

Boshi Sen—Scientist and Karmayogi—I

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Basishwar Sen, popularly known as 'Boshi', was a remarkable person—a leading plant physiologist, a deeply religious person, friend of Jawaharlal Nehru and later of Indira Gandhi and many other national and foreign personalities. He had intimate relations with the monks of the Ramakrishna Order and was a patron of Uday Shankar Cultural Centre at Almora. His wife, Gertrude Emerson, was equally talented and a match for Boshi. The purpose of this small article is not to write his detailed biography but only to highlight his association with Sri Ma Sarada Devi, and other venerable monks and devotees of Sri Ramakrishna.

Boshi Sen was born in Bishnupur, a town in Bankura district of undivided Bengal in 1887. Though, no longer having the earlier glory, still it was a mute witness to the former beautiful architectural specimens left by the devoted kings in the form of temples and banded tanks which even today enchant the visitors. Once Sri Ramakrishna had told Ma Sarada Devi that 'Bishnupur is Gupta Vrindavan' and that she should visit it. When Holy Mother replied that being a woman how it was possible for her to visit Bishnupur, Sri Sri Thakur iterated that she should visit it.¹

Boshi's father was Sri Rameshwar Sen who was one of the first graduates of the Calcutta University from Bankura district. He was working as an Inspector of Schools in the Provincial Education Department. His mother Prasannamoi Devi was a simple, religious woman. While Sri Sureshwar Sen was

the eldest son of his parents, Boshi was the fourth. Young Boshi was good in study. Due to untimely death of his father Rameshwar Sen, circumstances in their family changed. As Boshi's elder brother was the sole earner, his mother had difficulty in running the household. When Boshi's education at local school was over he was keen to continue further to fulfil the dream of his father who wanted to see him as a scholar. He ran away from home at the age of twelve and finally reached one of his married sister at Ranchi. After completing his school education at Ranchi, he studied for some time at Burdwan and finally passed B. Sc. examination from St. Xavier's College in Calcutta.

When Boshi was studying at St. Xavier's College, an incident occurred which was to change the course of his life. Boshi had an acquaintance whose name was Bibhuti Bhushon Ghosh—he was also from Bankura district. Bibhuti used to go regularly to Belur Math. One day Bibhuti took Boshi to Belur Math and introduced him to Swami Sadananda. Boshi's first experience was unpleasant as the Swami rebuked him for some reasons. Undeterred, however, he visited the Swami after a few days when he received Swami Sadananda's hearty blessings. Thus began a lifelong bond between the two which was to continue even after the Swami's death.²

The story of how Swami Sadananda became the first disciple of Swami Vivekananda is too well known to be repeated. Swami Vivekananda was very fond of 'Gupta Maharaj' as Swami Sadananda

was commonly known. His nursing of Balaram Bose in Calcutta and later of Swami Abhedananda at Varanasi are legends. The same was his service during the Plague epidemic in Calcutta along with Sister Nivedita and others. Swami Sadananda had earlier spent two months in Bishnupur when Boshi's elder brother Sureshwar and his family came in close contact with him and had become staunch devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. Bishnupur has then become connected with Calcutta by rail and had thus become a transit point for Sri Ma Sarada Devi during her frequent visits to and from Calcutta to Jayrambati. Once, while on transit at Bishnupur, Mother was sitting in the premises of Sarvamangala Temple located on the bank of 'Lal Bandh' and had said, 'Thakur's words had come true' referring to the prediction of Ramakrishna Dev that she would visit Bishnupur. During Mother's last Bishnupur visit, she was welcomed by Boshi and his nephews as Sri Sureshwar had left this world a few months earlier. Mother remembered her devoted son Sureshwar Babu and his services to her and said he was another Girish Babu. While Mother was taking lunch, Boshi took a group photograph of Mother and her companions and this was her last photograph in physical body. She told Boshi and his nephews to maintain this house: 'Your father stayed here, Gupta had come here and I have also come—Gupta has shown the way to whatever events are taking place here'.³

Even a strong and healthy man that Swami Sadananda was, became very weak and thin due to serious illness. Sister Nivedita, who was close to Gupta Maharaj, had rented a house at Bose Para Lane in Calcutta for his treatment—the house was near Sister Nivedita's School. She had made arrangements for his diet and looked after him like a loving mother.⁴ She called upon Boshi, his younger brother 'Tabu', and Shri

Bibhuti Ghosh and asked their help in nursing Gupta Maharaj. Swami Sadananda also wrote a letter to Boshi asking him to come and join him. These young men were proud to call themselves 'dogs of Sadananda'.⁵ He was confined to bed for more than two years and nursing him was difficult. He hardly was able to move and so all his body functions had to be taken care of by Boshi, Tabu and others. Day and night they held him in their arms when the struggle for breath did not allow him to lie down. As Boshi was still studying in college, invariably night duty was assigned to him. They nursed their master with devotion. They washed, scrubbed, cleaned and cooked for him. Night after night they passed without sleep. The love which the Swami inspired made them forget their own body and its needs. In the course of these two to three years Sadananda passed on to them all he knew and felt of Swami Vivekananda. He gave them a new and unique training but he was severe in the extreme in his dealings with them. The onlookers might sometimes have considered this treatment of them cruel but these boys, who were devoting body, mind and soul to his service, knew his love and never lost their joy.

Their adoration of the Swami grew day by day. And when after nearly three years of such untiring and loving service, Sadananda entered into Mahasamadhi on 18 February 1911 at 8 pm with his eyes fixed on the picture of his Guru and the word 'Swamiji' on his lips, he left no sorrow behind. Even as his name meant joy, so he left a deep abiding joy in the hearts of these 'dogs' of Sadananda.⁶

Due to their unstinted service during the last days of Swami Sadananda, the senior monks of the Ramakrishna Math used to look at Boshi, his brother, and friends with great affection. They used to go to the monks. It was great fun. The monks used to

feed them, joke with them and there was no spiritual discussion. They used to come back full of joy and relaxed at Balaram House.

After his Guru's death in 1911, the idea of taking *sannyasa* had gripped Boshi's mind and, as a matter of fact, when one day Swami Saradananda told Boshi in presence of Holy Mother, 'Boshi, Sadananda never gave you initiation. You ask for initiation from the Holy Mother', Boshi remained quiet. Mother, who knew Boshi and other members of his family said, 'Boshi does not need initiation'. Perhaps, she knew that Swami Sadananda had given all he had to Boshi.

Brahmacharis of the Math, many of whom were staying with him at his rented Bose Para Lane residence, were all pressurizing him to join the Math as Brahmachari and leave for Mayavati. He had almost acceded to their request when destiny intervened in the form of a telegram that came from his brother's wife asking for his service for nursing his niece who was seriously ill. Later, when he decided to join the Math, he went one day to Swami Brahmananda for initiation after taking bath in the Ganges with some flowers and sweets. He knew Maharaj would give him initiation if he asked for it. However, it so happened that when Raja Maharaj asked him about the present state of science, Boshi started talking about the subject with so much joy and sincerity that Maharaj said 'You stick to this, Boshi. You will get everything through your science'.

On another occasion, he had a dream that he was about to board a boat which was leaving for Belur Math. Swami Vivekananda and other monks were seated in it. But Swamiji told him, 'No, you stay on that side'.⁷

Sister Nivedita, discerning his desire to join the Math, also dissuaded him and advised him to fulfil his Guru's and Swami

Vivekananda's ideal by continuing his services through research in science. Boshi felt that a divine decision has been made for him and he was to follow his career in science. But he continued to maintain close relations with monks of the Ramakrishna Math and Holy Mother Sarada and remained a devotee of Thakur, Sri Sri Ma and Swamiji throughout his life.

As mentioned earlier, Boshi was staying in a rented house at Bose Para Lane taken by Sister Nivedita. The rent was Rupees twenty per month. In her small room Boshi had made a little Shrine with the photograph of his Guru in the middle of it. After Sadananda's death in 1911, Boshi and others continued to stay there. In the meanwhile Boshi had passed B.Sc and wanted to study M.Sc. but he did not have money to pursue the studies. Due to the good offices of Sister Nivedita, Boshi, however, got a research scholarship of Rupees twenty per month. According to the terms of the scholarship, he was to work under the renowned scientist, Dr Jagadish Chandra Bose who was also his teacher at college. Since Sister Nivedita had also left her mortal body in the meanwhile, so this scholarship of Rupees twenty came as a reprieve as he could continue to stay at the same house at Bose Para Lane. Boshi was ever grateful to Sister Nivedita and would say later in life: 'I owe my Science to Sister Nivedita. It was she who placed me under Sir J. C. Bose. It is difficult for me to express in words what I felt about her. In my own little way I try to express in life some of the dynamic ideas she used to radiate.'⁸

Swami Brahmananda's grace

Boshi had first met Sri Maharaj or 'Raja Maharaj' (as Swami Brahmananda was called) at Howrah station in 1906 when he returned from Madras along with Swami Abhedananda. The students including Boshi had decided to remove the horses from the

carriage and pull it to the destination. Later, when Boshi prostrated himself to the Swamis, Raja Maharaj had blessed him by placing his hands on his head. Boshi fondly remembered this grace.⁹

Next Boshi met Sri Maharaj in 1910 when he had come to Bose Para Lane to see the ailing Swami Sadananda. Sri Maharaj them informed the latter that a plot of land had been purchased in Bhuvaneshwar for a Math. Swami Sadananda had said with folded hands that he wanted to be the gatekeeper of the new Math. Maharaj said with a kind and soft voice, 'First, you must recover, son.' This loving words moved everybody present there.¹⁰

Swami Brahmananda was then staying at Balaram Mandir which was near Bose Para Lane where Boshi was staying. As Boshi was working with Dr J. C. Bose, he was not able to visit Maharaj daily. That is why Sri Maharaj used to call him 'Season flower'. There are many interesting anecdotes involving Maharaj and Boshi as in spite of his hectic schedule in the Bose Institute, Boshi would make it a point to visit the Swami regularly. At the same time, remembering Swami Sadananda's instructions he would find time for meditation and chanting every morning at his Shrine at his Bose Para Lane residence.

It was the trait of Sri Maharaj to give due recognition to any person who would serve him with sincere devotion, however trivial the service may be. Once Boshi was asked to prepare a chillum of tobacco for Maharaj. While three personal attendants of Maharaj were trying to hurry him, Boshi took his own time till he was satisfied that the chillum had been rightly prepared. When Maharaj drew his first puff from the hookah, he gave a mild blow to Boshi affectionately on his back and said. 'One more chillum like this and I will give you Sannyās'.

Out of his grace, Maharaj gave Boshi

the privilege to serve him. One day Maharaj asked Boshi whether he would be able to shave him. He replied, 'If you help me Maharaj, I can'. On his way to the Bose Institute, he would shave Maharaj daily and acquired the nickname of Maharaj's barber. Maharaj used to avoid shaving on cloudy days. So one morning Boshi skipped going to Maharaj because it was drizzling. When Boshi met Maharaj in the evening, he found him rubbing his chin and mouthing 'ouff'. Boshi then learnt the lesson that it was not for him to take decision on a matter concerning Maharaj.

There are so many other stories concerning Boshi and Sri Maharaj. Once Doctor Kanjilal was to take initiation from Maharaj. Doctor Kanjilal asked Boshi to purchase an umbrella and a pair of slippers which he would give to Maharaj as Guru Dakshina. Boshi purchased the best available umbrella and a pair of slippers, specially made with the best quality leather. Maharaj was very pleased and praised Boshi especially for getting him a comfortable slipper.

Boshi also got the opportunity of massaging Raja Maharaj. Maharaj liked vigorous massage. While Boshi would massage Maharaj he would hold Boshi's thumb in his hand and press it to demonstrate his strength. Boshi would invariably try to pull out his hand. Later Boshi realized that it was foolish of him to pull his hand when Maharaj himself was holding it and immediately stopped his struggle. For this Maharaj gave him a wonderful smile. Later, whenever Boshi would massage his hand, Maharaj would always give that signature pressure on his hand.

Once when Boshi was massaging Sri Maharaj, he spoke about *sādhanā* or spiritual practice. He told Boshi: 'Do you think that a specified amount of austerity, japa and charity can help one in attaining God-realization? No one can force

realization out of Him'. At that time Boshi was not regular in his spiritual practice. Maharaj then continued, 'You would not be able to hold realization when it comes to you if you are not regular in your spiritual practice including meditation and japa.'¹¹

Once Maharaj expressed his desire to Boshi that he wanted to visit the Bose Institute where experiments were being carried out on the response of plants to external stimuli. Boshi, needless to say, took him there and Maharaj saw the demonstration with great interest. That evening his mind was full of what he saw in the research laboratory. He told Boshi: 'Thakur could never walk over grass—he used to avoid the grassy patches by jumping over it so that grasses would not get hurt. Never in those days we could believe that grasses could feel. Now what we saw today has confirmed that Thakur's emotion and feeling were true'. Then he added, 'Do not leave your scientific research. You will get everything through this'.

Once Boshi said to Swami Brahmananda, 'Maharaj, you are miserly'. 'Why do you say so', asked the Swami. 'Because you have the power to give the experience of God to others but you are withholding it'. Swami Brahmananda gravely asked 'But who wants Him?'¹²

Bad news came in the month of April in 1922 to the effect that Sri Maharaj had an attack of cholera. Boshi rushed to Baram House. On hearing his voice and request Maharaj allowed him to fan him. The last two days Maharaj's life have been described in detail by his biographers. He gave hints about who he was and what was his real self. He was in heavenly spirits and blessed everybody who were present. An hour before Mahasamadhi, Maharaj stopped speaking and seemed to have withdrawn himself fully from this world. Boshi was gently stroking his hand and wondered whether Maharaj still

remembered that old playful gesture of his thumb. At the same instant, Boshi felt it—light but unmistakable—Maharaj's last bequest to him!

In Holy Mother's company

The first time when he was privileged to see Holy Mother, Boshi prostrated himself before the Mother's feet and prayed silently for devotion and faith. Surprisingly Holy Mother had blessed him with her hands over his head and said, 'May you have devotion and faith' and had given him puffed rice and green chilli to eat.¹³

A similar blessing came Boshi's way when he heard Holy Mother tell his nephew Bhuli, 'Why should you go to see the Puja when I am here?' Boshi always considered himself indebted to Bhuli after he heard these words from Holy Mother's own lips. As mentioned earlier, Holy Mother visited Bishnupur in 1919 and told him: 'Boshi, keep this house. Your father has lived here, your guru has been here. I have been here, keep this house'. This she said a second time. When Boshi went to see her off at the station she said it for the third time. Boshi had the discrimination to say, 'Mother, what of keeping this house, I could build an entire city here if you give me the power to do so'.¹⁴ Unfortunately, though Boshi had set up a school for children in memory of Sri Ma Sarada at Bishnupur and he and his wife Gertrude had made provision of adequate funds for maintaining it, there is no trace of it now at Bishnupur.¹⁵

Earlier Swami Saradananda had sent Swamis Atmaprakashananda and Bhumananda and Boshi to Jayrambati to bring Holy Mother to Calcuta in view of her failing health and to get her medically treated. However, the efforts were in vain. She finally left her mortal body on 21 July 1920. Two photographs were taken after her Mahasamadhi. While the first photograph

was that of Mother alone, the second one was a group photograph in which Boshi could be seen along with the monks, devotees and sevaks.¹⁶

Initially, Boshi had middle class conservative streak towards stage actors. However, when he remembered that Girish Chandra Ghosh had received the blessing of none other than Sri Ramakrishna, he changed his view and became close to Sri Girish Chandra Ghosh. Girish Babu's famous words—'There is mercy in what Lord gives and mercy, if not more, in what he denies'—became Boshi's personal philosophy and all his life he accepted with equanimity things as they came. Girish breathed his last in Boshi's arms.¹⁷

With J. C. Bose

Dr J. C. Bose, the eminent scientist who had already made name in the field of physics, was then doing research on the response of plant life towards external stimuli when Boshi joined him as a research scholar. There was no Bose

Institute then—experiments were carried out in one room and a half of Presidency College. The revolutionary experiments getting confirmation about plant response to electrical impulses as well as development of ingenious instruments for the automatic recording of plant tissue reactions made Dr J. C. Bose a famous man. Besides giving scientific training to Boshi, Dr Bose also guided him in matters of development of personal character and earthy matters. Boshi practically became Bose's right hand man—attending to research work, attending to his personal needs including sending and bringing clothes to and from laundry. Bose had become dependent on him. But invariably after day's work was over, Boshi would trudge to Balaram House to meet Sri Maharaj and other monks who used to welcome him warmly. The tension acquired during the day would disappear and Boshi would return fully relaxed to his Bose Para Lane residence.¹⁸ ■

(To be concluded)

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