. One can succeed in spiritual life only through japa and meditation.'

Sri Sarada Devi: 'Does one achieve everything by practising japa and meditation for a few days? Nothing whatsoever is achieved unless Mahamaya clears the path. Didn't you notice the other day that a person's brain became deranged because he forced himself to excessive prayer and meditation? If one's head becomes deranged, one's life becomes useless. The intelligence of a man is very precious. ... One should always recollect God and pray to him for right understanding. How many are there who can meditate and practise japa all the time? At first they earnestly practise these disciplines, but their brains become heated in the long run by constantly sitting on their prayer rugs. They become very vain. They also suffer from mental worries by reflecting on different things. It is much better to work than to allow the mind to roam at large. ... My Naren [Swami Vivekananda] thought of these things and wisely founded institutions where people would do disinterested work.'

Reminiscences of Holy Mother

SWAMI PARAMESHWARANANDA

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi was then living in the new house at Jayrambati. She was suffering from malaria off and on. There was no end to the problems and unreasonable demands of her relatives. She was kept constantly busy trying to cater to the whims of Radharani and others. She would patiently bear all this trouble though at times she did express irritation. She moved to the new house in the month of May 1916. From that time onwards all visitors used to have her darshan and offer puja to her in this house. Earlier she used to live in Uncle Prasanna's house. The events that led to the construction of this new house and the reasons for which she agreed to move in there are worth mentioning.

Holy Mother had been living in her old home from a young age. When the ancestral property was divided among her brothers her room fell in Uncle Prasanna's share. Along with the spread of Sri Ramakrishna's message, when Holy Mother made herself available to her devotee-children and men and women from different places started coming to her for peace, one of her relatives, who was on only her second visit to this place after marriage, spoke out: 'Why all this trouble in my house? I don't like it.' A few days later Uncle Prasanna said to Mother, 'Didi, it won't suit you to stay in this house any longer. You better make some other arrangement.'

At that time Mother lead a very cramped existence even though she bore almost all the expenses of this household. Every day, if there was no one to help with the daily chores, she would herself rise early in the morning, clean the house and mop the floor, scrub the utensils, cook and serve food and attend to the feeding and other requirements of the visiting

devotee-children. This continued even in her old age.

Once, at 5 p.m. on the Mahashtami day, I found her trying to prepare puris out of nearly five kilograms of flour as well as the curry to go with it, all by herself. There were several women relatives in the house at that time, but no one took notice. I asked her, 'Mother, you suffer from rheumatism; why then are you trying to knead all this flour? This will cause you pain. Besides, there are many others to do this for you.' Mother replied, 'Yes, my son, if only you stay over here today and do this for me. Otherwise I will have to do all this myself.' Mother was up till late in the night attending to the feeding of the devotee-children and all members of the household. All this work she used to do ungrudgingly and without bothering about her own physical needs.

When Mother heard that it would no longer be possible for her to continue in her old house as no one was willing to shoulder her and the devotee-children's responsibilities, she became very sad and said, 'Today I feel like taking refuge under some tree with my children (the devotees)!' On hearing this news, Swami Saradananda and Master Mahashay (Mahendranath Gupta) quickly arranged to have the new house constructed. Mother now lives in this new house along with her devotee-children.

At that time Jayrambati village was very unclean. Even though a hamlet, it is doubtful if there was another hamlet like it, or if similar customs obtained anywhere else. It was surrounded by thickets. Only the Banerjee pond—where Mother took her bath—was somewhat clean. Other ponds were all full of moss, cress and hyacinth. The pond near Mother's new house that was purchased and

taken over in Swami Saradananda's name was also so overgrown that women used to actually sit there and pluck the cress for food. The roads were so bad that in the rainy season the roadside drains and ponds would all become one. The clayey soil would also turn so muddy at this time that even living within the house would be very difficult because of the mud. Moreover, malaria was also rampant. One felt repugnance even to touch the water that was in use at that time. Once Swami Srivasananda (Narayana Iyengar), on seeing all the mud and realizing the great inconvenience that Mother was being put to, expressed to her the desire to have the house and courtyard paved with bricks and cement. She said, 'No, my son, brickwork is not necessary—people will say these persons have got a lot of money! It is quite alright as it is.' The plans had to be abandoned at these words of Mother's. We have observed on many occasions that Mother used to keep herself so hidden that no one could get to know anything. Next year, when Srivasananda repeated his wish, Mother said, 'Yes, my child, there is a lot of difficulty in the rainy season. When Naran (Srivasananda) is saying so, it is better to have the place paved.'

In view of the endemicity of malaria and the lack of pure drinking water, it was suggested to Mother to have a well dug. She said, 'It would be really good if there is a well here.' When Sharat Maharaj was asked about it in Calcutta, he gladly assented. Later, on an auspicious day, work on the manufacture of bricks was commenced. Mother's health was steadily deteriorating due to recurrent attacks of malarial fever. Even though the treatment provided temporary relief the intermittent bouts of fever caused her great discomfort.

Holy Mother's *tithipuja* was then at hand. We asked her, 'Mother, we wish to have a celebration on the occasion of your birthday.' Mother said, 'Alright, but do not be extravagant. Tell all the boys and girls who are here and all those who will be coming, and the families of Prasanna, Varada and Kali.' She also

asked us to invite a few other people. We saw that she was not at all willing to have the matter publicized in any way. When Uncle Kali came to know all this, he said, 'Didi, "Vaishnava mendicants" are also there! Will this arrangement suffice?' Mother said, 'Wait, let me first attend to the Vaishnava mendicants at home; then we can have your Vaishnava mendicants.'

Once, at the time of Sri Ramakrishna's *tithipuja*, Mother was staying at Jagadamba Ashrama in Koalpara. Knowing that the *tithipuja* was nearing, I went from Jayrambati and asked her, 'Mother, Thakur's *tithipuja* is approaching. If you permit, we have decided to have a function on the occasion.' Holy Mother said, 'That is very good, do celebrate Thakur's *tithipuja*.' She handed over five rupees to me and said, 'You are arranging to have Thakur's *tithipuja*; may Thakur grant your welfare!' On the previous occasion many people had had prasad during the function, and orchestral music, Ramnam kirtan, and the like had turned the function into a grand affair. Mother had said, 'Why all this right now, even while I am alive? You can do all this later!' I was a bit sad at this. Mother understood it and said, 'It is not good to overdo anything.' So this time I was very cautious about the arrangements.

Everything was almost ready the day before the puja itself. Revered Sharat Maharaj sent clothes, fruits and sweets from Calcutta. A few devotees had come from Dhaka and other places. Many of Holy Mother's sons and daughters were in the house. Mother got up as usual at 3 o'clock in the night, and after having finished her japa and meditation started to make all preparations by herself. We made arrangements for the puja. After having her bath Mother performed the daily worship of Sri Thakur.

Then a certain lady disciple brought some new saris for Mother to wear. Out of the two or three saris offered Mother put on the one sent by Sharat Maharaj and sat on the cot facing westward, with her feet hanging and

Srimati Radharani's child on her lap. It appeared as though the ever-blissful Supreme Goddess—Adyashakti, Mahamaya—was seated in Her benign form with Gopala in Her lap, for the welfare of the world and the well-being of Her children. The devotee-children present there at this time were amazed to notice this mood of Mother's.

When I stood before her with a garland of large marigolds in hand, Mother said, 'Give the garland, give.' With great circumspection I said to a lady attendant of Mother's, 'You offer this garland to Mother.' The lady put the garland round Mother's neck. The garland was very big. Extending right up to her feet, it appeared very beautiful. We then offered flowers at Mother's lotus feet. I felt that if all of Mother's children, wherever they were, could offer flowers to Mother at this time, that would have been very good. I took a whole lot of flowers and, offering them at Mother's lotus feet, said, 'Mother, today many of your children wish to attain fulfilment and have their lives blessed by offering flowers at your holy feet. But because of the distance, and for various other reasons, they are unable to come, even if they wish to do so. Today I offer *pushpanjali* at your holy feet on everybody's behalf.' With a beaming face, Mother said with great joy, 'Son, I pray to Thakur that He grant everybody welfare, and bestow well-being on all, wherever they may be.' Mother remained in this exalted mood for some time. When she was again her usual self, I said, 'Mother, have some water now.' Mother took some refreshment and gave prasada to all. This was a very memorable day for all the devotees. Many began to feel as if the ever-blissful Mother, in Her bountiful grace, was graciously granting the welfare of Her children through an outpouring of overflowing love.

A few days later, during the course of a conversation in this new house itself, Mother said to me, 'Write to Sharat and purchase the place of my birth, and construct a house there. Where will all the children who will come

live? Where will you all live?' Radharani then used to live in the kitchen room facing west. When she too spoke out about her problem of living space, Mother said, 'Wait, Radhu, let the house come up there. We shall go and live there.' Radharani was very happy to hear this. I said, 'Mother, why would your brothers part with your birthplace? Once the Ranchi devotees wanted to have that place paved and marked with stone. When Uncle Kali was told this he said, "You will have to cover with currency notes the entire space that you wish to have marked." Who knows what he will do now? At that time the place could not be acquired for these reasons. Why should they hand over the place now?' Mother said, 'You call Kali to me, I shall tell him.'

When Uncle Kali came, Mother said, 'Look, Kali, these children of mine who are here may one day forcibly take away the land where I was born. Instead, now that I am still here, the three of you (Uncle Kali, Uncle Prasanna and Uncle Varada) hand over the place for three hundred rupees.' Uncle Kali said, 'Yes, Didi, you will be having a house, and for that we ought to hand over the place without recompense. But I must have ... rupees.' In answer Mother looked at me and said, 'Write to Sharat and give Kali ... rupees. The others need not be told about this.'

Anyway, Uncle Kali having consented, Mother called Uncle Varada too and asked him to hand over the place in exchange for three hundred rupees. Uncle Varada replied, 'That's very good, Didi. A house is going to be built for you; we ought to hand over the land for nothing. If everyone contributes, I have no objection.' Uncle Prasanna was at Calcutta at that time. When the matter was reported to Sharat Maharaj, he informed Lalit Babu and asked him to settle the matter. Lalit Babu invited Uncle Prasanna to Holy Mother's house in Calcutta, offered him some pranami, and had a letter of attorney prepared in Uncle Varada's name so that Uncle Prasanna's share of property could be sold by Uncle Varada. ~

Women's Empowerment

DEEPALI SINHA

Women's empowerment has now become a buzzword in social, political and economic spheres across the world. Before going into any detail, let us first clarify what the word *empowerment* actually means: 'Empowerment, in its simplest form, means the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance. It is a process that enables women to gain access to and control of material as well as information resources.' This concept appears to be the outcome of several important critiques and debates generated by the women's movements that have been emerging throughout the world.

Considering the power of the human ideal to influence individual and collective lives, it is surprising that the image of the male human being as an ideal has almost completely dominated culture and civilization all through history. Though women constitute nearly half of the world's population, they never seem to have developed for themselves an independent ideal with the same degree of universality and moral imperativeness as that possessed by the male ideals.

Until modern times women did not enjoy the freedom to live as independent members of society and follow their own vocations and interests. We find that in Hindu law before 1956, a daughter had no right to her father's property. At all stages of her life, a woman was dependent on men. Thus the ancient lawgiver Manu decreed: 'A woman is (to be) protected in childhood by her father, in youth by her husband, and in old age by her son; she is never fit to be independent.' Lawgivers in other religious traditions were not more liberal. The prevalence of frequent wars and the insecure social and economic conditions had

perhaps made this dependence of women unavoidable.

Judged by Indian standards, the condition of women in this country has not been inferior to that of men, some of Manu's inane pronouncements notwithstanding. And even judged by universal standards, it will be found that Indian women have always enjoyed a greater degree of fulfilment, happiness and honour in society than their sisters in other cultures. Long before people in the West thought of giving rights of property to women, long before the Married Women's Property Acts, by which English women were accorded full rights to property, were passed in England, women in India enjoyed ample right of property and succession. It was on account of the fact that in our country women had all along enjoyed dignity and respect both at home and in society that it was so easy in our own times for them to get the right to vote and acquire other privileges. Men in India yielded these to women without the slightest demur.

The Vedas declare that 'the wife is one half of the husband'. No man could perform a sacrifice without having his wife as a partner in the rite. The concept of *ardhanarishwara* typifies this noble truth. It was the application of this principle that was responsible for the Hindu lawgivers' accordance of the right of inheritance to the widow. Though woman is undoubtedly an inseparable half of man, still she is a distinctive half. It is this that has been emphasized throughout our culture and civilization. It has been rightly observed by the Aga Khan that 'a country is like a human body; men and women are the two lungs. If you reduce the power of women ... it is exactly like having a human being who has ... only one lung to work'.

The Women's Liberation Movement, also called the Feminist Movement, that started in the West some time back has a vital relation to this particular topic. Immense are its repercussions on all aspects of Western life, particularly in America. In fact, it is a reaction against the exploitations of the male-dominated societies everywhere in the world.

This Feminist Movement is in fact a social movement that seeks equal rights for women, giving them equal status with men and freedom to decide their own careers and life partners. For centuries everything in Western life, literature and religion was male-dominated, but after the Second World War the protest against all this gender bias, as it is now called, set in and developed soon into the current Women's Liberation Movement. The eighteenth-century philosopher Condorcet spoke in favour of female emancipation and in 1789, the year of the French Revolution, Olympe de Gonges wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Women. A modern milestone in feminism was marked by the publication of *Le Deuxieme Sexe* (1949; *The Second Sex*, 1953) by the French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir. This book became a worldwide best-seller by appealing to the idea that liberation for women was liberation for men too.

The next major work was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). She attacked deadening domesticity—the conditioning of women to accept passive roles and male dominance. In 1966, she and her colleagues founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) that has sought to overturn federal and state laws and practices that enforce the inferior status of women in the USA. It was the US members of the UN Commission on the status of women who were instrumental in having the United Nations declare 1978 the International Women's Year. For the first time women as representatives of their countries met in international conferences, especially notable being a giant conference in Mexico City which adopted a World Plan of Action for the ensu-

ing decade. The aim was particularly to advance women's participation in decision making in all areas of public life.

But it is most unfortunate that although much noise has been made about women's issues, no dramatic improvement has been observed in the situation. Many stern customs and practices work against women and leave them weak and fragile. It is certainly true that it is much better than what it was earlier, but much more remains to be done. More than one hundred and fifty years ago, in 1848 to be precise, the Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls had the following lines in its manifesto: 'The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man towards woman having in direct object the establishment of a tyranny over her.' It is a poignant irony of fate that this history is still repeating itself. The dismal situation in the Third World beggars all description. A case in point is the brutal restrictions that were imposed on women by the oppressive Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

So far as India is concerned, the constitution of the country has been fair enough to treat men and women equally and give them the same freedom and rights. It is a thousand pities that the wise words of the Indian Constitution have remained pious wishes and are honoured more in the breach than in their observance. The Indian political parties talk a great deal about women's empowerment but actually give women little power.

Dowry deaths, female infanticide, and similar atrocities are increasing these days. The dowry system has become a positive evil. The practice has led to the torture of brides in various forms, including murder. This is a trend all civilized people will have to resist with courage since it threatens not only women but the entire society. To control this, Indian women should themselves frame a new code of laws relating to marriage, inheritance, guardianship, and related issues. This code might be optional in the first instance,

and anyone, of whatever religious persuasion, should be at liberty to be governed by it.

In India the ratio of women to men has been dwindling over the years. A recent survey of infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers showed that within their combined age group, seventy-one per cent of females suffered from significant malnutrition as against twenty-eight per cent of males. In the widening gender gap in India female literacy is markedly less than that of males. India and China are perhaps the only two countries where there has been a regular practice of female foeticide. Thus we see that even in these days women are denied their birthright before they can see the light of day.

We even hear of occasional repetitions of such obsolete customs as the *sati*. The word *sati* means 'a true or virtuous woman'. But *sati* as a social evil is a gruesome act in which a Hindu widow immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre under circumstances beyond her control or under social pressure. The cure does not lie in more and more legislation, but in the effective enforcement of the laws that are already there.

Child marriage is prevalent even now in some remote areas of our country despite legal prohibitions. Earlier socio-reformist religious movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj pioneered work against child marriage. Even some of the Vedic mantras mention that a girl could be married only when she was fully developed both physically and mentally.

It is for all, especially women at large, to see that no discrimination is made between them and men. Swami Vivekananda was also vociferously against all such discrimination. Swamiji said that since the soul has no sex, women should not be regarded as inferior to men. What women require is 'woman-making education', which can build strong character and a sense of independence. And Vivekananda was convinced that the women of India would rise when Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi

appeared on the scene. He saw that centring round the great historical life of Holy Mother, women in India and abroad were going to rise to a new renaissance. The character of Sarada Devi is exemplary in this respect. As the embodiment of the great Mother Power she has come to rejuvenate true womanhood.

Sarada Devi's message to the modern woman is clear. Without losing their inherent femininity, women can be strong, successful and happy. For all these values she stands as a shining ideal, a consummate manifestation of the Spirit within the reach of humanity. Though she had not much of book learning, she commanded respect from one and all. Nobody had the courage to disobey her. The great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna believed that she represented the 'High Court' whose judgement was final. She has shown us that to be empowered, women have to rise to the occasion and act with strength and confidence.

Shyama Singh, a member of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women, said that there must be a holistic approach to women's empowerment. Only a minuscule percentage of women stay in cities. So the empowerment process must be initiated at the rural level, where women cannot present their views in gatherings. The real fact is that women lack the confidence to assert themselves. For that they need to be aware of their rights. Awareness must precede empowerment, but this does not mean that empowerment be deferred until awareness is complete.

An important point has been raised by a recent writer, Anil Kumar Jana: 'The issue of empowerment of women necessarily involves sustainable measures that would help create a social order based on gender justice.' The negative social mores have to be broken down first before real gender discrimination can be eliminated. The best solution lies in spreading literacy and education and raising awareness on a war footing, so that women can become fully equipped to access their social, political, economic and, of course, spiritual rights. ~

All This Is Verily Brahman

PRAVRAJKA SEVAPRANA

(Continued from the previous issue)

First we must have an ideal; and we must never lower this ideal. We should try to dwell in it all the time. We must think of it. It should permeate our very being. Swamiji says, 'Out of the fullness of the heart the hand worketh' (2.302). We need to bring this idea into all aspects of our lives. When we get up in the morning we can think: 'I am verily divine and all that I see is divine. This is the Lord Himself in front of me.' Where is sadness if all this is verily Brahman? This idea will invigorate us and fill us with strength. The teachers say this idea will in the end give us tremendous joy.

So we must try to always remain aware of this ideal, to see God in everything. Swamiji says that since this may be very difficult at first, you must take some place where you do see it, and concentrate on that. If you find it easy to see God in one thing—any one thing—take that one thing and concentrate there. Say you feel close to one person—someone you love: mother or child or friend or even your teacher. Take that one person and try to really see God in him or her. Then gradually broaden your vision and see Him in others.

We all know the story of the woman who came to Sri Ramakrishna and told him she was having trouble meditating. She said that every time she tried to concentrate, the image of her young nephew, to whom she was very attached, came to her mind. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Very well, meditate on your nephew as God. Think of him as God.' When she did this, sure enough, her mind became concentrated and her spiritual life blossomed. Because everything in this universe is really Brahman in essence, we can use anything as a vehicle, a means, a gate, as it were, to realization, *if we go*

deep enough. A word of caution, however: we do need to take the guidance of a teacher in this matter. But the possibility is there for many different paths. Everything we see and experience here is really just an invitation to know God. It is God beckoning to us, asking us to step through the veil, as it were, to see Him.

Seeing God in Realized Souls

The manifestation of God seems to be more available to us, more accessible, in some forms than it is in others. If we study the state of a man who has realized God, for example, we can make that very state a thing for practice. I do not mean just blind imitation. It is finding the essence, the heart, of what these knowers of God are. This is the reason why Arjuna asks Sri Krishna about the man of steady wisdom: 'How does he speak, how does he sit, how does he walk?' Repeatedly we are told about the illumined man, because there at least we are able to see God or Truth manifesting more clearly. These illumined souls are the teachers for us. They are our guides. Their lives are models for our lives. 'The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman,' the Mundaka Upanishad tells us. They see only God. So if we have contact with someone who has known the Infinite, we too have in some degree seen what is meant by the Infinite. In the presence of such knowers our minds too are lifted up to a higher level.

Sometime back I read of Swami Shivananda telling a devotee that whenever he (Swami Shivananda) met a devotee he would first see the chosen Ideal of that devotee, and then gradually he would see the devotee himself. Imagine what a state of mind—as if we are all in truth little manifestations of various

aspects of God just waiting to be awakened. The knowers of God can see that. They actually see the chosen Ideal of an individual and therefore they can point out the easiest, most direct route for the aspirant on the spiritual path.

Love Is God

We can try to make it our practice to see our own chosen Ideal working in and through those around us, shining through them all and also shining in our own hearts. Christ says, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' Swamiji says, 'Who serves Jiva, serves God indeed.' This can be a practice.

I remember a swami saying, 'He who has it here'—he put his hand on his own heart—'has it there'. To really know and act with this conviction—how blissful it would be! We would be constantly worshipping the living God, as Swamiji says. If we were really able to practise the presence of God, we would feel united with all. If we truly saw the face of our beloved Lord everywhere, what more would there be to do? Love is its own fulfilment, it is its own end. Only when I have within myself the consciousness that I am not the body, or the mind—only when I have the consciousness of my own true being, of God within me—only then can I look on another as Spirit, as a manifestation of the Divine; then only can I realize the Oneness that is all.

I am reminded of a short story that I read years ago. A young man receives a gift. He can make one wish and choose whatever he wants. He thinks about it and chooses. He asks that he always be loved. Then the story unfolds. The young man is always loved and at first this is very nice. He goes happily about, but he begins to misuse this gift. He begins to treat others cruelly without caring for them at all. He becomes vain and selfish. Everyone loves him, but within himself he becomes more and more miserable. Because his heart is cold, he begins to suffer intensely. Finally he

comes back in a very miserable state to the person who gave him the wish in the first place, and he is allowed to change his wish. This time he chooses to always be able to love. And now, although externally many unfortunate things happen to him, he is never unhappy because he always loves. He is filled with love for those around him and this brings him joy.¹⁵

Need to Dive Deep

We need to penetrate deeply into all that is around us to see the Reality. Swami Vivekananda tells us we can do this. You love nature. Go out and look deeply into it. See what it really is. See God worshipping Himself in the flowers, in the mountains, in the stillness of a sunrise. Penetrate deeply and see what is behind all phenomena. Take your time, Swamiji says, and you will achieve your end.

There is a booklet where Swami Ashokananda tells of his own early practice. His description is very beautiful and it gives us an idea of one way we could practice:

You feel like becoming one with the whole universe. You do not want to be separate from anything but to become one with everything. ... There was a time when I liked that idea very much. I had finished my education in the university and was living in a small town. It was a very unusual kind of place, with the habit of becoming inundated with floods. Every year a good part of the town would be under water, as was the neighbouring land for miles and miles all around. ... Well, it was a beautiful thing to see. ... I made a habit in those days of going into the backyard of the house where I lived. From there I could see miles and miles of this water, and there I would sit. There was no rain at that time. I would sit there and lose myself in the utter oneness of these undivided waters. No waves there; the water not moving. And there was the sun. I looked towards the east, and for miles and miles I would see only the water in which the blue sky and the sun were reflected. And then I would lose the sense of outerness; that sense of an outer world at which I was looking would go away, and the sense of oneness that this vast water created would pervade the mind, saturate the mind, and somehow over-

whelm the mind. ... I would lose myself in this sense of oneness pervading everywhere; I would not remember even my own physical existence. ... After I had bathed, I would meditate on the sun, and that meditation was also of a peculiar character. I wore eyeglasses even in those days, and I would take them off and hold them so that the sun would shine on the glass. The sun would appear small in the lens, but it was a very convenient symbol for meditation, and I would lose myself in that meditation for a long time.¹⁶

So we see that there are many ways of practice right here before us, but the point is, we must go deep into our practice until we reach the core of it. It is not enough to just look at the surface and say 'How nice, it is all one'. That will not help us much. That will not sustain us when things become difficult. We must penetrate deeply into the heart of things, into our own heart, to find the Truth.

Meditation on Brahman

It is said that Brahman can be meditated on as the Light in the eyes. What a beautiful idea. 'The Person that is seen in the eye is this Self.' He is the Beautiful One, He is the Shining One. The consciousness, the light that we see in all beings, is He. He is that and He is more than that. As we meditate on these ideas our minds become more and more pointed and subtle. We are more and more able to see beyond these external names and forms and perceive the Essence behind them all.

It is said that five elements are present in everything—*sat-chit-ananda* and *nama-rupa*, being-consciousness-bliss, and name and form. If we begin to see everything in this light, to see the names and forms as apparent only, we can really begin to discriminate between the Real and the unreal, between the Self and the not-Self—to separate the milk from the water, as it were. This is one of the basic practices for every student of Vedanta.

In everything we see or do, our consciousness is involved. There is one practice called the *atmajnana* method. Here we try to see the whole universe as part of our own self,

our own existence. We can never really say, 'This object exists'. We have to say, 'I perceive that this object exists'. Whatever we perceive is perceived in consciousness, in our own Atman, or Self. The teachers tell us, 'Consciousness is not contained within the body; the body is contained within consciousness.' Think about this statement. What does it mean for us? We are trying to see what is behind our false reading of reality. Even the thought, 'I have a body', is contained in my own consciousness. If we are able to step back in our own minds even this much, it gives tremendous freedom.

In this practice too we have to give up before we can see the Reality as it is. What do we need to give up? We have to give up our little ideas of ourselves, our superficial reading of reality. Our bodies are subject to birth, disease, old age and death. This cannot be the only truth about ourselves, or for that matter, about anyone else. What is the truth about myself? If I am in reality Spirit, then that is the truth about everyone, and about everything else also. We see variety, but behind it there is unity, the divine Spirit, manifesting everywhere. In fact the divine Spirit, or Consciousness, simply is. The knower of God sees this sameness everywhere.

Worship of the Living God

The only problem is that all these also appear to have names and forms; they appear to be different. Swamiji says, 'His eyes, his hands, his face, worship the living God.' Behind it is always Being-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute—the same Reality, like the gold which is moulded into different ornaments—rings, bracelets, necklaces—all different names and forms of the same substance.

Swamiji tells us to 'Open your eyes and see Him'. That is the Truth. We do not have to go somewhere else or do something else. It is present now, here before us. Once Swamiji was talking to a group of monastics and he said: 'And where will you go to seek Brah-

man? He is immanent in all beings. Here, here is the visible Brahman! Shame on those who, disregarding the visible Brahman, set their minds on other things! Here is the Brahman before you as tangible as a fruit in your hand! Can't you see! Here—here—here is the Brahman! He spoke these words in such a way that everyone there suddenly went into a meditative state. They stood still and quiet. Swami Premananda was on his way to the chapel for worship after his bath in the Ganges. When he heard these words of Swamiji he fell into an ecstatic state and became motionless. After a quarter of an hour the swami said to him, 'Now go for worship.'¹⁷ I wish we had someone here now with Swamiji's power, to tell us to see God in this way. That would finish everything off. There would be no need to talk about it!

Swami Ashokananda writes:

Yes, everything is God and not less than God, anywhere. Everything is Brahman, everything is Spirit. ... You can reach a state in which you look at things with these very eyes but you see something different from what you ordinarily see. The sense forms stand aside and the true Reality—the spiritual Reality which everything is—becomes at once self-evident, directly perceived. ... You will say, 'You mean to say that if I change my ideas about a person, then instead of seeing that person I shall begin to see God?' That is *exactly* what I mean. It can be done, it has to be done. ... Beyond this body and beyond this mind there is an unlimited consciousness. If I cannot give any limit to this consciousness, then it becomes the infinite conscious Being. ... Form is made up of body and mind. But beyond this form is the real Being, and that real Being is the Divine Being.¹⁸

Prayer for the Truth

Swamiji tells us, 'I never read of any more beautiful conception of God than the following: "He is the Great Poet, the Ancient Poet; the whole universe is His poem, coming in verses and rhymes and rhythms, written in infinite bliss."¹⁹ In Him all exists. He is moving.

He is also immovable. He is near and He is far. He is inside everything. He is outside everything, interpenetrating everything. Whoever sees in every being that same Atman, and whoever sees everything in that Atman, he never goes far from that Atman. When all life and the whole universe are seen in this Atman, then alone man has attained the secret. There is no more delusion for him' (2.153).

Swamiji ends his 'God in Everything' lecture with the *Isha Upanishad* prayer for the vision of God. This beautifully poetic prayer is addressed to the Sun. It says: 'Thou sun, who hast covered the Truth with thy golden disc, do thou remove the veil, so that I may see the Truth that is within thee. I have known the Truth that is within thee, I have known what is the real meaning of thy rays and thy glory and have seen That which shines in thee; the Truth in thee I see, and That which is within thee is within me, and I am That' (2.154).

An illusion is covering the face of Truth. Our prayer always is that this golden illusion, this alluring maya, be removed so that we can see the face of God everywhere. The famous Gayatri mantra is simply another form of this same prayer. 'Do Thou guide our understanding'—this is the prayer that comes from the heart of all sincere seekers after God, and it is this yearning, this prayer for God, for Truth, that leads one to realization. The Truth is already there within us, and the Truth is always shining everywhere around us. As Swamiji said, 'Here—here—here is the Brahman!' Let us keep these words sounding in our hearts and minds. Let us meditate on this truth until we too can see God in everything. ~

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The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna according to Mahendra Nath Gupta

SWAMI CHETANANANDA

The Life of Mahendra Nath Gupta

M was the pen-name of Mahendra Nath Gupta. He was born in Calcutta on 14 July 1854. His parents were spiritually-minded people, and he was very devoted to his mother. When he was four years old, he went with his mother to attend the Chariot Festival of Jagannath at Mahesh, and on their way back they stopped at the Dakshineswar temple garden. He later recounted his memory of that day:

The temple was all white then, new and glistening. While going round the temple, I lost sight of my mother and was crying for her on the temple porch. Immediately a handsome brahmin came out of the temple and, touching my head, consoled me. Then he called out: 'Whose child is this? Where has his mother gone?' M told the devotees, 'Most probably he was Sri Ramakrishna because at that time he was the priest in the Kali temple.'¹

From his childhood, M had religious and mystical inclinations. When he was five years old, he used to climb to the roof of his house to gaze at the vastness of the sky or to stand there during the monsoon and experience the torrential rains. He had read in the Mahabharata that one should love and worship one's teacher, so when the family priest visited their home, M saluted him and served him personally. On his way to school he would bow down at the temple of the Divine Mother, which was on the other side of the College Street Market. When he was in the eighth grade he started to keep a diary, and the following entries show his religious nature: 'I got up in the morning and prostrated before my parents.' 'As usual, on my way to school I saluted Mother Kali and Mother Shitala.' *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*

was the ultimate result of this habit of keeping a diary, and M himself commented about his great work, 'I was an apprentice for fifteen years' (192).

M was a brilliant student. He received his school education at the Hare School in Calcutta, where he was second in his class, and in 1875 he graduated third in his class from the Presidency College. He was a favourite student of C H Tawney, a well-known professor of English, who later wrote a brochure on Ramakrishna. While M was in college he married Nikunja Devi, a cousin of the Brahmo leader Keshab Chandra Sen. At that time Keshab was the hero of modern Bengal, and M was very much influenced by him.

After graduating from college, M became a teacher. He served as headmaster in several schools in Calcutta. In February 1882, when he met Ramakrishna, M was the headmaster of the Shyambazar branch of the Vidyasagar School. He was an excellent teacher, well versed in both Eastern and Western philosophy as well as in history, literature, astronomy, and science. Moreover, he had studied the New Testament so thoroughly that he could quote many passages from memory. Long after M had met Ramakrishna, a Christian minister once expressed his amazement at the depth of M's knowledge of the Bible. M told him politely, 'Sir, we lived with Christ [to M, Ramakrishna and Christ were the same], so we understand his teachings a little' (ibid.).

God's divine play in this world is such that we sometimes find suffering leading to happiness, and again, success leading to a downfall. M's mother died when he was young, and without her, squabbles gradually

disrupted the harmony in their joint family. M was a peace-loving soul, and he finally could no longer bear the pettiness and selfishness of his relatives. He decided to leave home. One night at ten o'clock, he left for his sister's house at Baranagore, accompanied by his wife. He hired a horse carriage, but one of the carriage wheels broke near Shyambazar. He approached a friend's house nearby to ask for lodging for the night, but got a cold reception. Luckily, at midnight he found another carriage and was able to reach his sister's house. M said later that his mental anguish was so great then that he was thinking of taking his life.

The next afternoon he went for a walk with his nephew Sidhu, whose father, Ishan Kaviraj, happened to be Ramakrishna's physician. Sidhu took him to the temple garden of Dakshineswar, and there M met Ramakrishna for the first time. M put it beautifully: 'I was thinking of killing myself, but instead I found my real Self. My family troubles led me to God' (193). It is interesting that Sidhu, who took M to Ramakrishna, never visited Ramakrishna again. M writes of that first visit:

They [M and Sidhu] arrived at the main gate at dusk and went straight to Sri Ramakrishna's room. And there they found him seated on a wooden couch, facing the east. With a smile on his face he was talking of God. The room was full of people, all seated on the floor, drinking in his words in deep silence.

M. stood there speechless and looked on. It was as if he were standing where all the holy places met and as if Śukadeva himself were speaking the word of God, or as if Sri Chaitanya were singing the name and glories of the Lord in Puri ...

M. looked around him with wonder and said to himself: 'What a beautiful place! What a charming man! How beautiful his words are!'

...

As he left the room with Sidhu, he heard the sweet music of the evening service arising in the temple from gong, bell, drum, and cymbal. He could hear music from the nahabat, too, at the south end of the garden. The sounds travelled

over the Ganges, floating away and losing themselves in the distance. A soft spring wind was blowing, laden with the fragrance of flowers; the moon had just appeared. It was as if nature and man together were preparing for the evening worship.²

On that first day, M spoke very little with Ramakrishna. He later said to the devotees: 'After meeting Sri Ramakrishna, I completely forgot my past. His towering personality and spiritual magnetism erased my sad memories.'³

On his second visit, M was scolded by Ramakrishna and, as he described it, his ego was crushed. With a humility born of greatness, he immediately perceived the truth of Ramakrishna's words and accepted it. It seems that M's belief in intellectual knowledge was overpowered by Ramakrishna's spiritual wisdom once and for all. Generally people prefer to hide their weaknesses, but M was so sincere that he meticulously recorded all the scoldings he received from the Master, as well as his reactions to them. M's record runs: 'Thus rebuked M. sat speechless. His pride had received a blow. After a few minutes Sri Ramakrishna looked at him kindly and said affectionately: "You see, you have certain good signs. I know them by looking at a person's forehead, his eyes, and so on."⁴

On this occasion M asked Ramakrishna four vital questions about life. For readers of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, it is as though M had asked them on behalf of humanity: (1) 'How may we fix our minds on God?' (2) 'How ought we to live in the world?' (3) 'Is it possible to see God?' (4) 'Under what conditions does one see God?' Reading Ramakrishna's responses to these questions in the first few pages of the *Gospel*, one can already see how the Master incorporated in his teachings parables, symbols, songs, stories, folklore, myths, scientific reasoning, day-to-day household examples, and examples from nature and the behaviour of animals and humans. He seldom used scriptural testimony. He taught

from his personal experience and explained the deep truths of spiritual life in an utterly simple way, and this captivated M. Never before had he met such a man.

On his fourth visit, M found Ramakrishna in his room surrounded by a group of young men. As soon as M came into the room, the Master laughed and said to them: 'There! He has come again.' Then he explained the reason for his laughter: 'A man once fed a peacock with a pill of opium at four o'clock in the afternoon. The next day, exactly at that time, the peacock came back. It had felt the intoxication of the drug and returned just in time to have another dose' (90).

For the remaining four and a half years of the Master's life, M returned for dose after dose of this divine intoxicant—direct association with God Incarnate—and then shared it freely with other seekers of God. At the beginning of each volume of the Bengali *Gospel*, he quotes a verse from the Bhagavata: 'O Lord, your words, like sweet nectar, refresh the afflicted. Your words, which poets have sung in verses, vanquish the sins of the worldly. Blessed are they who hear of you, and blessed indeed are they who speak of you. How great is their reward!'⁵

As other Incarnations of God have had someone to witness or collect their teachings, perhaps M was this same great soul born again for that purpose. At first sight, Ramakrishna recognized M's worth, and the following comments he made about M indicate that M was not an ordinary person: 'I recognized you on hearing you read the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*. You are my own. The same substance, like father and son. Before you came here, you didn't know who you were. Now you will know.' 'Once [in a vision] I saw Gauranga and his devotees singing kirtan in the Panchavati. I think I saw Balaram there and you too.' 'Yes, I know everything: what your Ideal is, who you are, your inside and outside, the events of your past lives, and your future.'⁶ 'I can see from the signs of your eyes, brows and face

that you are a Yogi. You look like a Yogi who has just left his seat of meditation.'⁷

At one of their first meetings Ramakrishna wanted to evaluate M's understanding of his spiritual state. He asked M: 'What do you think of me? How many ānnās of knowledge of God have I?' 'I don't understand what you mean by "ānnās",' replied M. 'But of this I am sure: I have never before seen such knowledge, ecstatic love, faith in God, renunciation, and catholicity anywhere.'⁸

On another occasion Ramakrishna asked, 'Have you found anyone else resembling me—any pundit or holy man?' M replied, 'God has created you with His own hands, whereas He has made others by machine' (261). This remark made the Master laugh.

After he had been visiting the Master for some time, M felt the urge to renounce family life and become a monk. But Ramakrishna had set out a different path for him and discouraged him from this idea, saying: 'God binds the *Bhāgavata* pundit to the world with one tie; otherwise, who would remain to explain the sacred book? He keeps the pundit bound for the good of men. That is why the Divine Mother has kept you in the world' (718-9). When M insisted, the Master said: 'Let nobody think that if he does not do Mother's work, it would remain undone. The Mother can turn even a straw into a teacher.'⁹

Ramakrishna knew the mission of M's life: M would be the recorder of his gospel. Ramakrishna trained him accordingly, making him a perfect instrument to propagate his message to the world.

Ramakrishna remarked about M: 'This man has no ego.' This was true because he had crushed M's ego. On his second visit, M tried to argue with the Master on the question of whether God has form or is formless. About the incident M recorded in the *Gospel*: 'This was M.'s first argument with the Master, and happily his last.' An egotistic person cannot carry God's message. There is a saying:

'Where there is I, there is no God; and where there is God, there is no I. As darkness and light never stay together, so ego and God.' Anyone who wants to be a perfect instrument of God will have to efface his or her ego. M wanted to be in the background in the divine drama of Ramakrishna. In the *Gospel*, he hid himself behind many names: M, Mani, Master, Mohinimohan, an Englishman, a devotee, a servant, and so on.

Introduction and the Kali Temple of Dakshineswar

M wrote a short biographical introduction to Ramakrishna in the first part of the original Bengali *Gospel*. Swami Nikhilananda's translation does not include this introduction; the translator includes his own more elaborate biography instead. In the original *Gospel*, M wrote about Ramakrishna's birth, his parents, his boyhood days in Kamarpukur, his education, his association with holy men, and his first samadhi. He described Ramakrishna's move to Calcutta, his acceptance of the position of priest in the Kali temple of Dakshineswar, and his vision of the Divine Mother. M discussed Ramakrishna's marriage to Sarada Devi. M also wrote that Ramakrishna became so God-intoxicated that he could not continue to do the worship service, but instead practised Tantra, Vedanta, Christianity, and Islam, and thereby realized God through many religious paths. The Master cried: 'Mother, I shall listen only to you. I don't know any scriptures, nor have I anything to do with the scholars who are well versed in them. You teach me, Mother.'¹⁰

Ramakrishna realized that the Supreme Brahman and the Divine Mother are the same. According to M, the Divine Mother told Ramakrishna: 'You and Myself are identical. Endowed with devotion, you stay in this world for the good of humankind. When pure devotees come, talk to them about God' (ibid.).

During the vesper service, the Master

would cry from the roof of the kuthi: 'O devotees, where are you? Please come quickly.' Gradually, the devotees began to come. M gave a list of the Master's men and women devotees and the year in which they came. M also mentioned Ramakrishna's pilgrimages and meetings with distinguished people of the East and West.

In his original introduction to the Bengali *Gospel*, M left a beautiful description of the temple garden of Dakshineswar.

Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita

In 1897 M published two pamphlets in English under the title 'The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna'. A few years later, the *Gospel* was published in Bengali in five volumes as *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*. Volume one was published in 1902, volume two in 1904, volume three in 1908, volume four in 1910, and volume five in 1932. The *Gospel* contains nearly 176 entries that M recorded during Ramakrishna's lifetime and eight entries that he added after the Master passed away. In addition, M collected a few more entries from other sources and included them in the appendix.

M told the history of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*:

To what extent can we foresee God's plan? The Master made me start keeping a diary in 1867 when I was a student of class eight at Hare School. Since then I recorded in my journal my daily activities, the places I had visited, and so on. I met the Master in the later part of February 1882. That is when my habit of maintaining a diary really became fruitful. When we look back on our past we realize that God is making us do everything. God determines beforehand what he will do through a particular person and then gets it done through him. There were many people around the Master, but he made me write the chronicle. As a result, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* came into existence. I was an apprentice for fifteen years. The hard discipline greatly helped me. It sharpened my memory and increased my skill in writing. I could recall

the sequence of all of the incidents that had occurred during the day after I returned home at night. I would try to remember the first lines of the songs I had heard. This is the way the Master worked through me.

I was involved in worldly activities, bound to my work, and could not visit the Master whenever I wished. Therefore I used to note down his words so that I could think over what he had said between my visits to him. In this way the impressions made on my mind might not be counteracted by the stress of worldly work and responsibilities. It was thus for my own benefit that I first took notes, so that I might realize his teachings more perfectly.

I used to memorize the Master's words, and then after returning home I would write brief notes in my diary. Sometimes I would spend the whole night in completing my record. Later I would fill in all the details from memory. Sometimes I would spend seven days completing the record of one day's happenings. Thus *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* appeared in book form from the notes of my diary. Sometimes I had to wait for a word of the Master's to come to my mind as a chataka bird waits for a drop of rainwater to fall. Sometimes I meditated on one scene over a thousand times. As a result I could vividly visualize the Master's divine play, though it had happened long before. By the grace of the Master I used to feel that his play had just happened. Therefore one can say that it was written in the Master's presence. At times I would not be satisfied with a particular description of an episode, so I would get absorbed in meditation on the Master. Then the correct picture would vividly appear in my mind. Therefore, from a human standpoint there was a great distance of time, but in my thought world I felt that it had happened just before I recorded it. My account is not culled from other sources. I recorded whatever I heard from the Master's lips with my own ears and whatever I saw of his life with my own eyes.

... *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is the world's only firsthand record of the life and teachings of an avatar. One can collect materials about Sri Ramakrishna in three ways: First, direct observation recorded on the same day; second, direct observation but unrecorded during the lifetime of the Master; and third, hearsay,

also unrecorded during the lifetime of the Master. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* belongs to the first category. I was present during each scene of the *Gospel*.

I have published my diary very carefully. If there is any mistake in it, then its value will diminish. People do not realize that at one time I had to study the rules of evidence. If a witness makes a single mistake, the entire case becomes nullified. Addressing the judge, the lawyer says, 'My Lord, this witness is not reliable.' I used to visit the court and observe all these details. The evidence of an eyewitness is very valuable. For that reason the judge asks, 'Did you see this yourself?' If a person has seen and heard something himself, his words carry weight. I checked all the facts and details before I published the *Gospel*.¹¹

When somebody asked M to remove some of the repetitions from the *Gospel*, he replied:

I cannot do that. The Master told the same parable to different people. If I remove a particular section, the train of the conversation will be broken. Moreover, you won't be able to see the effect of the *Gospel* on a particular person's life. The Master gave the same teaching to five different people in five different places. What he said to Bankim, he said to others also; and whatever conversation he had with Vivekananda, he had with others too.

You see, sometimes the brilliance of a diamond is enhanced by changing its setting. Putting it on the dusty ground produces one effect, and putting it on a green lawn produces another. But putting it in a casket lined with blue velvet produces the most brilliant effect of all. The same is true of the words in the *Gospel*. The rays of the sun look different when they fall on water, on the earth, and on glass, but the maximum brilliance is produced when the sun is reflected on glass. So I cannot avoid the repetitions in the *Gospel*, because removing them would disturb the Master's dialogue.

Once Hriday said to the Master: 'Uncle, please reserve some of your best teachings. Otherwise, if you say everything all at once, and then repeat the same thing again and again, people will not come to you anymore.' The Master replied: 'You rascal! I shall repeat my

words fifty times. What does it matter to you?' (323).

The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* was in the curriculum of M's school. When M was accused by some people of trying to sell his books to the students, he calmly replied:

The students will understand the effect of reading the *Gospel* when they enter family life. The Master used to say, 'The world is a burning fire.' And I fully realized it. After the boys enter the world and are tormented by sorrows and sufferings, the Master's immortal words will save them, like a loving mother. If they remember at least one of the Master's teachings, that will be like a boat to ferry them across the turbulent ocean of maya and it will bring peace to their lives (ibid.).

In spite of his illness, M read the proofs of the last part of the Bengali *Gospel* at one o'clock in the morning by the light of a kerosene lantern. Being lovingly chastised by a colleague, he said: 'People are finding peace by reading this book, the Master's immortal message. It is inevitable that the body will meet its end, so it is better that it be used for spreading peace to others. We are in the world and have fully experienced how much pain there is in it, yet I have forgotten that pain through *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. I am hurrying so that the book may come out soon' (ibid.).

The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is an authentic record of Ramakrishna's life and teachings, deep and yet very simple and appealing. Ramakrishna's language and the expressions he used are fascinating. Many people learn Bengali just so that they may read this wonderful piece of literature and get a taste of how Ramakrishna talked.

When we read the *Gospel*, its vivid descriptions help us to visualize Ramakrishna as he moved through his environment. We see the places he knew and the people he came in contact with. This vivid and artistic depiction of an avatara's life is unique. Swami Vivekananda wrote: 'The move is quite original, and never was the life of a great Teacher brought

before the public untarnished by the writer's mind, as you are presenting this one. The language also is beyond all praise, so fresh, so pointed, and withal so plain and easy. ... Moreover, the dramatic part is infinitely beautiful.'¹²

As we read the *Gospel*, we enjoy the holy company of the Master. In the *Gospel*, festivities are always going on, with Ramakrishna at their centre. We enjoy the theatre, music, singing, dancing, humour, worship, meditation, and samadhi. Reading the *Gospel* chases away loneliness and boredom. The *Gospel* presents to us the divine drama of Ramakrishna with various characters representing all types of people: jnanis, devotees, hypocrites, drunkards, householders, monks, actors, actresses, musicians, and so on.

Swami Bhajananda writes:

Every great religion has its own scripture, and there are several scriptures already existing in the world—Veda, Avesta, Tripitaka, Bible, Quran. Do we need one more? Yes, precisely because there are several scriptures we need just one more to show the validity of every one of them and to establish their overall harmony. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* compiled by Sri M. serves this purpose admirably well.¹³

M's record of Ramakrishna's life is extremely interesting, in part because he himself played a vital role. Sometimes he was a silent witness of the divine drama of Ramakrishna; at other times, an active participant in the play. In addition, M's love for the Master was phenomenal; his I-consciousness was saturated with Ramakrishna-consciousness. If this were not so, he could never have produced the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, which is unique among the world's religious literature. Faithfully and vividly, M recorded the Master's samadhi and meditation, his prayer and worship, his dreams and visions, actions and devotion, purity and renunciation, singing and dancing, humour and mimicry, sadhana and pilgrimage, behaviour and psychology, religion and philosophy, and his social and scientific out-

look. But most important, M recorded Ramakrishna's conversations with God, as well as his talks with the people who came to him, his love and empathy for others, and his fervent concern for his devotees.

M writes in the *Gospel*:

The Master was weeping and praying to the Mother in a voice choked with emotion. He prayed to Her with tearful eyes for the welfare of the devotees: 'Mother, may those who come to You have all their desires fulfilled! But please don't make them give up everything at once, Mother. Well, You may do whatever You like in the end. If You keep them in the world, Mother, then please reveal Yourself to them now and then. Otherwise, how will they live? How will they be encouraged if they don't see You once in a while?'¹⁴

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14. *Gospel*, 381.

M on Sri Sarada Devi

What was Holy Mother's life like? What teachings did Sri Ramakrishna give her when he was at Kamarpukur? He took her to Kamarpukur to enact the *grihastha ashrama*. People thought he had now become a householder. But he would incessantly talk about God to Mother. He would constantly advise and train her to lead a godly life. God realization is the supreme aim of human life. What sort of life must one lead to realize this aim; how is a devotee to keep the knowledge of and devotion to God bright in his heart—these he would discuss all through the day and night. He would also impart secular instructions. He said: A devotee is to be competent in all affairs. One must be able to act in accordance with time, place and person.

We get two lessons from Mother's life: brahmacharya and total absorption in God. Self-restraint and service. She knew nothing but God. Seeing God in all beings, she used to unceasingly serve 'Him'. Whatever Mother has said are veritable mantras. Great and learned women like Nivedita used to sit at her feet with folded hands. This is symbolic of modern ideas and modern education bowing down to her.

At times we would send some things to her through a servant. Mother would make the person sit on an *asana* and feed him to his heart's content with the best offerings, sitting in attendance all the while. She was not like other people who kept one type of food for the servants and another for themselves. Mother made no such distinction—for her all were equal.

Once it was proposed that a cow be brought from the Math and kept at Udbodhan [Mother's house]. On hearing this Mother said, 'No, no, they see the Ganga, move about freely and are living with the sadhus. You intend bringing one here to be put in a room with a rope round its neck! That cannot be. I will not be able to take such milk.' She did not allow the cow to be brought. From this we can understand that she is the mother of even the ant.

Glimpses of Holy Lives

Sadhu Kishandas

(Continued from the previous issue)

In 1915 Mahendranath went from Vrindaban to Kankhal to witness the Purna Kumbha Mela. One day Kishandasji paid him an unexpected visit at the Kankhal Sevashrama. It was cold and Kishandasji had covered his body with the cotton blanket Mahendranath had given him a long time ago from the Vrindaban Sevashrama stores. Both of them were happy to meet each other in a new place. Kishandasji also had come to attend the Kumbha Mela along with his community. He insisted that Mahendranath visit their camp. In order to honour the invitation Mahendranath and his companions decided to go to Kishandasji's place the next day.

The Vaishnavas had set up their tents on the other side of the Ganga and the pavilion of Kishandasji's community was located there. A veritable city of tents greeted Mahendranath's eyes when he arrived at the other bank. The whole area was crowded with ashramas and bazaars, and teeming with sadhus and pilgrims! Nevertheless, Mahendranath found Kishandasji's pavilion without much difficulty. It stood on a wide road with a wooden plank bearing the community's name hanging from a stake in front.

The Disguise Drops

People at Vrindaban Sevashrama knew Kishandasji to be a poor, unknown Vaishnava sadhu who begged his food. Naturally, it was with this idea that Mahendranath and his friends entered the pavilion and enquired after him. What was their surprise when they found their dear Kishandasji seated on the abbot's throne! He seemed to exude power as he sat there, and he was being shown great re-

spect and honour—as though he were a king! Mahendranath was astonished. Kishandasji received the group with great cordiality and invited them to eat at his place some day during the mela.

Mahendranath observed that even amid so much pomp and splendour Kishandasji was still wearing the old cotton blanket. Not only that, pointing to it he now began to tell the assembled devotees the story of how it came into his possession, much to Mahendranath's embarrassment. There was nothing remarkable about the blanket, but for Kishandasji it had a very special value since he regarded it as a gift of love from the Vrindaban Sevashrama.

God First, World Next

The Vaishnava community to which Kishandasji belonged was extremely rich. Its annual income ran into lakhs of rupees. Every day during the Kumbha Mela about five thousand sadhus were fed at its pavilion. A large tent served as the shrine, where the presiding deity of the sect was installed. The image was bedecked with so many costly jewels and ornaments that Mahendranath wondered if he had ever seen such a huge treasure at one place. Down centuries kings and queens, merchants and businessmen had offered much wealth to the deity. This time the mela had drawn some twenty-five lakh people and so the shrine was guarded round the clock by nearly five hundred sadhus.

Slowly Mahendranath came to know certain things about Kishandasji. Kishandasji happened to be his guru's eldest disciple and was expected to succeed him as abbot. But he

had declined the position as he felt that the responsibility would interfere with his spiritual life. He preferred the all-renouncing sadhu's unencumbered life of begging and meditating and in fact lived away from the community. However, the Kumbha Mela was a time when all the disciples met together, and they took the opportunity to express their love and reverence for their seniormost brother.

The Humble Abbot

The day before the ceremonial bath Kishandasji came to the Kankhal Sevashrama and invited the residents to join his community in the ritual.

The road to the bathing ghat ran past Kishandasji's pavilion. There Mahendranath saw six or seven richly caparisoned elephants mounted with silver howdahs being readied for the procession. The one hundred and eight Vaishnava insignia were in glorious display. Presently the drums rolled to a crescendo and Kishandasji the abbot ascended the lead elephant. Mahendranath did not fail to notice that the old blanket was adorning Kishandasji's shoulders even as he sat in a silver howdah! Spotting Mahendranath and his friends in the crowd Kishandasji folded his hands in salutation and said with great humility: 'I salute you, sirs, I salute you. Kindly don't mind my sitting on an elephant. I have been made the abbot, so I can't avoid these things.' Everybody around was deeply touched to see such an expression of humility coming from one occupying such an exalted position. It was evident from the very look of his face that Kishandasji was speaking from his heart.

In the evening Kishandasji came to the Sevashrama, the blanket still on his shoulder. The ashramites decided to have some fun and began teasing him. 'Oh, we didn't know our Kishandasji was an abbot!' they exclaimed. 'Why, he is a king!' With folded hands Kishandasji said shyly: 'What can I do? I live with them, so I have to abide by their wishes at least once in a while. But I belong to you. Where

you are, there I am. I do what you people ask me to do.' After much merriment Kishandasji went away.

Mahendranath could see that Kishandasji was genuinely humble, completely free from the sense of ego. He could have sat on a silver throne if he chose to, but he preferred to sit on the bare floor with folded hands. Temporal power and material wealth had absolutely no influence over him.

Over the Last Hurdle

Years passed and Mahendranath had returned to Calcutta. One day he heard from a novice who had served at the Vrindaban Sevashrama the story of Kishandasji's last days.

In 1924 or 1925 Kishandasji was afflicted with severe dysentery which caused him intense suffering. The pain was beyond human endurance and it soon became clear that death was imminent. But in spite of the excruciating pain the soul seemed to refuse to leave the body. What could be the reason, Nadu Maharaj, the head of the Sevashrama, wondered. Kishandasji thought hard. Was there something he had left undone? Then it struck him. There still lurked in his mind a sense of distinction, however subtle, between pure and impure, and a vestige of aversion for non-vegetarian food. Turning to Nadu Maharaj, Kishandasji said: 'Maharaj, could you arrange for some meat, make it your prasada and give it to me? That should put an end to my suffering.' Nadu Maharaj would hear none of it at first, but after repeated entreaties by Kishandasji he had to agree. Meat was brought and cooked at the Sevashrama. Then, with great hesitation, Nadu Maharaj picked up a piece, touched it to his tongue and handed it to Kishandasji. Kishandasji touched the meat with a finger and then touched the finger to his tongue. Then he uttered with deep satisfaction: '*Puran, puran, puran!* Fulfilled, fulfilled, fulfilled!'

Surprisingly, Kishandasji passed into mahasamadhi that very night. ~



Reviews



For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA
publishers need to send two copies of their latest publications.

Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother: Her Teachings and Conversations. *Trans. Swami Nikhilananda; ed. Swami Adiswarananda.* SkyLight Paths Publishing, Sunset Farm Offices, Route 4, PO Box 237, Woodstock, Vermont 05091, USA. 2004. xvii + 261 pp. \$29.99.

An apt photograph of a pink lotus on the cover eloquently signifies the manifestation and ministry of Mother Sarada Devi. No pretensions. So open, ever soothing to the sorrow-buffed mind, so pure and divine despite living in the mud of earthly affairs. When we think of Mother Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda's words immediately rush into our horizon: 'Mother's grace, Mother's blessings are all paramount to me.' Next to his comes the work of Swami Nikhilananda, a direct disciple of Holy Mother who brought to a worldwide audience Sri Mahendranath Gupta's monumental Bengali recollection in *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*. He also translated into English the reminiscences of Holy Mother by Swami Arupananda, Sarajubala Devi and the diary jottings of a few lay disciples. The book has now been republished as *Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother*.

Once again we enter the magic of Holy Mother's presence and it is ever a new joy for the child to gaze at the familiar figure and seek her protection and love throughout the day and even in sleep. For she embodied all the high visions of life. Those who came to her gathered in their hearts the immaculate sweetness of her presence that slipped through even the most casual gestures. As when she asked for a basket thrown away in the street by her monk-disciples to be brought to her: 'They are all monks and totally unattached. But we cannot allow such waste. We could have used the basket at least for keeping the peelings of the vegetables' (75).

This is divine common sense for the consumerist Valhalla of our times! Relating this incident Sarajubala Devi says with humility: 'The basket was kept for some future use. I had my lesson from her words, but we are so slow to learn.'

But then, Mother's patience was as wide as that of Vasundhara, Mother Earth! This comes out graphically through Swami Nikhilananda's essay where he dwells on Mother as a spiritual teacher, one who could make the path to realization as easy as possible for the disciples: 'For you there is the Ramakrishna-loka, the heaven where Sri Ramakrishna is eternally present with his intimate disciples.' This is all we need to know.

We get ushered into Holy Mother's immediate presence by Sarajubala Devi and Swami Arupananda (who was for many years Holy Mother's personal attendant). We learn how the Divine in human garb had suffered physical and mental discomfort like an ordinary human being and endured it all with smiles and laughter. As when she said: 'All will say: Ah, the Mother had such a gout, she used to limp like this!' It is hard to read these passages without ejaculating repeatedly, 'Oh, Ma!'

One handles *Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother* with reverence. It contains golden thoughts bound in a book as well produced as the perfect lotus bloom on its cover. Holy Mother's words waft around like the honey of pollen flowing from it plentifully, a *puṣkalamādhvikajhari*. Just live a deceitless, simple life. Practise meditation and japa. 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 God right now if you become desireless. In effect, reading *Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother* is itself meditation, japa, an effective instrument to chase away desires and receive 'Mother's Grace, Mother's blessings'.

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Tribute to Holy Mother. Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Ramakrishna Avenue, Patna 800 004. E-mail: rkmpatna@sancharnet.in. 2005. 198 pp. Rs 60.

This sesquicentennial tribute is a compendium of articles highlighting different aspects of Holy

Mother Sri Sarada Devi's life.

The first article is a translation of an essay by Swami Saradananda dealing with the worship of the Mother Power—the Shakti that brings forth, nurtures and finally withdraws the world.

Swami Mukhyananda's article shows the rare capacity that Mother had of lifting small acts to greatness by the way she performed them. Swami Prabhananda's article gives an account of several incidents which show how the apparently ordinary and unlettered village woman unobtrusively steered the Ramakrishna sangha through troubled waters during the early years after its inception.

Dr Ratri Roy has written an interesting article drawing from the mystical experiences of saints in the West and finding parallels in Mother's life.

Swami Sudarshananda, Swami Jnanendra-nanda and Prof. Bimaleswar Dey deal with the one aspect of Holy Mother that cannot escape notice, namely her love and compassion. In his article on Mother as an embodiment of practical Vedanta Swami Amartyananda delineates several Vedantic virtues and shows how they are practically demonstrated in Mother's life. Swami Deshikatmananda and Swami Tyagarupananda both deal with the ideal of Indian womanhood and from different directions show how the Holy Mother ideal is relevant to modern society. Swami Gananathananda's article is more mystical in nature and deals with the divine aspect of Mother. A related but quite unusual article is the one by Swami Sandarshananda where he brings out the common features of the lives, teachings and personalities of Holy Mother and Bhagavan Buddha.

Munibe Sami describes how Mother combined in her dealings with her shishyas the seriousness of the preceptor-disciple relationship with the sweetness of the mother-child relationship.

Fittingly, the book ends with a collection of the sayings of Holy Mother in Hindi and a poem in Maithili.

A Monastic

The Sterling Book of Ma Sarada. Prof. M Sivaramkrishna. New Dawn Press, A-59 Okhla Industrial Area, Phase II, New Delhi 110 020. E-mail: info@sterlingpublishers.com. 2005. 128 pp. Rs 99.

Prof. Sivaramkrishna's book *Ma Sarada: The Miracle of Love* is clearly written from the standpoint of a devotee and takes for granted in its non-Indian

readers a degree of acculturation that will easily identify 'Ma' as 'Mother'. By using 'Ma' instead of 'Mother' Sivaramkrishna claims Sri Sarada Devi as his very own and in the process inscribes Western discourse, which is always implied with the use of the English language, with the indelible stamp of the local and Indian use of the English language. It becomes one more way for the regional and the local from the postcolonial context to flavour or colour the formal dimensions of English prose.

Biography is not Sivaramkrishna's purpose. He assumes a basic knowledge of Sri Sarada Devi's life in his readers, choosing to highlight only certain events from her life, and aiming perhaps to bring to his readers in an easy and accessible manner the essential dimensions of her unique motherhood. In the process, Sivaramkrishna dilutes the impact of the grave, serious and elevated subject that Sri Sarada Devi or Holy Mother is. In an age of increasing commodification, Holy Mother must not be made into a commodity that can be easily consumed or digested by a public that does not want to work too hard. There are instances where the language seems too conversational or casual. Prose that copies the movements of ordinary speech becomes, in this reviewer's opinion and in this context, unsuitable for the sublime subject it is dealing with. If Sivaramkrishna is mindful of genre, as he seems to be, then hagiography demands a certain elevation of style. An instance of levity is the writer's comment on Sri Ramakrishna's praise of Sarada Devi's singing: 'When the Master himself says, "very good," don't we say "Amen!" to that?' (77).

However, the book highlights certain inalienable dimensions of Sri Sarada Devi's life and character that reveal Sivaramkrishna's capacity to combine devotion with insight and analysis. Paradox, as he rightly claims, is one of the most compelling dimensions of a divine personality. As much as Mother was proud of the fact that Swami Vivekananda ignited patriotic desire in many people, she is glad that he did not live long enough to be punished for his patriotism by the British (27). Similarly, when Radhu and Nalini reject the coarse swadeshi cloth that Ishanananda brought for them, she replies to his exhortation that all Indians must use swadeshi cloth by making the following observation: 'Child! They whom you consider as foreigners, too, are my children! This house includes and is for everyone. ... Please go and bring clothes which they would like to have' (29). Sivaramkrishna also

alludes to the incident where Mother's unexpected, uncharacteristic laughter on hearing about the many killed in the First World War shocked everyone present into a state of speechlessness, as an aspect of her divine motherhood that encompassed the 'Smashana Kali' (53).

Sri Sarada Devi's piety, generosity, innocence and ability to derive joy from everything are other aspects that Sivaramkrishna goes into. However, overlying the historical, analytical, biographical and hagiographical dimensions of the book is his great personal devotion to Holy Mother which comes out in statements like, 'All miracles are, as Sri Ram says, encounters between our love and God's love. When they coalesce the miracle of love envelops one and enlightens. ... Whether we believe it or not, have faith or not, the incontestable truth is: Ma and the Master pervade the cosmos from the *pipeelika* to Brahman!' (89).

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Great Women of India (Vols. 1 and 2). Dr (Mrs) S Ramani; art by Rajesh Kumar N. Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai 600 004. E-mail: srkmath@vsnl.com. 2004. 24 pp each. Rs 25 each.

These small pictorial booklets are the first of a series of five volumes published by Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, to celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. They are meant for young readers and tell the stories of twelve great women of India of the past.

There are two stories taken from the Upanishadic literature about Maitreyi, the wife of Yajnavalkya, and Gargi, who crossed swords with Yajnavalkya at the court of King Janaka. The greatness of Maitreyi and Gargi lies in the fact that they were prepared to dedicate their whole lives to the pursuit of Brahman.

Then there are six stories taken from the Ramayana about Sita, Shabari, Ahalya, Mandodari and Tara in the first volume and Anasuya in the second. The second volume also contains three stories from the Mahabharata about Draupadi, Savitri and Sukanya. It also tells the story of Madalasa from the *Markandeya Purana*.

These characters are well known throughout the country, thanks to the popular television seri-

als. While the women of the Upanishads and the Ramayana portray ideal characters, those taken from the Mahabharata are more down-to-earth, especially Draupadi. These stories give us the message that human problems have been the same down the ages, but they tell us how these women boldly faced and overcame those problems. They serve as role models for the younger generation.

The stories are short but adequate to arouse the interest of young readers to know more about these great personalities. In this sense the booklets serve a very useful purpose. Illustrations add to their value. The printing and get-up are pleasing.

If the text could be enlarged and revised, it may appeal to a much wider age group, especially teenagers. This age group, educated on Western lines, may come to appreciate the value system the women of ancient India stood for.

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Vedanta and Ramakrishna. Swami Swahananda. Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata 700 029. E-mail: rmic@vsnl.com. 2003. 446 pp. Rs 75.

Swami Swahananda is not someone who needs introduction to the admirers and devotees of the Ramakrishna Vedanta tradition. Readers are familiar with the revered Swami's books: his translation of *Chhandogya Upanishad* and that great classic *Panchadashi* of Vidyananda Swami. Similarly, his lucid book on *Meditation* is a significant contribution to this difficult subject. Above all, Swamiji's rendering of Swami Premeshanandaji's letters, *Go Forward* (two volumes), has now become a classic of *spiritual counselling*.

The present volume is a collection of the lectures Swahanandaji gave as Minister-in-Charge of the Vedanta Society of Southern California and the articles he wrote for various journals.

The rich collection is divided into four parts. Part I may be called a general introduction to the various aspects of Vedanta, the underlying unity being provided by its greatest exemplars, Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. Part II has essays on the spiritual classics of Hinduism such as the Upanishads and the Gita, as well as an exposition of yoga and meditation. One essay in

this section explores the Way of the Buddha. Part III has three essays, two on achieving peace through religion and one on Hinduism. Part IV highlights several aspects of Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swamiji. Also included are essays on Swami Brahmananda, the Ramakrishna movement abroad, the role of the devotees and need for a new temple of Sri Ramakrishna. There are, in addition, fascinating reminiscences of Swahanandaji's stay at Madras Math and his address to the interreligious meeting with the Pope.

Thus the volume is a sumptuous feast, a veritable compendium of the crucial aspects of Vedanta as brought into being in the wake of the advent of Ramakrishna, the prophet not only of universal harmony and peace but also of the diversity of faiths as strengthening the points of the harmony. As the revered author succinctly puts it, the uniqueness of Ramakrishna is to 'stress spiritual realization as the core of life' and sift 'the essentials from rituals and symbols of thought' by accepting 'all paths as valid'.

This is exemplified in the lives of the other two of the Holy Trinity—Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. Holy Mother is a cut above. Indeed, as Swahanandaji disarmingly puts it: 'Comparatively, Sri Ramakrishna could not contain his ecstasies, whereas the Holy Mother could, showing a greater power restrained. ... She manifested tremendous power of control along with performing other duties of life.' That is Mother's uniqueness. No wonder the direct disciples who bored holes through the hard crust of resistance made the Ramakrishna movement what the cultural historian of Ramakrishna Vedanta in the West calls a 'mega trend'! Swahanandaji's explication of Swami Vivekananda vis-à-vis the West is in this regard highly suggestive. To have made Vedanta vibrantly relevant today is the greatest contribution of the Ramakrishna Vedanta movement as shown by Swahanandaji vividly and lucidly. From the point of view of the growth of the movement in the early days, Swahanandaji's evocation of his days at the Madras Math is very interesting.

In short, here is a significant volume which deepens, intensifies and enriches our understanding of Vedanta as exemplified by Sri Ramakrishna, its greatest exemplar. As such, it is indispensable reading for the interested general readers, devotees as well as scholars interested in the study of this great movement and their illustrious exemplars.

The beautifully produced volume at an incredibly modest price is a tribute to the publishers, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture.

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Song of Life. *Radhey Shyam.* Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Kulapati Munshi Marg, Mumbai 400 007. E-mail: *brbhavan@bom7.vsnl.net.in*. 2003. xix + 100 pp. Rs 140.

'As I stroll all alone, like a lovely butterfly flying in the sun, thou whispereth something into my ears, through the sweet murmur of numberless lips of grassy blades, greening the dusty brown earth with a life of joy.'

'After a constant and determined struggle in the dark field of life, one step in the bright peaceful horizon of truthful revelations, makes one feel the radiance within one's blessed inner chamber. O Lord, let me have the key of truth, to unlock the doors of Thy radiant delight and give me strength to step into Thy eternal room of joyous grace.'

These are some of the pearls of wisdom that have sprung up from the pious and poetic heart of a seeker of Truth, the author of the book under review. This book contains beautiful songs rendered into English prose from the original Hindi, each having its own hue and fragrance to charm the readers' fancy. The author, committed to the Gandhian ideology, is known for his use of the haiku. Inclined towards mysticism, he feels pleasure to discover the soul in silence. These songs are in fact the meaningful communication between the author and this articulate silence.

Song of Life presents the essence of life in a most practical manner in simple, lucid and picturesque style. It echoes the beauty of nature—golden flute of the morning glory, rippling rivers, inviting meadows, singing swaying trees, awakening hues of blue, the mighty sun, the grassy lap of Mother Earth and the black beauty of starry splendour. But it is the kindly touch of the Master that has worked a miracle with the author's sweet silence. Hence, the mystery of life, soul, religion and its relationship with the Absolute is beautifully put before us, helping solve subtle philosophical riddles.

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Reports

News from Branch Centres

Ramakrishna Mission Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House and Cultural Centre, Kolkata, has been conducting an evening school for the poor children of the locality, most of them pavement dwellers. At present there are about 150 boys and girls aged between 2 and 14 years. Daily classes start with prayer and meditation. Younger children are taught the alphabet, counting numbers, drawing and the like, while older students are given special coaching classes on various subjects of their curricula. At the end of the classes the children are fed sumptuously, after which they return to their humble abodes.



Sri Buddhadeb Bhattacharya (centre) listening to a song being presented by a boy of the evening school

When Sri Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, Chief Minister of West Bengal, visited the centre on 26 September to attend the function held to mark its first anniversary (*see November issue*), he was welcomed by these children. Sri Bhattacharya blessed the children heartily and presented them with new clothes.

At the function the Chief Minister highly praised the Mission's multifarious welfare activities and its great contribution to the history of Kolkata and West Bengal.

On 3 August, Srimat Swami Gitanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math

and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the renovated room at **Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home, Chennai**, where Swami Brahmanandaji Maharaj had stayed for over a month in 1921. The room will henceforth be preserved as a memorial.

Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the BSc (Honours) course in nursing at the newly set up College of Nursing at **Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratishthan, Kolkata**, on 4 October. Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, presided over the function.

Our centres in **Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Malda and Saradapitha (Belur)** have been engaged, since 2003-04, in programmes for higher orientation of the inmates of the nearby jails (now called 'correctional homes') by providing them non-formal education; vocational training in animal husbandry, pisciculture, tailoring, carpentry, etc.; and health awareness and care through short-term camps.

Achievements

A student of **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalay, Deoghar**, stood second at the National Science Seminar organized by the National Council of Museums at Nehru Science Centre, Mumbai, on 4 October.

The headmaster of one of the higher primary schools run by **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chennai**, has been honoured with the 'Dr Radhakrishnan Award for the Best Teacher 2005' by the Government of Tamil Nadu.

A student of the school run by **Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar**, has secured the top position for the north-east region in the higher secondary examination conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Education

(CBSE) this year.

Relief and Rehabilitation

In the wake of the devastating earthquake in Jammu and Kashmir on 8 October, **Ramakrishna Mission, Jammu**, distributed 1,920 kg flour, 360 kg mustard oil, 60 l ghee, 2,500 kg salt, 2,000 kg biscuits, 625 kg milk powder, 4,725 blankets, 60 foam mattresses, 25 tents, 100 kg plastic sheets, 300 kg washing soap, 96 lanterns and 138 pairs of footwear to 1,778 families of 40 villages in Poonch district.

Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Memorial, Vadodara, distributed 61 utensil sets (each set including 4 cooking vessels, 4 dishes, 4 bowls, 2 tumblers, 1 spoon, 1 griddle and 1 spatula), 364 blankets and 19 tarpaulin sheets to flood victims in Vadodara district.

Ramakrishna Mission, Mumbai, distributed 2,136 kg rice, 953 kg dal, 282 blankets and 2,300 bed sheets to 2,500 flood-affected families of 5 villages in Thane district.

Heavy rains for several days during mid-October caused havoc in many places of West Bengal rendering lakhs of people homeless. Our centres did extensive relief work in the affected areas.

Ramakrishna Math, Chandipur, distributed 7,500 kg khichri, 13,200 kg *chira*, 97 kg milk powder, 2,300 kg sugar, 40,000 halazone tablets, 3,116 candles and 4,550 matchboxes to 19,475 families of 175 villages in Purba Medinipur district.

In the same district, **Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Contai**, distributed khichri, *chira*, sugar, etc. to 900 families of 5 villages.

Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, served khichri to 300 people in

surrounding areas.

Ramakrishna Math, Ichapur, distributed *chira* and gur among 10,000 families at 19 different places in Hooghly district.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Manaswadwip, distributed khichri, *chira* and gur to 925 people in South 24-Parganas district.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur, served 11,251 plates of cooked food, 2,770 kg *chira*, sugar, etc., 182 kg nutritional supplements, 25 tarpaulin sheets, 1,100 packets of oral rehydration salts, 6,000 halazone tablets and 250 packets of bleaching powder in 51 villages of Purba Medinipur and South 24-Parganas districts.

Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha, Belur, served khichri to 1,034 people in Howrah district.

Some centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission distributed clothing items to needy people in October. Details of the items distributed follow: **Agartala** (200 saris, 100 dhotis, 400 children's garments); **Baranagar Math** (94 dhotis, 94 saris, 180 children's garments); and **Karimganj** (58 dhotis, 292 saris).

Ramakrishna Mission, Port Blair, distributed 1,781 school uniforms, 1,774 school bags, 78 sets of textbooks, 12,418 notebooks and drawing books, 1,774 geometry boxes, 3,874 pens and other stationery items among 1,881 students of 11 schools in South and Little Andaman.

In October, the Batticaloa sub-centre of **Ramakrishna Mission, Colombo**, handed over to the beneficiaries 11 houses built for tsunami-affected people. ~

An Appeal

The Ramakrishna Mission appeals to one and all to contribute generously to the West Bengal flood relief fund. All donations made in cash or by cheque/demand draft drawn in favour of 'Ramakrishna Mission' and payable at Kolkata are exempt from income tax under Section 80G of the Income Tax Act. Donations may be sent to: The General Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Headquarters, PO Belur Math, Dt Howrah, West Bengal 711 202, India (Fax: 033-26549885; E-mail: rkmrelief@vsnl.net).



PRABUDDHA BHARATA

January–December 2005

Managing Editor - Swami Mumukshananda

Editor - Swami Satyaswarupananda

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