



THE LEADERSHIP OF MA SARADA IN RAMAKRISHNA MOVEMENT AT NINETEENTH CENTURY

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The nineteenth century was an important period in the Ramakrishna movement. In this period, Ma Sarada was a silent, powerful leader behind all. Ma Sarada was transforming the thoughts of Ramakrishna and self-realization. She became the soul of the Ramakrishna Order. She was one of the most significant spiritual leaders of the modern world, a great lover of humanity whose love extended to all people without any differences of caste, creed, class, race, region, or religion. She became a central figure of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement. Ma Sarada, the spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna, was born on 22 December 1853 in a poor Brahmin family in Jayrambati, a village adjoining Kamarpukur in West Bengal. Her father, Ramachandra Mukhopadhyay, was a pious and kind-hearted person, and her mother, Shyama Sundari Devi, was a hard-working woman. She had no formal education but managed to learn the Bengali alphabet. When she was about six years old, she was married to Sri Ramakrishna, according to the custom prevalent in India in those days. Ma Sarada was simple in character, pure in devotion and love for all living beings, and innumerable virtues naturally elevated her to excellence. A review of her life shows that her every action was done for charity. Despite suffering extreme difficulties in practical life, her generosity and peace of mind never faded. She has shown in her blameless life how people can live well in this practical world despite all the difficulties and advantages.

Keywords: Leadership, Ma Sarada, Ramkrishna Movement, Nineteenth Century

Introduction

The nineteenth century was an important period in the Ramakrishna movement. In this period, Ramakrishna's thought was growing rapidly, Swami Vivekananda was rising as a great religious leader in India, and Ma Sarada was a silent, powerful leader behind all. The Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement, with its seat in Bengal, constituted a major factor towards this development. Ma Sarada, who was transforming the thoughts of Ramakrishna and self-realization. She became the soul of the Ramakrishna Mission. She was one of the most significant spiritual leaders of the modern world, a great lover of humanity whose love extended to all people without any differences of caste, creed, class, race, region, or religion. “সর্বং খল্বিদং ব্রহ্ম” “Sarbang Khalbidang Brahma”—it means the recognition of the eternal truth. Ma Sarada accepted the Upanishadic idea and promoted the idea to the common man in direct form. She became a central figure of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement. Ma Sarada was simple in character, pure in devotion and love for all living beings, and innumerable virtues naturally elevated her to excellence. A review of her life shows that her every action was done for charity. Despite suffering extreme difficulties in practical life, her generosity and peace of mind never faded. She has shown in her blameless life how people can live well in this practical world despite all the difficulties and advantages.

Life Sketch of Ma Sarada

Ma Sarada, the spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna, was born on 22 December 1853 in a poor Brahmin family in Jayrambati, a village adjoining Kamarpukur in West Bengal. Her father, Ramachandra Mukhopadhyay, was a pious and kind-hearted person, and her mother, Shyama Sundari Devi, was a hard-working woman. She had no formal education but managed to learn the Bengali alphabet. When she was about six years old, she was married to Sri Ramakrishna, according to the custom prevalent in India in those days. However, she continued to live with her parents, while Sri Ramakrishna lived a God-intoxicated life at Dakshineswar. After Sri Ramakrishna's passing away in 1886, Ma Sarada spent some months in pilgrimage and then went to Kamarpukur, where she lived in great privation. To know of the matter, the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna brought her to Kolkata. This marked a turning point in her life. She now began to accept spiritual seekers as her disciples and became the open portal to immortality for hundreds of people. Her great personality, endowed with boundless love and

compassion, embraced all people without any distinction, including many who had lived sinful lives. When the Western women disciples of Swami Vivekananda came to Kolkata, Ma Sarada accepted them, ignoring the restrictions of the orthodox society of those days. Although she had grown up in a conservative rural society without any access to modern education, she held progressive views and wholeheartedly supported Swami Vivekananda in his plans for rejuvenation of India and the uplift of the masses and women. She was closely associated with the school for girls started by Sister Nivedita. She spent her life partly in Kolkata and partly in her native village, Jayrambati.

Ma Sarada and Her Leadership

Leadership of Ma Sarada was not directly visible, but she was controlling the power of the Ramakrishna Order. In her time, Swami Brahmananda, was President of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, but her advice was the final in Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. Other administrative leaders always consulted with her on every time. In 1916, the English ruler thought that the Ramakrishna Mission was involved in the revolutionary movement because some of the revolutionaries took monastic ideology in the shelter of the Ramakrishna Mission. Though, after joining the Ramakrishna Order, they did not make any contact with the revolutionary movement. But the English ruler did not believe the ideology. In December 1916, Lord Carmichael, the Governor of Bengal, accused the Ramakrishna Mission of giving shelter to political revolutionaries under the umbrella of its philanthropic activities. The government discovered that some revolutionaries had been inspired by Swami Vivekananda's book, so they thought that the monks of the Ramakrishna Order were behind the freedom movement. The governor's remark created great apprehension among the monastic as well as the general people. Some well-wishers of the Ramakrishna Mission suggested that Swami Saradananda (General Secretary of Ramakrishna Mission) remove those monks who had a revolutionary background from the order. But Swami Saradananda was deeply concerned about those dedicated monks and he was hesitated about this matter. Swami Saradananda recalled: "I went to Holy Mother (Ma Sarada) and informed her of the situation. She listened to me calmly and then said firmly: "My goodness! What is the matter? The Master (Sri Ramakrishna) was the embodiment of truth. These boys have taken shelter in the master, embraced his ideal, and become monks renouncing their families. They have shunned personal worldly enjoyment and dedicated their lives to serving the country and suffering people. My son, why would they pretend? You had better go to the governor and meet him. He is the representative of the king. If you explain to him the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission, he will definitely listen" ¹⁷.

Another eyewitness recorded that after listening to everything, Ma Sarada firmly said, "The Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission have come into existence by the will of the Master (Sri Ramakrishna). To break this rule of the monastic order due to pressure and rage of the government is "*adharmā*" (unrighteous). Those who have taken the monastic vows and surrendered to the Master will stay in the monastery; otherwise, no one should stay here. My children will take shelter under a tree and nonetheless will not deviate from the truth." ⁹

Swami Saradananda followed Ma Sarada's advice. He consulted with the attorney Dasharathi Sanyal, one of Swami Vivekananda's former classmates, and they prepared a memorandum on behalf of the governing body of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Saradananda met with Mr. Gourley, the governor's chief secretary, and handed over the memorandum to him. After one month, Mr. Gourley and Mr. Denham, a high-ranking police officer, came to Belur Math to meet with Swami Saradananda. They arranged for him to speak with the governor on 10th March, 1917. On that day, Swami Saradananda talked to the governor for nearly an hour. He was able to remove the governor's doubts regarding the whole activities of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. Following the meeting, Lord Carmichael wrote to Swami Saradananda on 26th March 1917:

"Dear Sir,

I thank you for having come to see me and for the trouble you have taken to tell me about the origin of the Ramakrishna Mission and its aims and objects.

I read with great interest the memorial that the Mission authorities submitted to me some time ago. I regret very much to hear that words used by me at the Durbar in December last regarding the Mission should have led in any way to the curtailment of the good Religious, Social and Educational work the Mission has done and is doing. As you, I know, realize, my object was not to condemn the Ramakrishna Mission and its members. I know the character of the Mission's work is entirely non-political, and I have heard nothing but good of its work of social service for the people....

*Yours very sincerely,
Carmichael" ²*

It was very unusual for the British governor to apologize for a statement and withdraw it in writing. This removed the cloud of doubt that hangs over Ramakrishna Mission. The British governor understood Ma Sarada's powerful voice and acknowledged her spirit. She was a powerful, silent, religious lady in that period. In this way, Ma Sarada steered the Ramakrishna Organization in a definite direction every moment. She had reflected in her own life how to keep one's goals fixed in an adverse environment and move forward in life. Sri Ramakrishna sowed the seeds of the future Ramakrishna Order by shaping the lives of a few people. But in the absence of Sri Ramakrishna, the Ramakrishna Order was led by Ma Sarada. Ma Sarada realized that the spirit of Sri Ramakrishna would not be limited to a few, but it would spread throughout the ages, among people of different communities in the country and abroad. So she expressed her clear disapproval of the sale of the monastery

land (the Main land of Belur Math) against Swami Vivekananda's wish. She also realized at that time that the scope of this Ramakrishna Organization would grow day by day. And so, it happened. The Ramakrishna Math was not confined to the land of Belur, and it was gradually expanded by Ma Sarada. Notably, many of the founders, entrepreneurs, directors of these ashrams are inspired by Ma Sarada. She did not acknowledge any public criticism of her service activities. She taught the people how to live an ideal life in the world. She also advised the monks how to sacrifice and do patience and be engaged in philanthropic work. She always forgave all mistakes of her dispels. She is encouraging them to correct the mistake. Sri Satyendranath Majumder writes in this context – “She was affectionate, but not tender. She had an invisible influence on the Sri Ramakrishna Sangha. She was careful to ensure that the ideals did not deteriorate as the Ramakrishna Order expanded”.⁹ Swami Sardananda, the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission, did not do even the simplest tasks without Ma Sarada's consent. Even the leader, Swami Vivekananda, would not dare to protest against her words if she did not agree to any action. Ma Sarada guided all the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission in their physical and spiritual lives. Her practical knowledge and common sense guided them in adjusting to community life in the monastery and gave shelter in Udbodhon House, Kolkata, to those who could not get along with others. Her spiritual power, unselfish love, and maternal affection transformed monks' lives. However, she did not allow those who deviated from the ideal of the Ramakrishna Order. She also lifted their mind to a higher realm through her spiritual power and compassion. Not only the Ramakrishna Mission, but also Ma Sarada is directly involved with an enumerable number of household devotees, and she also modulates their nature with barrierless love and compassion. Ma Sarada had the capacity to lead both monks and the household devotees for the development of the Ramakrishna Mission. She maintained direct contact with the household devotees, and she did not maintain the differentiation of poor and rich people. Ma Sarada used to clean the plates after feeding the devotees irrespective of their castes and creeds. When anyone did not support her, she simply used to say that it was her responsibility as a mother. She was a great role model as the mother in the Ramakrishna Mission. Ma Sarada was able to equate (Swami Sardananda), a Hindu monk, and Amzad, a Muslim dacoit, based on her spirit of universal motherhood. One day in her lifetime in Jayrambati, Nalini, one of her nieces, saw that Ma Sarada was clearing away a devotee's dirty plate. Nalini remarked, “My goodness! Aunt, you are clearing away the defiled food of people of all castes!” Ma Sarada calmly replied, “People of all castes are my children.”⁶

Ma Sarada's love is equal and unified for all the castes, whether high or low, all the religions, whether Hindu or Muslim, and for all the statuses of the society. She believed that, how can there be distinction among the peoples of any society? She did not deviate from her ideology. She had devotees and disciples from all castes and all statuses of a society. She initiated a devotee who was a *yugi*, which is a low caste in the 19th century. He was hesitating to associate freely with other devotees of Jayrambati. By understanding his hesitation, Ma Sarada reassured him and said not to hesitate because he was a *yugi*. Rather than she told him to remember that he was a part of her family. These types of thinking gave power to people who were hesitating by their social position and social status. Once during Durga puja, many devotees were offering flowers to the deity. A lower caste man from Tazpur was standing outside for thinking of a social position. He was hesitating to come inside because he belonged to the *Bagdi* caste, which was a low caste in that century. Ma Sarada belongs to a Brahmin caste, but she herself asked him to come and offer the puja articles to the deity, which he did. This is her significant work in the 19th century against the caste system in Indian society. When Ma Sarada visited South India, devotees were attracted to her. Ma Sarada couldn't speak a single word in their language. Ma Sarada also loves foreign devotees. Margaret Noble, Mrs. Sarah Ole Bull, and Ms. Josephine MacLeod were among them. She welcomed those foreign women who came to India. Miss MacLeod told Romain Rolland about Ma Sarada: “The Holy Mother (Ma Sarada) had a natural affinity with Western women, able to speak with them on any subject, and had a simplicity, a fitness, a delightful disposition. Just as pure as Ramakrishna or Vivekananda, she was all the while living a holy life and at the same time capable of being interested, with the joy of a child, in the attire of her European friends.”¹³

Ma Sarada was a living ideal for maintaining the loving relationship with all people. In the 19th century, the society of Bengal was very dogmatic. The society of Bengal did not maintain a good relationship with the foreigner. Ma Sarada was an exceptional character who maintained a good and compassionate relationship with the foreigners. The relationship of Ma Sarada and Sister Nivedita was very heart-touching and inspiring. Sarada had been born and brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family of rural Bengal in India, and Sister Nivedita was a modern, Western-educated woman. Ma Sarada did not know English, and she was not familiar with Western etiquette, but their conversation and meeting were so familiar. Sister Nivedita had a great respect for her. Sister Nivedita compared her to Mother Mary. One of her letters, which was written by Sister Nivedita, is as follows:

“Beloved Mother:

This morning, early, I went to church—pray for Sara. All the people there were thinking of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and suddenly I thought of you. Your dear face, loving look, white sari, and your bracelets. It was all there. And it seemed to me that yours was the presence that was to soothe and bless Sara's sick room.”⁷

Mahendranath Gupta, the writer of Ramakrishna-kathamrita, requested not to allow one devotee to meet her. She replied, “If my son is besmeared with dust and dirt, I will have to clean him and take him on my lap.”¹⁵ Due to this kind of compassion and caring, loving nature, and Sarada, kinds of people were bestowed for their development. On the other hand, she was the source of strength for the young freedom fighters of the country. Due to tremendous mental pressure Girish Chandra Ghosh, a

famous dramatist of the society at that time in Bengal, had been in Bengal a lot; his mental condition was not well. But after meeting with Ma Sarada, she recovered from her mental condition. Girish Chandra Ghosh was transformed by association with Ma Sarada. After this association, he returned to Calcutta and resumed his acting career with a fresh energy and progressive outlook. Girish later recalled his days in Jayrambati: “What infinite affection did I see in the mother! She was my real mother. She kept her vigilant eyes on every minute detail. One day in Jayrambati saw the mother going to the pond a piece of soap, a bed sheet, and a pillow cover. When I went to bed that night, I found that my pillow cover and bed sheet had been beautifully washed. Tears trickled from my eyes when I thought of her affection.”⁸

Ma Sarada’s divinity was so impressive that the Great Leader Swami Vivekananda had paid great respect to her in his lecture “My Life and Mission, which was given in America on 27th January, 1900. He acknowledged the importance of Ma Sarada after the passing of Sri Ramakrishna: “Then came a terrible time personally and for all the other boys as well...well.... That one’s sympathy brought blessing and hope. She was a woman, my Master’s (Sri Ramakrishna) wife. We all have great respect for her”.¹⁷

Ma Sarada could reshape the very ordinary household work into a path for inner peace. She exemplified in her life how a rural so-called uneducated woman could become the guide of luminaries like Swami Vivekananda and other illustrious disciples of Shri Ramakrishna. In fact, she was perhaps the first all-in-all woman leader for a men’s monastic order and a worldwide movement. Apart from her leadership and supremacy over many, she could also project forbearance as a virtue to grow, mature, and deepen human development and social development. Ma Sarada was also an inspirer of an original Indian education system for women who blended the best of the East and West through Sister Nivedita. She was inspired through positivity by an enumerable number of people who were coming to contact her in her life span. Her spiritual power, unselfish love, and maternal affection transformed the lifestyle of many undisciplined people. Ma Sarada lofted their mind to a higher realm through her universal love and compassion.

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