

The Universal Appeal of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother

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One hundred and fifty years ago, a girl child was born in Jayrambati, a small village in Bengal. Named Saradamani, she was brought up in the traditions of the 19th century Hindu society. She never went to school and was married at the very tender age of five years. Till she grew up to be a teenager, she hardly ventured out of her village. At the age of eighteen, she came to Dakshineswar and here she led a highly cloistered life. Till the end of her sojourn on this earth, she spoke only Bengali, and that too perhaps, a rural dialect. She always remained a modest woman with a self-effacing nature. Yet, today she is admired, adored and worshipped as the Holy Mother, the earthly form of the Divine Mother, not only in almost every part of India but in many countries of the world. The latter is all the more surprising, because many of these nations have never adored the Divine as the Feminine.

To what do we ascribe this universal appeal of Sri Sarada Devi? She is like the deep ocean, difficult to fathom. In spite of the fairly large number of writings we have on her, she remains an enigma. Those who have not been caught in her attraction cannot catch even a glimpse of her appeal, while those caught are unable to analyze her. Yet, the human mind trained in the 20th century, the age of reason and logic, cannot help but try to understand this appeal of hers.

Her appeal has various dimensions, the physical, the intellectual, the emotional and the spiritual. These are, however, not exclusive of each other. The Mother was obviously well-built and robust, with a pretty face. However, hers was not a beauty that would qualify for a Miss Universe contest. Her face exudes an indescribable, ethereal charm, which in Sanskrit is termed *lokottara soundarya*. Her eyes are full of deep compassion and pathos, not unlike what one sees in Jesus Christ. Whereas the portraits of Christ are largely, if not wholly, the imagination of the artist, what we have in the case of the Holy Mother, is her real-life photograph. It appears as though she is looking at her children gone astray from their goal in life, and waiting for them to return to her fold—‘Come all ye that are heavily laden, and you shall find solace here.’

Own mother

It is extremely amazing that many who came into contact with the Holy Mother, saw their own mother in her. She herself affirmed this on many occasions. She told Girish Chandra Ghosh that she was his ‘true mother’, not a mother ‘by any assumed relationship, nor by way of empty talk, but truly your mother (*Pâtàno mà noi*).’ This is a very significant statement because in Indian society women are very often referred to respectfully as ‘Mother’ and Sarada Devi says she is not such a mother but a ‘true mother’.

The most amazing aspect is that, even today, those who have seen only her picture also deeply feel that she is their own mother. There is the real-life incident of an illiterate, rickshaw-puller in Kolkata who, seeing the book ‘Shataroope Sarada’ in the hands of a passenger, was desirous of buying the book. Why? He said he had lost his mother in his childhood and seeing the face of the lady on the book cover, he felt it was his own mother’s portrait.

There is the equally amazing anecdote of a small-time seller of goods in Bangladesh, a Muslim, who kept the Holy Mother’s photograph in his kiosk. His own mother died in his infancy and he never knew how she looked. There was no photograph of hers in the house. When he saw this picture, he felt very surely that his mother must have looked exactly like this.

This is the physical aspect of the Female, the one Feminine Principle in whom all female forms merge. However, it cannot be gainsaid that the portraits or images of the Divine Mother, be it Durgà or any other, do not evoke the same response. One adores, worships and prays to the image, appreciates its charm and beauty but very rarely does one approach it as though it is one's own mother. It may even be considered a blasphemy to say that one sees one's own mother in the image. The Holy Mother is described as pavitrà svaroopini—the embodiment of purity, and yet one feels she is one's own mother, although the latter is subject to various human foibles. How is it that many saw their own human mother in her? It appears the human aspect was transposed on her divine form, so the devotees and even strangers approach her with childlike love and reverential adoration, at the same time.

I would first like to deal with two of the oft-cited incidents in her life. She fed Amzad, the Muslim boy and then proceeded to remove the leaf in which he ate and to clean the place. In response to her niece's exclamation that this would entail losing caste, the Mother said, 'Keep quiet. Amzad is as much my son as Sharat.' This is generally cited as an instance of her expansive and all-inclusive love where external differences between one child and the other, did not count. This is no doubt true. There is however, another angle to this. Sharat was a Hindu and Amzad, a Muslim. By this act and statement, Holy Mother, at one stroke, obliterated all prejudices regarding religion and caste. Was she a social reformer crusading against such prejudices? Or was she reaffirming the unity of all religions revealed by Sri Ramakrishna? I am inclined to believe it is neither—she just saw no religion or caste. These were mere games in which her children are engaged, although they turn out to be dangerous at times. She ignored these childish pursuits. I would say that here she scores over Sri Ramakrishna who practised the various religious disciplines and then proclaimed that religions are but different paths to reach the one and the same goal. We never hear Mother mention religion or caste.

Yogin-ma once wondered whether the Holy Mother, the spouse of Sri Ramakrishna, who was Renunciation personified, was trapped in worldliness. Why was she so attached to her niece, Radhu? Sri Ramakrishna appeared to Yogin-ma in a vision, showed the dead body of a newborn baby, with the umbilical cord and placenta intact, floating by in the Ganga and said, 'Does the Ganga become less pure and unholy by this? Regard her (Sarada Devi) the same way.' The import of this statement is very profound. The Ganga knows no purity or impurity, and hence its holiness is neither enhanced nor diminished by what it carries. The sense of purity belongs only to the human mind. It is not that the Holy Mother retained her purity despite being surrounded by the worldly; she was beyond both purity and impurity. Sri Ramakrishna offered all dualities at the feet of Kàli, but the Holy Mother felt no need to do this. She was beyond all dualities.

In both the above instances, she demonstrated that mundane differences did not affect her. We have to see the significance of her accepting the fallen and the sinful, in this light. 'Does the mother not clean the child that has dirtied itself?' was her question. The child, per se, is not unclean. It is merely that it has smeared its body with some dirt. The dirt does not, in any way, taint its innate innocence and purity. People are neither wicked nor good; these are just societal judgements. Why be proud that you are good and why look down upon others with disdain? Go beyond evil and good, sin and virtue, is the Mother's message. Sri Ramakrishna was very particular about who touched his feet or who approached him for spiritual instruction. The Mother was not fastidious because she chose to ignore all differences. Sri Ramakrishna showed the way for those who are desirous of breaking all earthly bondages. The Mother showed us how to live in this world and hence she has a universal appeal.

Unlike Sri Ramakrishna who was always God-intoxicated, the Holy Mother involved herself in all household chores. No work was lowly for her. Through such activities, she not only taught us the dignity of labour but also showed how to spiritualize our mundane life. One day when an attendant flung a broom carelessly into a corner, the Mother said, 'Should you neglect a thing because it is small? Will you not need it again? Whatever respect a thing deserves must be accorded to it.' Each has its own place and dignity. If such is the case with inanimate objects, how much more concern should we show to the living? Everyone has his or her place in society and should be respected for the tasks they carry out. Therefore, Swami Vivekananda said a cobbler and a king, each is great in his own place.

On another occasion, some young monks threw away a basket after clearing its contents. Mother had it retrieved, saying it will be useful for putting vegetable and fruit peel, which should not be thrown away, but offered properly to cattle.

In this age of senseless consumerism, and what I would call a 'culture of disposables,' Mother's admonitions bear great significance. She was teaching us the laws of conservation always held up in our society. Moreover, by showing proper regard for an article of utility, one is also—although indirectly—acknowledging the labour and diligence of the person who made it.

When we remind ourselves that the Holy Mother was brought up in a traditional, rural atmosphere and had no formal schooling, it amazes us that she could not only understand modern concepts and changes in the society, but also adapt herself to them with neither hesitancy nor any difficulty. Sister Nivedita says, 'I have never known her to hesitate in giving utterance to large and generous judgement, however new or complex might be the question put before her. . . . With unerring intuition she goes straight to the heart of the matter, and sets the questioner in the true attitude to the difficulty.'

When Swami Vivekananda advocated that monks should also take up service activities, the orthodox in the society as well as Sri Ramakrishna's own disciples disapproved of the move. The Mother said 'It is far better to work than to let the mind loose. . . in riotous thinking. . . . My Naren observed all this and so laid down the foundation of selfless work.' She supported her Naren not because she loved him the more, but because she saw that his ideas were absolutely in tune with the Master's teachings. When she visited the Sevashrama at Varanasi, she said, 'I saw the Master himself present ... these are all his works,' and herself donated money for the cause.

When some monks expressed doubts regarding the prohibition of ritualistic worship at Mayavati, she said emphatically that Sri Ramakrishna being an advaitin, all monks of the Order are advaitins. No arguments to buttress a point, no quoting from the scriptures; and this is what Nivedita refers to as 'unerring intuition'.

When a woman devotee complained that her young daughter was unwilling to marry, Mother did not, contrary to expectations, scold the girl. She asked the girl be sent to Nivedita's school. 'She can do immense good to others if she gets education. . . she will not only improve herself but will be able to help others,' she said.

She encouraged her own disciple, Sarala Devi, a Brahmin girl, to train as a nurse, overcoming opposition from Golap-ma. She was thus way ahead of our times in recognizing the need for women's education and empowerment.

Another appealing aspect of the Holy Mother is her courage. Here, I do not merely refer to the way she

confronted the dacoit couple, or the way she overpowered the mentally deranged Harish who chased her. Her courage of conviction is also equally, if not more, significant. She was still in her teens when her husband asked her whether she came to drag him down into the mire of this world, by exercising her right for a physical partnership with him. With no hesitation whatsoever, she said, 'why should I drag you down to the path of samsàra? I am here to help you in your chosen path.' We should note she says 'help you' and not 'follow you.' She demonstrated she was a true sahadharmini. Swami Budhananda says, 'Here is a glimpse of the real Sarada. It is no borrowed light. It is the Light itself. That primeval sin of Eve was, as it were, thus requited by one of her sex. . . . The prestige which Sri Saradamani conferred on the entire womanhood by this act of supreme renunciation has yet to be understood and assumed by the women of this world.' Today, this is being appreciated by many Western women, who have either forgotten or not understood the biblical vows of marriage.

When Sri Ramakrishna objected to food being sent through a woman of doubtful character, Mother boldly told him she could not deny anyone who called her Mother, and she was just in her twenties then! When he remonstrated that she fed Baburam too much at suppertime, and that it would affect the young man's spiritual practices, Mother spiritedly replied she would take care of that! This shows that the Holy Mother was always keenly aware of her Divinity though she chose to live like an ordinary housewife.

Sri Ramakrishna, I would say, cringed in revealing his Divinity. He hesitated to use the terms 'I' and 'Mine'. He would always seek the Divine Mother's approval and intervention. The Holy Mother, on the other hand, said very emphatically, 'Take refuge in me. Always remember that there is behind all of you, One.' The ever-modest lady even said, 'Where will you find another like me?' Dviteeya kà mamàparà, says the Divine Mother in Devi Mâhâtmya.

Sri Ramakrishna himself proclaimed to the world that she was no ordinary mortal, by performing the Sodashi poojâ, and she accepted his worship as her absolute right. On an earlier occasion, while massaging his feet, she questioned him as to how he regarded her. He told her, 'The Mother in the temple, the one who gave birth to this body, and the one who is massaging my feet are one and the same.' There was no sadness on the part of the Mother, no tears running down the face as in an Indian movie. She heard it with equanimity, for she knew the truth already. It was as though she was testing her husband!

Sri Ramakrishna told Golap-ma, 'She is Sarada, Sarasvati, Jnânadâyini. She is born to bestow knowledge on others.' At Rameswaram, the Mother revealed to a brahmachari, and at a later date to Golap-ma, that she was Sitâ. How can it be otherwise, for Sri Ramakrishna had declared, 'He who has come as Râma. . . is now Ramakrishna.'

In her own family, the Mother revealed her Real nature to Shibu, Sri Ramakrishna's nephew. On his insistence, she admitted she was Kâli and, it was Shibu who told a young monk, 'Mother is Kâli herself. . . . Through her grace comes freedom.' The Mother also said she was brought to this earth by Sri Ramakrishna, or else, she would be in Vaikuntha, meaning thereby that she was Lakshmi. Perhaps it is for this reason, the one who could not touch even a rupee coin got golden bangles made for her.

Yet, these revelations were like flashes of lightning. Most of the time, she behaved like an ordinary housewife. The ultimate of her revelations is her declaration, 'I am the mother of the virtuous as well as the wicked.' Here is an assurance that each and every one of us has a place near her; and none is outside her circle. Such assurance can come only from the Divine Mother. Adi Sankara said, 'Kuputro jâyeta kvacidapi kumàta na bhavati,' and here is proof of that statement. An ordinary mother may

however be aware of her child's erring ways, though she loves him, but the Holy Mother saw no vile or wickedness. Hence, with great dignity she could tell Sri Ramakrishna himself that she could not deny anyone who called her a mother.

Yet another extremely appealing aspect of the Holy Mother is her childlike innocence. The dacoit couple whom she encountered in the Telo-Bhelo area, had a great change of heart and looked after her solicitously that night. I am inclined to believe that it was her childlike entreaty and guilelessness which won the man's heart. No doubt, Mother told her disciples that the couple saw Kâli in her. That I believe must be later, when the dacoit woman joined her husband and Mother decided to shower her grace on them. What won over the man, I strongly believe, is her guilelessness.

There is the comic incident of her hearing the hissing sound of air proceeding from a dry faucet, and her mistaking it for a snake in the pipe! She was frightened like a child. However, she would recount it to her disciples, with no embarrassment, and with much glee. Then, there is the amusing incident when she and Rammay Maharaj were rolling out chapatis. Nalini, her niece, remarked that Rammay's chapatis puffed better than hers did. Like a child, the Mother was piqued and threw away the rolling pin. She had to be cajoled by Rammay to resume her work!

During her last illness, she would sometimes refuse to eat food. Her attendant would threaten her that Sharat Maharaj would be called in. The Mother would immediately acquiesce to the attendant's words!

The most appealing, the most striking of the Holy Mother's characteristics is her love—a love that knew no distinction, it encompassed the rich and the poor, the saint and the sinner alike. It was an unconditional love, a love that sought no requital. What man lacks and desperately needs in these times is love, to know you are cared for, to have someone who tells you that you are needed, that you have a value and a worth in this life. The rising incidence of divorces and broken homes, of abandoned women, children and parents, of alcoholism and drug abuse, of murders—all point to the fact that love is becoming scarcer by the day. One only has to turn to the Mother and we are enveloped in her warm love. Her love is like the proverbial Cherrapunjee rains, sometimes a downpour, at times in torrents, and sometimes maybe only a drizzle, but whenever we seek it, it is there.

Unfortunately, we are like people living with all windows and doors closed, totally unaware of the rain outside. Therefore, though her love is ever present, Swami Abhedananda prayed to her, on our behalf, requesting her for a drop of her love, which is sufficient to quench the fire of worldly trials and tribulations—*Premaika bindum chira dagdha chitte visincha chittam kuru nah sushântam.*

Her love found expression right from her childhood. She would bring reconciliation between two quarrelling friends and help not only them, but also the world realize the futility of petty quarrels. Untutored, she proceeded to cool the hot khichudi served to the famished, with a fan in her little hands.

The spirit of service can never arise unless there is love in the heart. Service without love is a mere action that seeks compensation in return.

Mother served Sri Ramakrishna with great love. Swami Budhananda says, 'this love was the motive force which forged her entire personality.' It is this which was directed towards Sri Ramakrishna's disciples as well as to her own. Swami Vivekananda says that after the death of his Master, when the whole world had abandoned them as young fools, it was only one person—a woman—who stood by them. Moved by their plight with no place to call their own, no proper food to appease their hunger,

and seeing the flourishing Buddhist monasteries in Gaya, Mother prayed to Sri Ramakrishna. Not merely prayed, but remonstrated with him for abandoning his disciples. Even during her stay at Dakshineswar, she would cook uncomplainingly, even at odd times, to feed Sri Ramakrishna's disciples. In later days, her joy was in feeding her innumerable disciples and the young renunciates. If one of them was delayed for some reason, she would wait without herself eating food.

When a disciple who fell sick soiled her bedding and the floor, the Mother quietly cleaned the place, lest her attendants scold the woman for the trouble she caused. Devotees would travel long distances to see her at Jayrambati. After a bath and the sumptuous food they received, tired from the long journey, they would have a siesta. Mother would take out the washed clothes they had put out for drying, fold them neatly and keep them ready for these children. Once, a housewife not too well-to-do and a mother of a number of children, forgot a towel while leaving. Discovering this, the Mother was so worried that a brahmachari ran and caught up with the guests and gave them back the towel. The Mother knew that buying another towel would be a burden for the woman. She also realized that, harassed by so many children, the devotee could not take care of every little detail.

Mother's love was a gentle love. Sister Nivedita wrote to her in a letter: 'Dear Mother! You are full of love! And it is not a flushed and violent love, like ours, like the world's, but a gentle peace that brings good to everyone. . . . It is a golden radiance. . . .' Mother's love invokes such poetic language! And the poetry continues: 'Surely, the wonderful things of God are all quiet—stealing unnoticed into our lives—the air and the sunlight and the sweetness. . . of the Ganges, these are the silent things that are like you!' Nivedita writes further: 'Isn't your thought of the high calm that neither loves nor hates? Isn't that a sweet benediction that trembles in God, like the dewdrop on the lotus leaf, that touches not the world?' Yes, Holy Mother's love is a sweet benediction. I however take issue with Sister Nivedita, on one count. Why does she term the Holy Mother 'Sri Ramakrishna's own chalice of his love. . . .' I would say the Mother was her own chalice of love for the world. What else was she but Love personified?

Language was no barrier for her. Swami Atulananda, a Westerner, received initiation from her. Later, he was asked as to how he understood her instructions, since the two did not know each other's language. The Swami made a telling remark: 'When a child sits on its mother's lap, in which language do they converse? I felt. . . I was a small baby sitting on the lap of my mother.' The modern-day Anasuya, who with her love could turn anyone into a child!

A very poignant incident concerns Padmabinod, a friend of Swami Saradananda, who unfortunately, at a later stage in life, became an alcoholic. Passing by the Udbodhan house, he in his inebriated state would, sometimes, knock on the door of his friend. Once, at the dead of the night, when the door was not opened, he started singing a song asking the Compassionate Mother to get up and open the door. The Holy Mother could not resist his plaintive appeal, and got up and opened the window wide. The man, even in that condition, did not lose his devotion to Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother. Glancing up at her face, he saluted her by rolling on the street. Did Padmabinod become a changed person? Maybe not. He however received the Mother's grace, because she saw the devotion in his heart, and ignored his waywardness.

Mother's love included all living beings. She would wait anxiously for the call of two calves and would be worried if they did not turn up any day. A brahmachari detested a cat that roamed around in Mother's house. Apprehensive that it may not receive milk during her absence, she employed a ruse and told the boy 'I reside in the cat, too'!

Mother's love found expression as compassion for many people. When a man, residing opposite her house, was beating his wife mercilessly, the Mother who never spoke loudly, immediately came out and scolded him. She would give oil and eatables to the poor villagers in Jayrambati. When Swami Vivekananda dismissed a servant from service for stealing, Mother ordered that he be taken back. She said it was poverty that made the man steal. On another occasion, she scolded her niece Nalini for haggling with a blanket seller. We, the better off in society, pay up our bills in big shops with the most impersonal atmosphere, and yet haggle with a street vendor of vegetables and feel elated on striking a bargain. Mother taught us how to feel for the poor and the downtrodden.

The obverse of love, compassion and service is renunciation. Mother outwardly lived the life of a householder involved with the problems of her brothers and their families. Many mistook her love for Radhu as excessive attachment. Yet, her spirit of renunciation was no less than that of Sri Ramakrishna. Coming to Dakshineswar, she had to leave behind her the freedom of a rural life, and live confined to the four walls of a small room. There was not even a murmur of regret. When Lakshmi Narayan Marwari was directed by Sri Ramakrishna to offer the money meant for him to Holy Mother, she flatly refused, although she could have provided better comforts to those who lived with her. When the temple authorities stopped paying her the monthly allowance after the Master's passing away, she was least concerned about it. When people criticized her for wearing gold ornaments, she took them off unhesitatingly and with no regrets. Thus, she shows the householders, how, despite being surrounded by money, loved ones and fame, one can practise renunciation.

Mother would take food for Sri Ramakrishna to his room, every day. Once, Golap-ma requested that privilege and Mother granted it with no hesitation. And yet, that was the only time she could see her husband and guru, the joy of her life.

One sees the acme of her renunciation in her willingly foregoing the joy of physical motherhood, which is generally considered to be the fulfilment of womanhood. In our purānas, we come across wives of many sages who beseech their husbands for a child. But the Mother never prayed thus. Her message is: expand your heart and ignore the body.

Mother craved nothing for herself. She lived a simple, austere life. As a guru, she received many clothes but she distributed them freely. She ate sparingly. She exemplified the adage 'Simple living and high thinking'. Modernity is not in one's dress and the number of cosmetics one uses, but in the way one thinks and lives.

Mother's patience is legendary. Balaram Bose called her kshamāroopa tapasvini. With what patience she attended to the whims and fancies of her wilful niece Radhu! She had to live among her ever-quarrelling brothers, sisters-in-law and nieces. There were also innumerable misunderstandings between the women inmates and the young renunciates. She had not only kshamā (patience), but also great titikshā (tolerance), with no thought of reprisal (Sahanam sarva dukhānām aprateekāra purvakam). She said there is no greater virtue than this. Her patience found expression as two wonderful characteristics—her ability to adjust to any situation, any place and, to each and every person with whom she had to deal (jakhon jemon takhon temon, jekhāne jemon sekhāne temon, jār jemon tār temon). What an extremely difficult task for an ordinary person! Secondly, she never found fault with anyone. No fault of others could unsettle her. Golap-ma once complained that the Mother does not seem to see the failings of others and the Mother replied that there were enough people to do so, and the world will not come to any ruin if one person does not do so. She

strongly believed in the adage 'it is human to err'. She said it is easy to break but difficult to build, and by constantly seeing only faults, one becomes a mere fault-finder.

Every aspect of the Holy Mother has a universal appeal. People irrespective of race, religion, gender and their place in society, get attracted by her personality because every trait she demonstrated in its entirety is an essential human characteristic. What I mean by this is, these are characteristics which differentiate the human from the sub-human. These are the characteristics which remind us of our own divine nature. Spiritual practices are as important and necessary as a moral life to get nearer to it. It is only by transforming what Sri Ramakrishna called a 'raw ego' into a ripe one, and by developing an attitude of detachment that this becomes possible.

The Holy Mother emphasized the need for spiritual sàdhana. She never prescribed elaborate rituals, no hard dos and don'ts. She placed great emphasis on the repetition of the Lord's name—Japàt siddhih, she said. 'God has given fingers that they may be blessed by repeating His name with them.' What a simple and beautiful statement! She played the role of a guru admirably, not by needless discipline but through the outpouring of her love. None was turned away and deprived of her spiritual ministrations. Swami Premananda remarked that they, the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, were sending poison to their beloved mother! She could digest that because she is Shivàni, the consort of Nilakantha Shiva. She, however, never took credit for her ministrations, and the ever modest and humble foremost disciple of Sri Ramakrishna emphasized that He alone was the Guru.

Mother's personality has a universal appeal because her characteristics tantalizingly appear to be within our reach. Sri Ramakrishna said that a boat stays in water, but water should not get into the boat. We have to live in this world; where else can we live? The Holy Mother showed how we should not let worldliness take possession of us. The real homage we can pay to Mother in this blessed year of her one hundred and fifty-first birthday is to try and imbibe at least a few of her appealing characteristics to whatever extent we can. Let us pray to Sri Sarada Devi and Sri Ramakrishna that our lives may thus become blessed and that we may bring cheer and peace to those with whom our lives are involved.

I am extremely grateful to have got this blessed opportunity to pay my homage to the Holy Mother. I am acutely aware that I have not been able to do justice to the opportunity provided. I am certain and sure, however, that She, the Compassionate, will accept this inadequate and insignificant offering out of her boundless love and kindness.

* This is the text of the Foundation-Day Oration Dr Kamala S. Jaya Rao, formerly Deputy Director of the National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad, delivered at the Institute on 29 January 2004.