

Life and Teachings of Sarada Devi: A Milestone in History of Gender in India

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Introduction- Sarada Devi (1853- 1920) , wife of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, famous Dakshineswar Kali temple priest , emerged as a major cult figure after death of her husband and was revered as Sri Ma or Holy Mother in contemporary Bengal. Ramakrishna used to identify all women as *manifestations of Ma Anandamoyee* and this extremely valorized mother- son relationship which later undoubtedly took patriotic colour was reflected in the journey of life of Sarada Devi whose traditionalist mother- goddess image was established through endeavour of Swami Vivekananda, most illustrious disciple of Ramakrishnadev and later by Nivedita. Sarada was completely engaged only in household duties during lifetime of her renowned husband and recalled her life with Ramakrishnadev in Dakshineswar as a tale of bliss. But she used to live in a tiny, dismal room with a doorway so low that anybody would hit his/her head entering it and there was no latrine for womenfolk. She had to prepare food whole day because devotees and disciples of her husband used to come at all hours. There were many weeks when Sarada could not even get the coveted opportunity of seeing Ramakrishna but in spite of all suffering she called her life a tale of *ananda* because her husband never had beaten her and even worshipped her as embodiment of the Divine Mother . Through utmost ordeal her body became *dev- sharir* and Ramakrishna in a dream instructed her to start giving diksha . She also started going into *Samadhi* and claimed herself to be *jagater ma*. Sumit Sarkar had rightly opined that in Ramakrishna Cult women became tolerable only if somehow completely desexualized.

Early Life and conjugal understanding- Sarada Devi was the first child of Ramachandra Mukhopadhyay , a poor Brahmin of Jayrambati village of Bankura Zilla. She was married to Ramakrishnadev, famous priest of Dakshineswar Kalimandir of Rani Rashmoni when she had been only six years old. She came to Dakshineswar to live with her husband when she was almost eighteen years old. She was completely controlled by traditionalist thought about conjugality in which a woman would achieve supreme success through her selfless devotion towards her husband. Her marriage with Ramakrishnadev was never consummated because

he already embraced the life of an ideal sannyasin. Swami Saradananda told that Ramakrishna married to show the world an ideal of a sexless marriage. In his *Shodashi Puja* Ramakrishna worshipped his wife Sarada as an incarnation of the divine mother. Sarada was also regarded as first disciple of her eminent husband. Her days used to begin at 3 a.m. She practised *japa* and meditation until daybreak. Most of her time had been spent in cooking for her husband and his devotees keeping herself completely in the background . Some female devotees became her lifelong companions. Sarada played a very prominent role in nursing Ramakrishnadev when his days were numbered due to throat cancer. She used to prepare suitable food for him and his growing number of devotees. After his death when Sarada thought of dressing like a conventional widow , she had a vision of Ramakrishnadev asking her not to do so. She played the role of spiritual guide of the nascent socio- religious movement for the next 34 years.

Divine status after death of Ramakrishnadev - Sarada Devi , a major cult figure as Sree Maa during her widowhood, began her pilgrimage through North India with some illustrious female devotees such as Lakshmi Didi, Gopal Maa etc. and went to visit Vishwath Temple of Lord Shiva at Varanasi and Vrindavan . In Vrindavan Sarada began her role as Guru and started initiating a large number of disciples of Ramakrishna movement. She used to tell that one must have devotion towards own Guru. Everybody ought to practise meditation and in that process mind would become calm and fixed. After the pilgrimage she lived all alone in Kamarpukur, the village where her husband was born and had to go through extreme poverty. She tried her level best to hide her situation but the news reached to all the devotees in Calcutta and they invited their Holy Mother to come to the city where a permanent house was built through endeavour of Swami Saradananda (the Udbodhan House). In that house Sarada spent the longest time of her life outside Jayrambati being accompanied and assisted by Golap Ma, Yogin Ma, Gopaler Ma, Lakshmi Didi and Gauri Ma. Occidental women followers of Ramakrishna Movement(through efforts of Swami Vivekananda) including Sister Nivedita became close to Sree Maa. Actually Sarada treated all her disciples as her own children. Ramakrishnadev wanted his devotees not to make any distinction between himself and Sarada Devi and so she got the highest reverence from the Ramakrishna Order quite easily. Her hospitality was characterised by motherly care and some of her devotees dreamt of her as a Goddess though they never saw her picture before.

Sarada Devi spent her last years in Jayrambati and Calcutta and breathed her last on July 20, 1920 in *Mayer Badi* of Calcutta. Her last message to the world is – If you want peace of

mind, do not find fault with others. Rather discover your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. She did not write books but her teachings, quotes and reminiscences were recorded by her devotees and disciples such as Swami Nikhilananda and Swami Tapasvananda. Renowned scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak highly appreciated her for tact and wisdom. Swami Vivekananda went to attend the Parliament of Religions in Chicago only after obtaining the blessing from the Holy Mother Sarada Devi.

Her influence on socio-cultural and educational environment of contemporary Bengal –

Ramakrishnadev himself instructed Sarada to shoulder responsibility of keeping future of his ideological movement safe and secure in urban environment of Calcutta. He told- *Dekho, Kolkatar lokgulo jeno andhakare pokar moto kilbil korchhe, tumi tader dekho*. According to his vision an ideal woman would be an embodiment of sacrifice and selfless dedication and his wife was totally committed to that sita- sabitri- damayanti model upheld by Vivekananda. But Ramakrishna did not encourage struggle for emancipation of women and demand for equal rights in world outside our domestic sphere. He wanted to give equal right and prestige to women only in world of religiosity and was ready to tolerate women only as embodiment of universal motherhood. So when Vivekananda, his most renowned disciple, wanted to take the path of empowerment of women following teachings of *Sanghajanani* Sarada Devi he could not deviate from revivalist tradition and Sister Nivedita and Gaurimata all were completely obedient to this traditionalist ideology very much different from Brahmo thought-process.

Though almost uneducated herself, Sarada always was a great supporter of education and self-realisation for Indian women. She always advocated that through self-confidence and self-help a woman could achieve her proper place in her family and society. She did not uphold theory of financial independence for women in outside world just like men but in the limited sphere of domestic place she always encouraged her female devotees to involve actively in some work which had monetary value. She herself was involved in such work to earn her livelihood in Jayrambati and Kamarpukur in her widowhood. She tried her level best to spread education for women in her own village and she did not think that marriage would be mandatory for every woman. She herself told one of her female devotees that- *Be dite na paro, eto bhabna kore ki hobe? Niveditar schoole rekhe dio, lekhapara shikhbe, besh thakbe*. According to her version in countryside uneducated women were forced to live their lives as animals. She always encouraged indigenous teaching method but was liberal enough to

embrace western education in special cases. Radhu, her relative, got opportunity of western education till she was thirteen/ fourteen years old. She arranged for training in Nursing for a woman entitled Parul of Guptipara. She vehemently opposed child marriage and fully appreciated two girls of Madras who used to study in school of Nivedita in unmarried condition upto twenty/ twenty –two years. She very often encouraged establishment of *Brahmacharini* organisation so that unmarried women could lead their lives with prestige and security. She always was a great champion of maintaining chastity and purity of womanhood. She told - *Chandreo Kalanka Achhe, amar mone jeno kono daag na thake*. But she took some exemplary steps also. She violated order of her husband and gave shelter to a woman of questionable character during lifetime of Ramakrishnadev. Drama artists such as Niroda Sundari, Tinkari and Tarasundari often criticised as nothing but prostitutes obtained blessing and support of Sarada Devi. Girishchandra Ghosh, Vinodbehari Som and Padmavinod who were criticised for their lifestyle in contemporary society were not at all rejected or ostracised by this Holy Mother and they recognized that this blessing and motherly affection brought positive change in their lives. Sarada was undoubtedly an embodiment of religion of humanity. She told- *Ami satero maa asatero maa. Satiro maa asatiro maa*. Even sometimes men and women involved in extramarital relationship got her mercy and pity. She did not bother to announce that if sannyasi sangha could not support entry of socially ostracised women as devotees in her place she could disconnect relationship with sangha.

Sarada always thought that in domestic sphere women either married or widow should get due respect and recognition from husband or other family members. She used to give example of her own conjugal life and announced that her renowned husband never violated her prestige during his lifetime. She always protested against physical abuse of women within domestic sphere. While condemning domestic violence she uttered- *Santander anekke to dekhi nijeder bhul- truti aparadher yiyotta nei, tabu tara chay bou- jhira tader kachhe noto hoye thakuk. Ei anyayer phale sedin aschhe, meyera ar prithibir moto saibe na*. She turned down obstacles created by conventional thought process of contemporary society and Hindu shastra which did not authorise women to perform puja in their own hands and gave that right to Lakshmidēvi, a relative of her husband in Koyalpara Ashram. She was realistic enough while making comment on family planning system. She always declared that any indigenous married couple should practise control in their conjugal life after birth of one child or two babies. But here she was not influenced by occidental thought process. In some cases she rejected social orthodoxy but she did not prefer to offer food items given by renowned drama

artist Tarasundari to sadhus or brahmacharis. She supported her action by telling that *samajer sab bidhinishedh bhenge diye jar ja khushi moto challe samaje srinkhala ba sansare shanti bajay thake na.*

Sarada devi was a big pillar behind establishment of Belur Math by Swami Vivekananda in 1897. In 1898 Swamiji decided to sell Math for collection of money for the sake of people attacked by plague but Sarada as *Sanghajanani* remained firm to maintain identity of Belur Math intact because it was the lifeline of Ramakrishna Movement. But she always supported social welfare besides promoting religiosity. She did not encourage Vivekananda when he wanted to make arrangement of animal slaughter in Durgapuja ceremony of Belur Math. Revolutionaries such as Debabrata Bose, Sachindranath Sen, Priyanath Dasgupta participated in Ramakrishna Sangha and Sarada was firm and determined enough with all her tact and wisdom to protect them from colonial government. She advised her disciple Swami Saradananda to meet with the Viceroy so that wrath of police could not destroy Belur Math. But she as an individual did not support bloody path of revolutionary terrorism but always was in favour of constructive swadeshi such as upliftment of cotton industry.

Sarada Devi wanted a separate organisation for female devotees of Ramakrishna order. After independence following her thought process Sarada Math and Mission was established in Dakshineswar area and its branches were founded in various places of India and also abroad. She was connected with her heart and soul to School of girls of Sister Nivedita and Saradeshwari Ashram of Gaurimata. When Nivedita started her work for welfare of indigenous women in 1898 she at first took shelter in house of Sarada Devi at Bagbazar. Sarada inaugurated school of Nivedita at Bospara Lane in 1898. In her inaugural lecture she told- *Ami prarthana korchhi , jeno ei vidyalayer upar Jaganmatar ashirvad barshito hoy, ebong ekhan theke sikshaprapto meyera jeno adarsha balika hoye othe.* Traditional ideology of preparing girls as perfect mother, ideal wife and loyal daughter was encouraged in oriental educational system of Nivedita school. Nivedita herself was influenced by Hindu revivalist ideology and cultural nationalism and wanted to uplift images of Sita- Sabitri- Uma as model of Indian womanhood. Sudhira Devi, an eminent teacher of that school got extensive moral support of Sarada Devi in her various endeavour. Renowned Brahamo women like Labanyaprabha Basu, Abala basu, Pushpa Devi, Amiya Devi and Saralabala Sarkar became involved with teaching in Nivedita school. This educational institution which received blessing of the Holy Mother in its nascent stage got recognition from University of Calcutta in 1949.

Besides this Gaurimata, a famous female devotee of Ramakrishnadev, established Saradeshwari Ashram in 1895. Due to experience of long pilgrimage she became eye witness of wretched condition of our indigenous women in various places of India. She was directly instructed by Ramakrishna and encouraged by Sarada Devi for upliftment of women of our motherland. When she started her ashram following footprints of Sarada in Barrackpore she had to face extreme poverty and other hindrances. Many times members of Saradeshwari Ashram had to remain half- starved but Sarada herself was always eager to support Gaurimata in her efforts. Gaurimata later established branch of her organisation in North Calcutta and obtained support of renowned personalities such as Ray Madhav Chandra Ray and his wife Keshabmohini Devi, Chandranath Niyogi, Mohit Mukhopadhyay, Nagendranandini Devi, Bipinchandra Ganguli , Sir Gurudas Bandopadhyay, Saradacharan Mitra and Surendranath Sen. Esteemed periodical such as Bangalakshmi upheld ideology of her ashram where in educational system traditional thought process about ideal Indian womanhood was encouraged. Girls were guided here to become expert in Hindu philosophy, cooking and other household chores, puja etc. Granddaughters of Balaram Basu, a famous devotee of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi used to study in ashram of Gaurimata. Widows often got shelter and support from it. Gaurimata established full- fledged executive body for her ashram in 1911 but in all disputes she always upheld decision of Sarada Maa as final and binding. Women who were socially ostracised for their questionable character did not get permission from Gaurimata to participate in activities of her ashram. She encouraged both sannyasdharma and role of ideal housewife for Indian women but in all states they should not deviate from chastity and moral purity.

After death of Sarada Devi in 1920 , Gaurimata was more active in maintaining stability of her ashram just to keep intact ideology of her Holy Mother. Durgapuri Devi, who got Higher education through blessing of Sarada and Swamiji, skilfully guided Saradeshwari Ashram. She got the coveted opportunity of occidental education but while guiding ashram of Gaurimata she also strictly adhered to traditional thought process about ideal Hindu/ indigenous womanhood. Even after death of Durgapuri Devi in 1963 this ashram kept its identity intact and celebrated its centenary in 1995. Besides a very strong influence of Brahma Movement these organisations mentioned above tried their level best to enlighten socio- religious and cultural life of contemporary Bengal being guided by Ramakrishna- *sahadharmini* Sarada Devi.

Conclusion - Sarada Devi was completely devoted to the role of advisory head of a nascent organisation that became famous as the Ramakrishna Mission. Ramakrishna- Vivekananda Movement achieved popularity in the second half of 19th century when the Age of Consent controversy touched its zenith as a struggle of power and prestige between the oriental and the occidental powers. In that historical context cultural nationalism and Hindu revivalist ideology got central position. Then it was quite natural that traditionalist thought process about indigenous womanhood where motherly care and affection obtained main place would influence psychological world of renowned women such as Sarada Devi or Gaurimata. Sarada was undoubtedly a prominent representative of late 19th century Bengal and her ideology of religious development, conformity to tradition, idea of social welfare with motherly affection for all women nurtured our cultural nationalism where women were nothing but embodiment of glory of our ancient heritage and civilisation. Sense of responsibility of nation- building became quite fruitful when women from Bengal and other places of India began to take active part in nationalist politics and enormously encouraged social welfare in 20th century. Here lies true importance of organisations such as Saradeshwari Ashram and its eminent founder Gaurimata, an ardent follower of Sarada Devi, rightly opined that- *Tomra mayera kom kise go? Ei je yuge yuge koto sadhu sannyasi abatar ese jagater kalyan korchhen, era sobai mayeder petei janmo niyechhen. Mayerai samaj ebong dharmoke dhore rekhechhe.*

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