

The Holy Mother and God's Motherhood

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What would the Divine Mother of the universe look like if she incarnated on earth in flesh and blood? The answer is the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi. Many people might gasp incredulously, but studying just a few incidents of her life will remove several doubts, as the Holy Mother is a unique revelation of God's motherhood. We encounter in her simple acts, sentiments, and casual utterances, an unbounded grandeur of overwhelming maternal love.

Silent Service

When the Holy Mother was still a little girl living in her village of Jayrambati, the whole countryside was devastated by a terrible famine. Her loving tenderness could be seen as she helped cool, by fanning with her delicate hands, the hot khichuri, rice mixed with lentils, prepared by her parents for the

starving people. Even as a child she helped her mother in all domestic chores and looked after her younger brothers.

One is wonderstruck at the Holy Mother's self-effacement in serving Sri Ramakrishna, his aged mother, and innumerable devotees at Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna's health had suffered as a result of his tremendous tapasya and frequent experience of samadhi. The prasada from the Kali temple was not easily digested by him, so there was none except the Mother to cook soups and curries suitable for his delicate stomach. When he sat to eat, she talked about some light mundane matters lest his mind soar to a higher region making him oblivious to meals. And in how many ways did she coax him to eat a little more. If ever the Mother happened to be away at her village home, he sent her repeated messages to return. What childlike dependence on the Mother's protective care the avatara had! Although she was used to the open spaces and serenity of her village, she happily stayed in the cramped octagonal Nahabhat room at Dakshineswar, with all its inconveniences. No discomfort could touch her if it was for Sri Ramakrishna's service.

When devotees began to visit Sri Ramakrishna, she cooked what was suitable for each of their individual tastes and digestive capacities. Without a trace of annoyance or tiredness she served them happily, while radiating compassion and bliss.

Overwhelmed with agonizing grief, after Sri Ramakrishna's *mahasamadhi* on 16 August 1886, the Holy Mother wondered why she should live any longer. Nothing would have stopped her from merging into Brahman, or donning the robes of a sannyasini and leading a life of contemplation. But she could not do this because of her all-encompassing mother's heart. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna, who was cognizant of her divinity, appeared to her and told her to stay in the world—she had a significant role to play in his mission of spiritual regeneration of humankind. In a vision the Holy Mother saw Sri Ramakrishna pointing to her insane sister-in-law's crawling baby girl and asked her to hold on to that girl—who he said was yogamaya, divine power—in order to provide an anchor for her mind, which tended to lose itself in lofty spiritual planes. That girl was named Radhu.

Veiled Divinity

People failed to recognize the Holy Mother's divinity, veiled in the garb of motherly affection for all creation. Who could gauge the Mother's spiritual magnitude in the midst of her utter rural simplicity? One sees her always engaged in cooking, scouring vessels, meticulously discharging her duties, and intensely involved in the domestic problems of her brothers. By accepting and undergoing day-to-day problems, and at the same time observing a life of detachment, self-control, forgiveness, and fortitude, she has exemplified the perfect life of a householder. She showed that every duty and action performed selflessly for the welfare of others was as good as performing spiritual practices.

What inhuman tortures Surabala and her daughter Radhu subjected the Mother to! Surabala constantly quarrelled with the Holy Mother and once even attacked her with a firebrand under the wrong notion that the Mother had taken Radhu's jewellery. She did not know that her own father, knowing her deranged mind, had taken them away for safe keeping. Despite the Mother's tender solicitude, in a fit of insanity Radhu once hit her hard with a big brinjal, causing the Mother to cry out in pain and making her back swell. Sometimes Radhu would take food in her mouth and spit it on the Holy Mother. Could the Mother put up with such behaviour if she did not possess inexhaustible strength and patience? Revealing her real nature, the Mother said: 'Look my dear, know this body (showing her own) to be a divine body. How much defilement and insult could it endure? If it is not a divine body, can any human being endure so much? ... Look, my dear, as long as I live, none of these can know me. Later they will understand everything.'¹

After Sri Ramakrishna's *mahasamadhi*, the Holy Mother lived in Kamarpukur in dire poverty. She would tie knots to re-pair her torn sari and turn the soil with a spade in order to grow some greens for food. At times she did not even have salt to season her boiled rice. Unlike Sri Ramakrishna, she did not sing, dance, laugh, and weep with divine joy; the mode of expressing her infinite power was through motherliness and suffering.

There were occasions when absorbed in thoughts of Sri Ramakrishna, she would lose all outer consciousness in deep samadhi and become one with him. All her gestures and postures at that time resembled those of the Master. Sri Ramakrishna himself once revealed

in a vision to Yogin-ma, who was the Holy Mother's constant companion, that Mother was pure as the Ganga and he and she were identical. The Mother was one with Sri Ramakrishna, as well as his extended being.

Sri Ramakrishna was intoxicated with the love of God, and the Holy Mother was full of love for all created beings. They were not just the obverse and reverse of each other but one and the same reality. Sri Ramakrishna showed how to be carefree and blissful as a child lying on the Divine Mother's lap; she, the Divine Mother, took all on her lap, unmindful of their faults, failures, lapses, and limitations.

The Holy Mother could be described as *mahamaya*, the great power of God. Even those born in her family lived under the notion that she was merely their sister, sister-in-law, or aunt. Her brothers always pestered her for money and never asked for knowledge or devotion. It took some time, even for the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, to realize that Sri Sarada Devi was not just the consort of their guru. She was the cosmic Shakti released into the world to lead many to eternal life, to soothe numberless hearts by absorbing their sins and woes into her bosom. The Mother as *bhukti-mukti-pradayani*, the bestower of worldly welfare as well as liberation, would reveal herself whenever there was a pathetic cry from one of her helpless children.

Girish Ghosh visited Jayrambati in 1891 and was astonished to see the Holy Mother. It was she who had appeared to him long ago in a dream as an effulgent goddess, when he was in the grip of cholera with no hope of recovery. She cured him by putting some prasada in his mouth. During Durga Puja at Belur Math in 1916, Swami Shivananda wrote in a letter: 'Owing to the presence of the blessed Holy Mother, it has altogether been a direct worship (and not merely worship of the goddess in an image). Although there was continuous rain and storm on all three days, yet by the Mother's grace, no part of the celebration suffered. And it even happened that just as the devotees sat for taking prasada the rain stopped.'² Once, moved by her nephew Shivaram's persistent entreaties, she revealed herself as the Mother Kali, who had accepted his entire burden of karma. Shivaram at once knelt before her and chanted a famous shloka from the *Chandi*, which begins with '*Sarva-mangala-mangalye*; who is the auspiciousness in all the auspicious' (432).

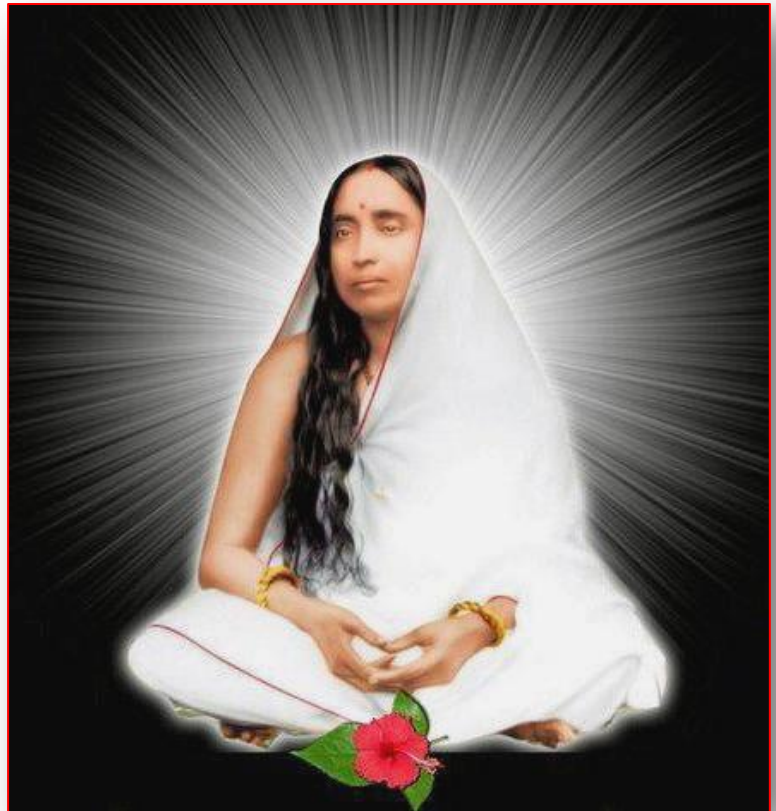
By a mere touch or benign glance the Holy Mother could break the bonds of karma, alter divine dispensation, and avert calamities. Could she have accepted the adoration and worship of the *yugavatara*, avatara of the age? Could she, if she was not the *adyashakti*, primal Shakti, be able to accept Sri Ramakrishna's fruits of sadhana during the *shodashi* puja, worship of the Divine Mother as a teenage girl?

As a Guru

After Sri Ramakrishna's *mahasamadhi* it was the Holy Mother who carried on his mission of spiritual ministration for thirty-four years. Whether in Jayrambati or Calcutta, devotees swarmed about her, irresistibly drawn by the subtle power of her love. There used to be a continuous stream of eager souls who wanted to be sanctified by touching her feet, seeking initiation, and taking sannyasa. This was particularly true when she was at her village, where, laying aside her veil and palanquin, she moved about freely and was easily accessible. Even as a guru she bound all to her by her maternal love. Her door was open to all; no one was a

stranger. She recognized all her children in whatever garb they appeared—brahmana, shudra, foreigner, relative, saint, sinner, learned, or ignorant. Like the goddess Annapurna, she fed them all with delicious dishes she cooked, removed the plates after they had eaten, cleaned the place, and bid them adieu with eyes filled with tears. One day after the meal, some of the disciples were about to clean the dishes, when the Mother prevented them: 'No, no, leave them. You are beings whom even the gods treasure.'³

She nursed her children in sickness as well. She massaged Swami Arupananda's head with a paste of ghee and camphor to relieve him of his headache. A young boy named Govinda, who tended the cows, was cured of a persistent itch by a paste of neem leaves and turmeric made and applied by the Mother herself. Brahmachari Jnan—later Swami Jnanananda—could not eat with his hands because of painful itching, so the Mother mixed rice and curries and put morsel by morsel in his mouth. In 1891, during the Jagaddhatri Puja at the Mother's house in Jayrambati, Swami Saradananda and others were laid up with malaria. In those days milk was not easily available in Jayrambati. She moved from door to door, limping due to rheumatic pain in her legs, collecting milk by ounces till she got enough for their diet. Her actions were reminiscent of Sri Ramakrishna's, who once said to his beloved Naren, the future Vivekananda: 'Alas! For your sake I could beg from door to door.'⁴



Seared in the fiery furnace of the world, countless devotees came to the Holy Mother seeking help. Her love did not allow her to refuse spiritual succour, even to the worst type of sinners. Who else but the Mother of the universe could bear the responsibility of the fallen and the degraded? Her life was to be a solace to thousands of ordinary people as well as to spiritual seekers. All those who sought mantra *diksha*, initiation, were blessed with potent mantras and were filled with peace and bliss. She initiated eager aspirants at any hour, at any place, and under any circumstances. All considerations of her personal suffering or the status of the person to be initiated were brushed aside. Even when she was not well, she initiated a Parsi devotee. She initiated Brahmachari Girija during her period of mourning after her eldest sister-in-law had died of cholera. She even initiated in an open field a youth just released from police custody, and in another situation initiated on a railway platform a porter who weepingly beseeched her. To a pure soul she gave a mantra of her own accord. Impelled by divine mercy she did not refuse even criminals and took upon herself the burden

of their sins. As a result, she often suffered from various physical maladies and a terrible burning sensation in her feet, which she had to repeatedly wash with Ganga water. Swami Premananda once remarked that the Mother, by giving refuge to all and accepting the sins of all, was digesting the poison they could not take. Had they done so, they would have been burnt to ashes. The repeated entreaties of Saradananda and others not to initiate people any more, particularly after her last illness, were of no avail. 'This body will die some day, but let them be awakened.'⁵

Many came and took initiation with earnestness. Some did not do japa and other spiritual disciplines regularly, while others neglected it altogether. The gracious Mother who had shouldered their burden would forego sleep and perform japa for their welfare. She had grown so weak that she could not sit for long. She would also pray to Sri Ramakrishna to arouse their spiritual consciousness and grant them liberation from this world of sorrows. It is interesting to note that the Mother did everything not only for those who practised sincerely but even for those who neglected their sadhana. Mahendranath Gupta, on his arrival at Jayrambati in 1915, imagined that any meditation or japa undertaken at the holy village of the Mother's nativity would lead to greater results. Therefore, he overdid these one day. When he went to salute the Mother, she said: 'Now that you are with your mother, what's the need of so much japa and meditation? I, indeed, am doing everything for you. Now eat and live merrily, free from all care.'⁶

The Holy Mother showered her blessings equally on householders and her all-renouncing monastic children. Many were granted sannyasa by the kindly Mother. She no doubt held the monastic life of renunciation, self-sacrifice, and celibacy in high esteem and yet, as the *antaryamini*, the indweller, did not give sannyasa indiscriminately. She knew that everybody had a measured role to play in Sri Ramakrishna's divine play and that everybody was not fit to lead a monastic life. Reading the future of the aspirants with her insight, she asked some to lead the life of householders and at the same time to call on God. She reassured them that there were quite a number of good householder devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. To those who had the strength of mind and spirit of renunciation she gave the vows of sannyasa. Once when a young man received the ochre robe from her, one of Mother's aunts remarked: 'Sister-in-law has turned that boy into a monk' (343). And Maku joined in saying: 'With what expectations the parents of this boy brought him up; and all these are now dashed to the ground! Marriage, too, is a virtuous act in this world. If aunt goes on making monks in this way, Mahamaya will become angry with her' (ibid.). The Mother said: 'Maku, they are all divine children; they will live on this earth as pure flowers. ... Haven't you seen into the happiness of this world? I am getting my very bones scorched by the fiery ordeals of your family lives' (343-4). Though she granted sannyasa to many, it hurt her mother's heart to call her children by their monastic names. 'My Naren', 'my Sarat', 'my Yogen', this is how she addressed them. It was she who interceded with Sri Ramakrishna, weeping profusely, that her children might have a permanent habitation and not wander from place to place for a morsel of food. On 21 August 1911, when Swami Ramakrishnananda entered *mahasamadhi* at Udbodan, she lamented sorrowfully, 'My Shashi is gone; my backbone is broken' (255). On 30 July 1918, at the passing away of Swami Premananda she wept bitterly and said: 'Baburam ... was so very near to my heart!' 'She laid her head at the feet of the Master's picture ... and cried out with a heart-rending wail, "Master, so you have snatched him away!"' (289). What infinite motherly love and solicitude for her monastic children and the Order!

Once, during one of her visits to Bangalore, the Holy Mother and her women companions were taken by Swami Vishuddhananda to the cave temple of Gavipura. On their return to the ashrama, the Mother was moved to find the whole compound crowded with people seeking her darshan. As soon as they saw her, they prostrated themselves on the ground. The Mother stood there motionless for about five minutes and extended her arm in benediction. Hers was the language of the heart, through which she transmitted transcendental bliss. No words were needed; no questions were asked and yet all the devotees doubts were solved. Earlier at Madras by her power of silent spiritual ministry, she had initiated many Tamil girls. She was able to make them understand the mantras and the process of japa and meditation without the help of interpreters.

Mother's Boundless Freedom

Come one and all! The Holy Mother is waiting with open arms to embrace all in her oceanic heart. Anyone can call upon her at any time, at any odd hour of day or night, in rain or shine. Worry not about the time of her rest or convenience, all her time and toil is for our sake. Worry not if you are poor and have nothing to offer her, have not read a single scripture, or have committed many blunders. Her very sight would fill you with indescribable joy. Her very glance would make you a saint, freeing you from all restlessness due to desire for sensuous enjoyment and material gains. She is none other than the Divine Mother descended in this valley of woes to take us across this transmigratory ocean of life and death.

A girl desperately wanted to see Mother, but her husband did not approve of it. So she pressed Kshirodbala, her friend, to accompany her to Mother's house after her husband had left for the office. It was Mother's rest time when they arrived. Golap-ma scolded Kshirodbala for bringing the girl at that time and disturbing Mother's rest. After a while Kshirodbala heard Mother calling her: 'Who is this girl, dear? Did Golap scold you, because you have come at this hour? Well, it is the Master's kingdom! No rules and regulations are valid here. Here the door is open to all. Whenever one gets the opportunity one may call on me.' 7 'What law would freedom bind? / What merit guide Her will, / Whose freak is greatest order, / Whose will resistless law ? ' 8

In those days when girls were not sent to school, Mother educated her nieces Maku and Radhu, made them read out religious books to her, and had her letters written by them. Golap-ma said that Radhu was grownup and there was no need of sending her to school. Mother said: 'Let her go to school. She can do immense good to others if she gets education and learns some useful arts. She has been married in a backward village. Th rough education she will not only improve herself, but will be able to help others.' 9



The Holy Mother was known for her tenderness and Golap-ma for her outspokenness, yet they were intimately bound to each other. This difference in temperaments did not ever so slightly ruffle their relationship. Golap-ma and Yogin-ma were her holy companions. She took their advice in all matters except regarding the welfare of her children.

Transcending all superficial barriers of colour, food, language, dress, and customs, geographical and cultural barriers as Europeans, Americans, Indians, she held all in the cosmic sweep of her maternal embrace. How could she run her 'universal' house without including everybody? She was the epitome of traditional and cultural values and would not let any caste or creed prejudices smother her personal freedom in a field that was eminently her own. Her heart was the meeting place where people from different lands and climes gathered, ate the same consecrated food, and lived in harmony.

To the horror of her orthodox companions she talked freely with foreigners, caressed their chins, and even ate with them. The Western ladies were fascinated by the 'stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind.'¹⁰ They also recognized in her 'a yearning love that can never refuse us'.¹¹ Swamiji was delighted to see the Mother confer-ring upon his foreign devotees a sense of dignity and the sanction to accept them in the Order.

The Holy Mother worshipped Sri Ramakrishna as her Ishta Devata, Chosen Ideal, revered him as her guru, and served him. Yet, in her domain of motherhood, she would not let even him curb her freedom in any way, just as Shiva lies prostrate under Kali's feet while she, the cosmic mistress, dances her cosmic dance. One time at Dakshineswar, the Mother was visited by a woman who had led a loose life in her youth but had turned to spiritual life in her old age. Noticing this,

The Master's sense of duty warned him that Mother should be protected from the company of persons who might come with impure motives. Besides, it might arouse adverse criticism from worldly-minded visitors. So he said with disdain, 'Pooh, pooh! a public woman! To think of chatting with her! What a nasty idea!' The Mother certainly understood the need for caution. Whatever might have been her past, she now trod the path of virtue and looked upon the Holy Mother as her own mother. How could Mother then drive away one who wanted to be comforted—the Mother whose life was to be solace to thousands of sinners and spiritual wanderers? ... for the sake of mere social propriety! The conversations, therefore, went on as before. The Master too, intuitively understanding the Mother's feeling, did not refer to the matter again.¹²

On another occasion the Master gladly ate the food brought by a 'mother's daughter' who had led an impure life. Sri Ramakrishna was immensely delighted to see the universality of her motherly sentiment that she could not refuse anything to anybody who called her 'mother'. Sri Ramakrishna allotted each one of his monastic devotees a fixed number of chapattis, flattened bread, so that they could practise deep meditation. But the Mother could not be satisfied unless she had fed them to their heart's content. When Sri Ramakrishna found out and objected, she told him not to worry so much because Baburam had eaten just two chapattis more. Sri Ramakrishna was relieved because she had taken upon herself the responsibility of feeding the devotees as well as caring for their spiritual welfare. It was she who guided them in every critical situation, stretching her vision beyond that of an ordinary

mortal. Taking shelter at her feet everyone, even spiritual giants like Swami Vivekananda and other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, felt safe.

Beg only from Her

One day the Mother was explaining that since human gifts do not last long, one should not beg from people, nay, not even from one's father or one's husband. Then she added: 'When the Master gives, it overflows all limits' (495). How true! When Sri Ramakrishna gave, he gave without calculation, for he knew no mathematics. The same was also true of the Mother. Sri Ramakrishna had seen Girish's play 'The Life of Chaitanya' at the Star Theatre in Calcutta. He asked Girish if he could show him another of his plays, but said Girish must charge something. Girish said: 'All right, you may pay eight annas.'¹³ Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Then you must take one rupee' (ibid.).

One day Sri Ramakrishna told his young disciples that he desired to eat the food they could obtain by begging. At this Naren and others decided that the first person to be approached should be the Holy Mother. The Mother gave them sixteen annas. Sixteen annas make one rupee; sixteen stands also for fullness or abundance. Thus the Mother signified her bestowing on them all that they could wish for. Throughout her life, whoever supplicated her with whatsoever desire—be it for removal of afflictions, wants, relief from physical maladies, or spiritual illumination—she fulfilled their needs.

Universal Mother

The Mother said that if a thorn pricked anyone's foot, it hurt her like a spear. If any one of her children was not well physically or mentally, it was she who suffered, for all bodies were hers, all minds were part of her cosmic mind. It was the beginning of the year 1899, Swami Yoga-nanda lay seriously ill at Mother's rented house in Calcutta. Whenever his condition deteriorated, the Mother became correspondingly emaciated; and whenever he felt better, it produced a corresponding elation in her. She was the bereaved mother and burst into loud wailing with a mother who had lost her young earning son. She identified herself with the sorrows of the whole world. It was she who suffered the agony of the woman who was heartlessly beaten by her husband. But when she was ill herself and could not eat anything, she consoled the devotees telling them that it was she who ate through their mouths. Even when in good health she would be satisfied by feeding her devotee children sumptuously. Once one of the devotees asked her: "Why do you deny yourself the things you serve me so plentifully?" The Mother replied, "Do I eat through one mouth? Don't be silly. I tell you, you shall eat."¹⁴

The Holy Mother's life is a striking manifestation of God's Motherhood, unprecedented in the history of the world. Gently and imperceptibly her divine love has entered the very core of humankind. Who else but the universal mother could give this abiding assurance to millions throughout the world: 'Destiny dare not throw my children into hell. Free yourself from all anxiety by entrusting your future to me. And remember this always, that there's one behind you who will come to you at the right moment and lead you to the everlasting domain' (403).



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