

Anant Rupini Maa Sarada



Glimpses from Maa Sarada's Life

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Written by: Dr. Lata Desai

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Phone: 02645 220811

Email: sewarural@ymail.com; smvs1985@yahoo.co.in

Dedicated

Dedicated to all those who are eager and
anxious to seek
Guidance to lead spiritual life
And awakening of women power.

Acknowledgment

We are blessed that most Revered Swami Smarananandji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission has graciously written the forward of this book.

Many people have contributed to the publication of this book. It is impossible to name them individually and express my gratitude

We acknowledge encouragement and guidance from devotees of Shri Ramkrishna Dev and Maa Sarada to publish this book.

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For and on behalf of,
Sarada Mahila Vikas Society
Dr. Lata Desai

About this Book

Inspired by the life and teaching of Ma Sarada, we have been working for women's empowerment for the last 30 years. Through this journey of 30 years whatever lessons, small or big we have learnt, we share with one and all. In the year 2017, a book, Anant Rupani, was published in Gujarati. Now the translation of this book is being published.

About 150 years ago, Maa Sarada had lived a relatively unnoticed life of an ordinary householder. Her true self was identified only by rare and noble persons like Shri Ramkrishna and Swami Vivekananda. In the early days of the establishment of the world famous Ramakrishna Mission, she fulfilled her duties as a capable leader. Though she was a renunciant, having been married, she lived the life of a householder in a unique manner. Though always busy with work, she remained unattached. To her devotees, she was the Universal Mother who was compassionate, loving and fearless. She lived the life of a revolutionary who fought against societal violence and wrong customs which adversely affected the lives of women. She lived the difficult Vedantic concepts in her day to day life giving solace to the sorrowful and troubled devotees, who were distressed due to a variety of reasons, innate and external.

Many of her disciples and devotees have noted down a number of incidents and discussions that have been witnessed by them or experienced through very close association. They have given in detail with place, dates and time what they have seen and heard during their interactions with her. This recorded information can make a positive change to the people of modern generation who are often belligerent, distrustful, and live in an atmosphere of disharmony. With the aim of bringing about a positive change in our attitude and helping us to lead a peaceful life, I am publishing this book.

We are living in the era of high technology with lots of comforts, but also with many problems such as broken homes, caste and gender-based discriminations, outrageous activities, corruption, unrighteous ways, environment concerns, etc. These are issues of great concern, leading to increasing disharmony and distrust the world over. One can find suitable solutions for these issues through the incidents in Maa Sharada's life. At those times, those places and the circumstances under which she lived, she was able to awaken within her the divine qualities and manifest them in her innumerable forms.

On studying some of the aspects of the life of Maa Sarada, one could perceive the innumerable qualities and innumerable forms she assumed in different situations. The book has not been written as an account of her life or a typical biography. In this book, her enigmatic life has been shared in 15 chapters. As each chapter has a unique importance, many incidents have been repeated in the different chapters because of having different perspectives. I have tried to interpret them with my limited capacity. At many places, 'Maa Sarada' has been referred to simply as Maa or Mataji. Further, the term 'Thakur' has been used for Shri Ramakrishna in many places and this may also be noted.

Any person wishing to bring about some small or large changes in their day-to-day lives has been able to get motivation, courage, support and guidance through the teachings of and incidents from Maa Sarada's life without great changes in their lifestyle whether in their place of stay, work or faith. There are many instances in this regard narrated in this book.

Dr. Lata Desai

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PHONES PBX (033)
2654-1144 2654-5700
2654-1180 2654-5701
2654-5391 2654-5702
2654-9581 2654-5703
2654-9501 2654-8494
FAX: 033 2654-4071
E-mai : president@kmm.org
presidentoffice@rkmm.org



RAMAKRISHNA MATH
P. O. BELUR MATH, DIST. HOWRAH
WEST BENGAL : 711 202
INDIA

FOREWORD

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, the Divine consort of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna is affectionately referred to as 'Ma' by millions of devotees in the world. Sri Ramakrishna foretold that so many children will call Her Mother that it would make Her ears weary. This book on Holy Mother by Dr. Lata Desai enumerates selected incidents from Sri Sarada Devi's life which depict Her mother power the loving, caring and guiding potential of a mother towards Her children. These incidents will acquaint the readers with Her far-sightedness, leadership, wisdom, values, presence of mind, attitude of service, immense practicality and so on.

Born in Jayrambati, a remote village in West Bengal, Sri Sarada Devi was trained by none other than Sri Ramakrishna himself to lead his future monastic Order as well as householder disciples. She proved these words of Ramakrishna true for she played the role of Sangha Janani (Mother of the Order) for thirty-four long years after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna. And, at the same time, while Herself leading apparently an ordinary life similar to that of a householder provided consolation to the afflicted by sympathising with them and confidence to the discouraged by Her words of inspiration. Nobody who visited Her would return empty handed, either spiritually or temporally.

I am sure that this book will definitely help the readers to connect the Holy Mother's life with their own life and instill them with love and devotion for Holy Mother who is the eternal source of inspiration to all of us.

May the blessings of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi be on all!

Swami Smaranananda
President
Ramakrishna Math and
Ramakrishna Mission
Belur Math
26th May 2019

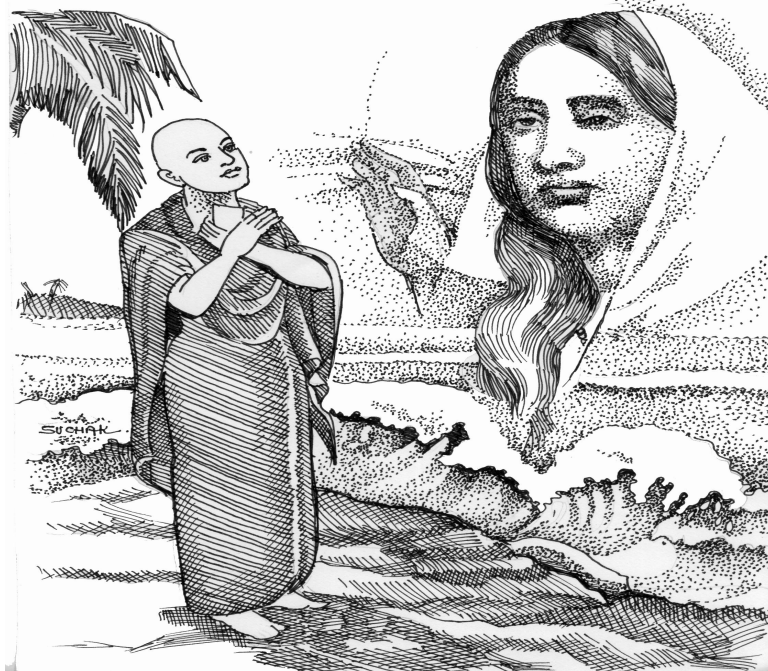
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1 Amazing Leader

The life of Maa Sarada was that of an ordinary rural woman, simple and uncomplicated. Understanding Maa Sarada's real personality is beyond the intellect of normal human beings. In the year 1953, during her birth Centenary celebrations, a World Forum was formed wherein a number of books were published on her life and message. Through these the world recognized her leadership qualities and strength in day to day life. However, within her, she had many leadership qualities. An attempt is made here to understand it in the context of her remarkable life.

Unbiased Attitude and Farsightedness: This incident occurred in the year 1898 when Calcutta suffered



Mother writes to swamiji to go to America

from an epidemic of plague. Thousands of people succumbed to this horrible disease and many abandoned their homes, running away in fear. This extreme sorrowful condition of people affected Swami Vivekanand deeply. He, along with the members of the Math, joined in serving the people. However, the Math did not have sufficient funds to take up this work. He told his fellow disciples that they should be ready to sell the land bought for the Math. The money raised can be used for this cause. “We are all renouncers, we should be ready to seek alms and sleep under the trees in the open if necessary. When thousands of people are suffering, how can we be concerned about our own Math and its land?” His personality was such that one could not move him away from these noble thoughts. His fellow disciple Sivanandji said to him, “You have always taken Maa into confidence in taking all decisions. But in this case, you have not consulted her.” Swamiji agreed to this and immediately went to meet Maa with his fellow disciples and after paying his obeisance to her informed her about his thoughts on selling the land of Math for serving the suffering people. Maa had so far agreed with all his proposals, but in this case she did not concur with him. She told him, this Math does not belong to me or you. You all may be willing to sleep under the tree, but future disciples need a suitable place. This Math is for the public at large. Can the purpose for which this land is purchased be compromised for relief work? Swamiji immediately understood the words of Maa and accepted her view whole heartedly. After doing pranaam to her, he left. Later he told his fellow disciples that Maa was right, and they have no right to sell the land belonging to the Math¹.

Here is another example of her farsightedness. At Ma's birthplace, a new house was constructed. The Gram

Panchayat put a tax of Rs. 5 as security tax on this house. During the first year, in Ma's absence, the manager paid this tax. But during the next year when he came to collect the tax, the mother asked the manager to go and try to waive the tax. She explained to her disciples that now we can afford to pay, but after some years, brahmacharis who live on alms will be staying in this house and they will find it difficult to pay the tax. Maa gave an application in her name to the Tax Collector requesting for exemption from paying tax for the building. Initially the disciple did not understand as to why this application was being submitted. Later he realized that charitable institutions are exempt from tax and the approval was granted.²

This incident is an ideal example of Ma's decision-making qualities and her farsightedness, which made a great leader.

Strength to Establish New Institutions: Swami Vivekananda faced severe protest and disagreement from his fellow brothers and devotees when he established Ramkrishna mission. At that time, saints and ascetics of various sects were considering service to humanity as a hindrance to spiritual life. We will narrate one such incident. One sadhu came to mother and told her that according to some sadhu, it was not be fitting for monks to run hospitals, sell books, keep accounts etc. Shri Ramakrishna did not do any such activities. Sadhus should do puja, jap, dhyan only. All other work will take one's mind away from God. After listening all such talk Maa Sarada said, "If you do not do any work, how will you spend the whole day? How can one do Jap and Dhyan for 24 hrs? Are you talking of Thakur? His case is different. You are able to eat here because you do work. Otherwise for one handful of food, you will be going from

house to house. This Math will continue to run the way it is. Those who cannot bear this may leave this place.”³ She supported Swamiji's decision during the early years of establishment of Ramkrishna Mission.

Maa Sarada played crucial role in establishing and encouraging two women-oriented institutions. At a time when women were confined traditionally to the four walls of the home, Sharadeshwari Ashram which was established by Gauri Ma, the disciple of Shri Ramakrishna. In 1984, Maa herself inaugurated this Ashram. She praised the initiative taken by Gauri Maa in this context and encouraged other devotees and disciples to help in the progress of the Ashram. She said, “Whoever helps to keep the lamp of Gauri Ma's Ashram lit, he or she will attain Vaikunth (Moksh)”⁴. In this manner, Maa Sarada became a major supporter of the first women-oriented institution.

Maa Sarada also took first step towards all-round development of girls by inaugurating Nivedita School which was started by a foreign disciple of Swami Vivekananda. She prayed and showered her blessings upon the school, saying that the girls it trained should be the ideal girls⁵.

Wisdom to Maintain Cordial Relations: There are several incidences where the inmates of branch centres were not happy with their heads. This incident occurred at Ramkrishna Mission's Koalpada Ashram. One day the head of this Ashram complained to Ma. “Ma, ashram residents are not listening to me now and they go to other Ashrams. If they have any problems, they directly come to you and you listen to them and keep them with you. If you do not give them refuge and instead send them back to me after some persuasion, then they will be obedient to me and will stay with me only”⁶.

Maa enquired about this issue and came to know that this in-charge was expecting only work from residents. He was not providing proper arrangement for their food, clothing etc. He was not taking proper care when they were suffering from repeated attacks of malaria. Maa called that in-charge and said, “What you are saying? Love is our guiding force. If you go on exercising authority in this way, how can the ashram work go on? How can you complain to me about children's food and clothing? Keeping such narrow mind and ordering and expecting work, how you will be able to run the ashram smoothly? Even our own children will leave if scolded very often. They all are my children. I will not be able to say such things.” Looking at Ma's flushed face and loud voice, the ashram in-charge bowed down to Maa with reverence, apologized and begged mercy. Thought he mother corrected the head when the need arose, she also advised residents to be disciplined and for bearing a few days earlier from this incident. She said to a brahamachari, “Look here, everyone has to be accommodating.” The master used to say, “Sha, Sha, sa” for bear everything he is there to judge⁷.

Act and adjust according to time, place, circumstances & requirement : Although the mother's kindness and affection were bestowed equally on all her children, she made some distinction based on above principle, but she did it all so delicately that it never gave rise to jealousy or ill-will among her disciples and devotees. This incident occurred at Jayramvati. One day Rajen Maharaj, who was second in-charge atone of the ashrams, came to Jayramvati. After making pranaam, he shared that he wanted to go to Varansias there was some friction at the Ashram and therefore he had lost his peace of mind. Over and above all, his health also was not good. When he asked the mother's

permission to go Varanasi she advised him to come and stay with her at Jayramvati and not go anywhere else. At this, Rajen Maharaj's face filled with joy. Daily Maa would do puja and offer prasada to God. From the offering, she used the sugar to make sherbet, which she drank before becoming busy with the ashram work. As Rajen Babu was not keeping good health, she gave the major part of the sherbet to him, taking only a small part for herself. She did this so skillfully that nobody in the ashram felt jealousy towards Rajen Babu or that she was favoring him above others. After a few days finding the in-charge alone with her she told him quietly, "Just listen my child, Rajen's brain has been heated a little as he had been sitting by the fire and also looking after the ashram. Besides there were also some frictions with the in-charge. His health has been affected. He wanted to go to Varanasi and come here to take my leave. I, however, prevailed upon him to come and stay here so that after sometime, his brain may get cooled and his health improved. After that he could go back to the ashram and resume his duties there. Every morning I give him some of the offered sherbet. This will have the effect of toning of his system. The mother told all this in a voice surcharged with love and concern that the in-charge's heart too was filled with feeling of sympathy for Rajen Maharaj. He was charmed at this love and affection that the mother showed for Rajen Maharaj. Thus mother put him in the right frame to understand the whole situation. Rajen Maharaj stayed with the mother for over two months and regained his health to a great extent. He then went back to his ashram and took charge of his heavy responsibilities there once more⁸.

Many such examples can be read about during the formational years of the Ram Krishna Mission. The coincidences how show the leader of an organization needs

to have abroad mind & wisdom to maintain cordial relations inspite of the numerous inconveniences of community life.

Preservation of Values: There are many examples where in to preserve the values Maa took decision without considering her personal inconveniences. This incident happened during 1st World War when there was a shortage of spirits and it was difficult to get them from the market. Maa was suffering from arthritis. Once a disciple made arrangements to get spirits for the dispensary and he requested to the manager that a small quantity of it be kept separately for use by Maa for her treatment. She did not agree with this request and replied, “This spirit is for the use of the dispensary for the patients there. I cannot use it for my comfort by depriving them of the same”. I will get relief if a massage is done with some warm garlic oil⁹.

Once it was decided to dismiss the cook at the Udbodhan ashram where Ma was staying. The manager of the ashram was hesitant to do that on the plea that this would cause inconvenience to Ma's food. Hearing of this Maa instructed the manager to dismiss the cook without consideration for her personal inconveniences¹⁰.

This incidence occurred in relation to dealing with the building of Thakur's temple in his birth place. One day Shri Ramakrishna's nephew Shri Ramlal and his daughter Lakshmi Devi wanted to know if the property will remain in their family after the temple was built. Maa retorted, “What kind of talk is this? After the temple is built, the sadhus of Belur Math will take the responsibility for the birthplace of Ramakrishna and the temple. For relatives like Ramlal, just as for the sadhus of the Math, metal sheeted tenements will be made.” Thus, Ma took balanced view without getting carried

away by family pressure¹¹. Such incidences show show the leader kept a tender heart while at the same time preserving values.

Making exceptions while observing the rules and regulations:

In the year 1919, a great tragedy happened in Bankuda district of Bengal. The sadhus of Ramakrishna Math started doing relief work there. One of the disciples of Maa who also joined the work, went to Maa at the end of the day after completing his work to take her blessings. Maa enquired about the progress of the work. He informed her that the poor, elderly, pregnant women and women with newborn children are unable to do any work. Therefore they were given coupons to enable them to collect rice, dal etc. At a fixed time and place, some women were also given saris. Those who are getting relief materials are the deserving people or not, the volunteers have been visiting their houses too. One day, when the house visits were done, it was found that nobody was present in a house. On enquiring, it was found that they have gone to work in the fields. To put the conversation in his own words: “I went to the fields to understand what they were doing. They were sowing seeds in knee deep mud. As soon as they saw me from afar, they all left the sowing and ran away and stood in the line for collecting grains. On enquiring I came to know that one of the women had given birth the previous night. She kept the child wrapped in a corner and was doing the sowing work. I went to her and told her that she should not be afraid, we will give you sufficient grains. On hearing this she got the courage to speak and told me that she was in great difficulty and if she worked she will get some more grains. For that she had taken her newborn child and came to work.” Maa was overcome with compassion. She said, “How can a woman with a

newborn child go to work in the field? Child, I am happy that you made some exceptions to rules and took the right decisions. Thakur will bless you for this noble act¹².”

For the proper management of the ashram, the sadhu-brahmacharis went to the big markets in the city for wholesale purchases of goods. They used to get very late returning to the ashram with the materials. Maa would ask all others to have their food and she herself will wait for the brahmacharis in the kitchen. An incident happened in the 'Udbodhan' ashram in Calcutta. For the systematic management of the ashram, rules/guidelines were made for the various activities of residents; these include time to wake up, doing puja-aarti, breakfast, lunch, meeting time etc. In this ashram, her disciples and women devotees lived with Ma. Additionally, some disciples of Ramakrishna Mission at Belur Math also came for lunch whenever needed, as they had to come to Calcutta for purchasing the requirements of the Math. About 100 years back, they had to come to Calcutta to get their provisions and other necessary requirements! At those times, they had no access to any vehicles including public transport like bus or tram. They had to use boats to cross the river and their travel depended on the timings of the boats plying in the River Ganga and the leisure times taken by the boatmen. One day one brahmachari reached Ma's ashram expecting to have food there without any prior intimation after all the residents had finished their lunch. The kitchen manager got irritated and started shouting at him. Maa intervened and told the manager that it is getting late for the lunch of my child. Arrange food for him as fast as possible. It is already late and my child has come here tired after much traveling. This happened when the brahmachari could not finish the work in time to reach the ashram at the lunch time¹³. With this example, Maa gave a very important

message to all that in a joint family or an organization, there should be flexibility in rules while handling exceptional cases.

Maa Sarada was a strict disciplinarian, but she gave freedom to her disciples when needed. In 1919, about 15 days before Durga Puja, 4 resident brahmacharis of the ashram left for Kashi without applying for leave as per ashram rules. On the way they went to seek Ma's blessings. She enquired about all persons at Belur Math and also whether they had taken permission from the Head of the Math Swami Saradanand. They replied, "No, Ma. Yesterday evening when we were walking outside the Math on the road and one of us suggested that this road will lead to Kashi. Then we decided to go to Kashi without returning to the Math. We are now on the way to Kashi. We did not inform anyone at the Math about our plans." She told them that she desires that they return to the Math immediately, in a few days there will be Durga Puja when a lot of work will be there at the Math. Without their help, the others will find it very difficult to cope. They had joined the Math recently. They should stay there in the company of the other Sadhus for some time. Staying in the ashram is also an austerity they need to get used to. Slowly they will be able to fulfill their other wishes too¹⁴. Saying this Maa showed her resolve in enforcing discipline while giving freedom.

Tender Heart: This incident occurred in the kitchen of Belur Math. One cook was found to steal things from the kitchen and when Swami Vivekananda came to know about this, he immediately dismissed the cook. The cook went to Maa and told him that he was very poor and without this job, his family would suffer greatly. On hearing this, Maa felt deep compassion for the poor man. Maa sent him back to the kitchen with Swami Premanand. She sent a message to

Swamiji that all of you have taken sanyas and can sleep even under a tree, seeking alms. But this man is a very poor householder, so he needs this job to maintain his family. Therefore he may be taken back in his job¹⁵.

Planning for Succession: Right from the beginning of Ramakrishna Mission, Maa has recognized the strengths of various disciples who can take up responsibilities in future. She showed faith in their capability and imparted suitable training to them in their fields as per their special qualities. She encouraged and empowered them. This is an example of developing the second line of leadership at the Mission.

She realized that in future, disciples will come to the Mission from all over the world when it would become necessary for the brahmacharis to communicate in English. To fulfill the future responsibilities, the next generation of brahmacharis had to be suitably prepared and in this context she hoped that the inmates of the ashram will learn English. In this 21st century, we hear that in many developed nations, speaking languages of other countries, and in particular, English, is discouraged and prohibited. Because of such thinking, the future of the youth of such countries is also affected. One can imagine that in the 19th century, Maa who was not educated wished to teach English to her disciples who were partially educated village folk with the vision that they may need to communicate with foreign visitors and students. She did not stop at such thoughts, but engaged a teacher to teach English language to the disciples¹⁶.

Swami Areshanandji while narrating his very first meeting with Ma, wrote: “I approached Maa Sarada and expressed my desire to take Mantra Diksha from her. She said to me, 'child, you are going regularly to Swami Brahmanand (Raakhal) for Satsang and he is the suitable person from

whom you should take mantra diksha. Please approach him and he will certainly fulfill your request¹⁷.”

Similarly, Subodh Maharaj who was like a small boy known as 'Koka' in Bengal to his devotees. He did not agree to give Mantra Diksha. If anyone approached him for this, he will direct them to Swami Shivanandji or Saradanandji. If devotees approached him, he will say, “What do I know? I am only 'Koka' (small boy). You people approach Raakhal Maharaj or Maa Sarada for Diksha whose spiritual level is very high. Without any delay, please proceed there.” Listening to this, Maa said, “Koka, as a child of Thakur, you are free to extract all the knowledge from him for as much time as you wish.” Later, Koka Maharaj became the Head of Ramakrishna Mission of East Bengal and on request of the devotees, he bestowed his blessings and knowledge on them whole heartedly¹⁸. In this manner, Maa Sarada continued her efforts to groom the next generation leaders through encouragement and by creating the right atmosphere.

In the life of Ma, the qualities of an ideal leader- creativity, love, compassion, maintaining cordial relations, farsightedness, unselfishness and discriminative power of not getting caught up in rigid laws and rules, taking broader views while taking discession as well as developing second line of leadership, were abundantly present.

In the year 1953, during her birth centenary celebrations, a World Forum was formed wherein a number of books were published on her life and message. Through these the world recognized her leadership qualities and strength in day to day life. Understanding Maa Sarada's real personality is beyond the intellect of normal human beings.

2 Unique Married Life

Maa Sarada and Shri Ramakrishna lived their whole lives in peace, harmony and happiness. Let us try to understand the secrets behind this and the special qualities of their married life through some examples.

Happy married life means mutual love and respect: Maa Sarada got married to Shri Ramakrishna



Shodashi puja performed by Shri Ramakrishna

when she was very young. When Maa Sarada was 18 years old, for the first time she went to live with her husband at Dakshineswar. A month and half after her arrival in Dakshineswar, her husband Ramkrishna worshiped her in the form up mother shodashi. Shodashi is the purest form

of divine mother. Later a female devotee asked mother, “Well mother, how did you feel when the master worshiped you as shodashi?” Let us read the description given by Maa in her own words: “It has been about one and half months since I came to Dakshineswar. During Puja, altha was put on my feet, kumkum on my forehead and sari was draped on my body. After sometime, I was given sweet in my mouth and paan too.”¹At the end of this sacred puja, considering Maa Sharada as Devi incarnate, her husband prostrated at her feet offering himself, his life long spiritual achievement alongwith japmalaat her feet and chanting the mantra 'Sarvamangala Mangalye'. Thus Shri Ramakrishna accepted is wife Ma Sarada as a symbol for the deity. and gave her highest respect and love.

Happy married life means not getting suspicious and carried away by rumours: Maa Sarada got married to Shri Ramakrishna when she was five and half year old. Initially for a period of 12 years, they saw each other only briefly 2 or 3 times. During this time, Shri Ramakrishna was fully immersed in various sadhanas at Dakshineswar temple. Married life was far from his mind and he didn't even enquire to get news about his wife. In addition, many people spread the rumour that Sarada's husband had gone mad. Instead of becoming sad or suspicious or anxious, the young Sarada decided to see for herself the real situation and serve him if needed. She reached Dakshineswar Kaali temple. Due to her long journey she developed fever on the way. In her words, “I went straight to Thakur's room. When he saw me, he said,

Oh, you have come. Good.” I expressed my wish to go to my room at Nahabat, but Thakur said, 'No, no. You are not well. I will not be able to take care of you there. You stay here only.' The next day he called the doctor for my treatment. After a few days, when I had completely recovered, I went to my room.”² Thus as a wife, she experienced the unique love of her ascetic husband. Today, husband and wife after believing rumours without knowing the truth, get mentally disturbed think of getting divorce and even of committing suicide. This incident gives an important message for married couples.

Fulfilling Each Other's Ideals: When her young husband Ramakrishna asked her about her role as his wife, “Have you come to bind me to the worldly life?” Hearing such a sensitive question, Maa replied without any hesitation, “No, no. Why should I bind you to worldly life? I have come to help you in leading you in your chosen path.”³

Ramakrishna never kept even one paisa with him and didn't even touch money. Laxminarayan, a rich trader, gave Rs. 10,000 to Ramakrishna for his day to day expenses like food and other items. Though Thakur clearly refused to accept this money, the trader continued to persuade him for this. Ramakrishna thought of giving a test for Maa Sarada. He called upon Ma and told her, “Lakshminarayan is insisting upon to take money. Since I cannot take it he wants to handover this ten thousand rupees to you.” Maa said, “What are you saying? If I take, it's as good as you having taken. Can it be like that?”⁴

Joyful married life: Gauri Maa, a female devotee, sometimes used to stay with Mataji at Nobatkhana while visiting Dakshineswar. Once Thakur asked Gauri Maa jokingly, “tell me Gauri dasi, to whom you love more among us?” Gauri Maa was also jolly by nature, so she didn't reply directly. She began to sing one song, which translates to: “oh bearer of flute with twisted legs, You are not great than Radha

People call you when they are in trouble

But when you are in trouble you call Radha only.⁵

Thus this couple with merry making and appreciativeness used to give pleasure to each other and to all in contact with them.

Taking care of one's worldly rights: One day Shri Ramkrishna asked to Ma, “since I am your husband, you have a right over this body”. Not only that they slept together in room at Dakshineswar for eight months.⁶ This unique couple had no wish for physical pleasure so they did not have their own child. In Hindu society fulfillment of woman's life is through motherhood. If a married woman does not become mother their presence is considered inauspicious at marriage and such occasions. In Maa Sarada's village, women use to gossip about her for not conceiving children. Her mother was very unhappy when she heard such talk, and would say, “My daughter has been married to such a crazy person that neither she could settle her own household nor she has her own off spring. She does not have even good fortune to hear word “Ma”. Hearing such remorse utterances one day Ramkrishna said “please do not get upset for this. One day you will see that so many children

will say “Ma” to your daughter that you will get surprised. When Ma Sarada was staying with her husband at Dakshineswar one day she remembered how her mother used to get upset with neighbouring women's gossip, though she never talked about it with any body. Sensible Ramkrishna understood her thoughts and said to his wife, “Why you should get worried? I will give you such gem like sons which you may not get even after difficult penance. Then you will see that so many will call you “Ma” that you may get astonished.⁷

Absence of Possessiveness: At Dakshineswar, there was a distance of 75 feet between the residences of Maa Sharada and Sri Ramakrishna. In spite of this, for months, Maa was unable to see him. She remained in her small room while her husband spent time with his devotees, happily singing bhajans, kirtans etc. She did not complain or expressed unhappiness or jealousy. She felt that her happiness was in his happiness and through supporting her husband in all his wishes. She felt neither possessiveness nor suspicions in his motives.

After the arrival of Gulabma, a great female devotee of Shri Ramakrishna, he told her to serve his food. Though it was very painful for Maa Sarada so she used to cook and prepare a dish for Thakur and made arrangement for Gulab Maa to serve him food. Due to this arrangement, she was unable to meet or see him even once during the day.⁸

Maa Sharada did not allow anyone to suppress her rights to motherhood, not even her husband. This incident took place in the context of the food arrangement and service for the

young disciples of Thakur. The disciples were deeply immersed in the various disciplines ('sadhanas') as per the advice of their Guru at Dakshineswar. Keeping in mind that if they take more food at night, it will affect their meditation, he used to keep a close watch on their food and asked Maa to serve them food accordingly. But she did not like this suppression of her motherly feelings by her husband since she considered them her own children and used to feed them to their satisfaction as per their hunger. He came to know that his disciple Baburam who was instructed to have only 4 rotis at night, actually ate 5-6 rotis, for which Maa was responsible. When he came to know this, Shri Ramakrishna went personally to Maa and complained, "Showing such misplaced affection, you are spoiling their future." Maa retorted, "Why are you so upset about his having two extra rotis? I will take care of his future, but will not reduce his food." Without saying anything more, smilingly Ramakrishna returned from there, respecting the supreme strength of her motherly affection.⁹ Ma's nature was generous, and she could not tolerate her husband's remark to her for this kind of nature. The number of devotees visiting Shri Ramakrishna to pay their respects increased. They also brought a large quantity of fruits and food with them as an offering to their Guru. He sent these items to Ma. After keeping a small portion for Thakur, she used to distribute the rest to all devotees and children living nearby. Of those who come to pay their respects, no one returned hungry after visiting Ma. Realising the generous nature of his wife, Thakur once asked her, "with your great generosity and open hands, how can we manage?" Hearing this, Maa did not utter anything in reply and turned quickly to return to her room.

Thakur realized her nature and respecting her rights, said to his nephew Ramlal, “Go quickly and try to cool down your aunt; if she gets angry whatever has been done will go down the drain.”¹⁰

Upholding respect and Dignity for each other:

Maa was much younger than Shri Ramakrishna. Moreover, her nature was shy, humble and peaceful. Her family and disciples who lived with her could not fathom her real nature. Shri Ramakrishna was always alert in seeing that she was never insulted and made to feel inferior. He ensured that she was treated with utmost respect and dignity. She was a child of 6 years when she got married. She came to her husband's house for the first time when she was 13 years old. Husband Ramakrishna taught his teen age wife about small household things carefully and politely. e.g. how to express respect towards elders, how to treat the guests etc.¹¹ As a wife, she got to learn many things like these and develop herself. Getting such invaluable lessons in life, she transformed into a simple, pure, dutiful and chaste girl. Later she narrated her experience to her female devotees, “From that time I felt in my heart a 'kalash' (holy pitcher) full of bliss seated permanently. I cannot express that firm steady feeling of bliss deep inside me.”¹² How many husbands in our society work hard to bestow on their wives such respect and dignity?

There is yet another example of Shri Ramakrishna's respect for and pride in Maa Sarada. One day when Maa turned around after keeping the plate of food for him in his room, thinking that it was his niece Lakshmi who was returning, he said, “Close the door properly when you leave.” Maa replied,

“Yes, I have closed the door properly.” As soon as he heard her voice, he was surprised and said, “Oh, is that you? I thought it was Lakshmi. Please don't take my words to heart.” Having made such a mistake unknowingly, he felt so embarrassed and repented. The next morning he went to her room and told her, “See, I felt so bad yesterday that I could not sleep the whole night. I kept thinking how I could talk to you so rudely?”¹³ In Bengal, friends and those on same age group are addressed by the word “tumi”. To give respect and dignity to Maa Sarada, Shri Ramakrishna and Sarada always addressed each other as equal by the word 'tumi'. Because of this, when he addressed her in familiar form saying 'tuyi' unknowingly thinking it was his niece, he became conscious about his inappropriate behavior and apologized to her. Maa always use to tell her disciples that, “I have been married to such a husband who has never disrespected me, he has not hurt me even with a flower.”¹⁴

Once an incident occurred with Shri Ramakrishna's disciple Yoginma. She was suspicious about the family life and behavior of Maa Sarada. One day when she was in meditation on the banks of river Ganga, she saw the dead body of a newborn child and some quarrels near there. She also saw Thakur standing in front of her. He asked, “Can the holy Ganga become unholy with the dead body of a child? Maa Sharada is also as holy as Ganga and you need not have any doubts on that. And further, we are one and the same.”¹⁵ In this manner the learned Ramakrishna recognized and pointed out the real nature of Maa and issued a warning, reprimanding those who doubt her by saying, “Hey, (pointing

to his own body) you can treat yourself, but you cannot do that to Ma. You can be saved by her inner strength. If she raises the hood (of serpent) inside her, no one, even Brahma, Vishnu or Mahesh cannot save you.”¹⁶ What an honour bestowed on the wife by her husband!

Standing together in each other's needs, difficulties and illness: Though brought up in the open and wide spaces of the village, Maa adjusted to living in a small room in nahabat at Dakshineswar Temple at Kolkata. Later she said, “For his seva at that time, I faced much difficulties staying in the nahabat in a small room. It was filled with things and even Ramakrishna's disciples lived there. We had to live, sleep, eat and do all our other activities there within a small space. The food for Thakur was also cooked there as he was unable to digest the food cooked in the temple due to stomach problems. In the beginning my head used to hit the small entrance; one day I got hurt very badly, but then I got used to it. I used to lower my head while entering the place and the small room was filled with many things. How many things can be kept on the swing at the top, how difficult it was to bathe and use the toilet!! Living in a closed room without ventilation, my health also got affected.”¹⁷ Once while going for bath at the break of dawn, I almost stepped on a crocodile sleeping on the steps of the river.” Many such difficulties and problems were faced by her, but she did not give any importance to these hardships. She used to tell her devotees, “While serving him, any hardship did not seem like an obstacle. I spent my days in a blissful state.”¹⁸

On the other hand, Shri Ramakrishna who had renounced everything used to be concerned about how Maa will live after his passing away. For this he slowly saved some money through his disciple Balaram Bose who was a householder. Mr. Bose invested this money in his agriculture and used to send Rs. 30 as interest to Ma.¹⁹

To become complemented and not rival to each other: As described above, the nature and behavior of Maa and Shri Ramakrishna appeared to be very different or even opposite of each another. Shri Ramakrishna immersed himself in deeply spiritual activities, whereas Maa led the life of a householder as she had many social and other responsibilities to fulfill. The contributions and roles of each in the ideals propagated by Shri Ramakrishna were very different.

To demonstrate the role of Maa Sarada, an incident is narrated here. During his final stages of life, Shri Ramakrishna lived in Kashipur. One day, Shri Ramakrishna asked Ma, “Aren't you going to do anything? Do I to do everything by myself?” Then Maa replied, “I am a woman. What can I do?” Pointing to his own body, he said, “Eventually, whatever this body has been able to do, you have to do much more than that.” Once again, he said, “The people of Kolkata are living in darkness like insects, leading totally wasted lives. Please take care of them.” Once again Maa expressed helplessness, citing her womanhood as her weakness. On hearing this, Shri Ramakrishna encouraged her again and said, “You have a lot more work to do. Is this all my sole responsibility?”²⁰

There are many occasions when Maa Sarada created the impression in the minds of devotees that she and Ramakrishna are one and the same and inseparable. Maa Sarada's devotee Manadashankar Dasgupta wrote in the March 1917 monthly publication that there was no difference between Maa Sarada and Shri Ramakrishna. Only externally they appeared different. Both had the same spirit (soul) within them.²¹

Subsequent to the Mahasamadhi of her husband, for 34 long years, under the able leadership of Ma, the world-famous Ramakrishna Mission was established. Facing many difficulties in the initial stages, she solved each of them to put the organization on a strong footing, thus demonstrating her unique managerial and leadership qualities.

3 Women's Empowerment

If we go through history of mankind, women in all religion are worshiped through various forms of Goddess. A very high level of contribution to philosophical growth as well as running the family and social system is made by women. Even modern science has proved that XX chromosome of woman are stronger than XY chromosome of men. Slowly and gradually for one reason or other, society became male-oriented. 'Shakti' culminated into mere "Puja". There was neglect of female power. Unfortunately, today it is believed that women are the 'weaker sex' and need protection from men. A one-sided male-dominated social system results in imbalance which leads to unrest, despair, frustration, and frequent battles and war.

Ma Sarada was an illiterate and shy woman from a rural background. Her true self was acquainted to very few of her disciples and devotees when she was alive. At the time of her birth centenary, a celebration at a world conference was attended by various religious leaders from India and abroad, as well as devotees and scientists. After various discussions and exchange of thoughts during summit, they felt that in Ma Sarada's life there was harmonious confluence of old and new world which, on face value, were opposite to each other. They concluded that her luminous and victorious life is a worldwide example of women's empowerment.¹

We will see how in Ma Sarada's life the special, natural virtues of women are exhibited through various incidences which deals with all the obstacles of women's empowerment

like physical and mental weakness, weak physique, rigid customs and traditions, lower level of education, less professional efficiency, lack of information and knowledge, lack of team-spirit, etc.

Service and sacrifice: The virtue of service is naturally seen in women since childhood. Even young daughters enjoy taking care of her siblings and parents. Grown up, a woman is seen taking care of her elders, guests, and husband. An attitude of “letting go” seems very natural to her. Now a days taking care of family members has become a burden for so-called empowered women. She wished to become empowered by fulfilling her self-interest pleasure and



Mother serving the hungry during a famine.

comfort. Though they realize later on that this pleasure and comfort do not last long.

There are many instances in Ma Sarada's life since childhood of serving selflessly unhappy and tormented people. Once due to a dreadful famine, her kind-hearted father used rice, meant for yearly storage, for famine affected people.

Vegetable hotch-potch (Khichudi) was prepared at home only and small Sarada used to serve hot hotch-potch to famine affected poor people. To cool it down she used to blow fan and used to feed with her small hand.²

Men & women both are responsible for today's condition of women: Most thinkers are of the view that change is needed in prevalent situation of women. Now next immediate question is that who will start this transformation? Since men and women both are responsible for this situation both will have to make changes in their mental status.

This article is limited to the analysis of the role of women in changing the situation of women. let us start with the obstacles faced by women and how to become stronger from Ma Sharda's life.

Mental Weakness: Due to false and imaginary fear, hesitation, lack of will power, and an inferiority complex, women's mental ability becomes impeded. Due to this reason only, they are unable to express their feelings, views, and opinions explicitly.

Be Self-reliant for your day-to-day requirement: Normally women do not prefer to seek help whether it be

financial or for household work. But nowadays it seems women have become dependent on others. Help for kitchen work, day care centre to take care of children, and old age homes for elders are increasingly getting popular. Maid for small baby at night so that sleep does not get disturbed, and party at hotels for guests. They feel ashamed in preparing food on their own, or taking care of family members by reducing TV time or leisure hours. In case of sudden death of husband or son etc. life of many women gets ruined. If we talk about Ma Sarada's life, nobody from family gave support to Ma Sarada after death of her husband Shri Ramkrishna Dev. Nobody took responsibility for her livelihood. Nephew Ramlal instructed and advised treasurer of Kali temple that Maa is getting enough money from devotees and also added that the childless widow will not need more money than that. Due to this, the pension fund which she used to receive also got discontinued. Her disciples insisted upon her to make efforts so that the funds resume. Maa said to them, "It's ok, that they have stopped money. What I will do with that amount?"² For her day to day requirements she began to grow some vegetable and paddy on small piece of land. Though her husband was having so many rich devotees she spent many a day in such a way that she didn't have money to buy salt for rice. She used to tie knots to fix her torn up sari, and sometimes her sari had eighteen knots. She didn't talk about her hardships to anybody and didn't ask for single penny even though she went through a very difficult time.

Even after some years her disciple Rasbihari Maharaj used to see Maa preparing chapatti or beating rice almost daily during his visit. He asked Maa, "Why you are doing this?"

Maa replied, "I have done more work than my share to set an example."³

Become strong against social and domestic violence by protecting yourself: Normally women consider themselves shy, and weak physically and mentally. They depend on men for their own protection. They cannot face and protect themselves from domestic violence, sexual exploitation, rape and molestation. So-called well educated and capable urban women feel hesitant and afraid to go out during night time. But nature has gifted women with special insight. She at once senses bad intentions of family or known neighborhood men. But due to physical and mental weaknesses, fear and hesitation, they remain silent against domestic violence.

During those days of 19th century women were under veils. Roads were deserted in absence of electricity and transport. In those days Mataji alongwith some other women went for Ganga snan (bath at holy river Ganga). Road was deserted and distance was long. In between, there was an area of a deadly robber. Mataji got tired while walking. She told other female companions to go ahead without being worried for her and kept on walking down alone in that deserted area. After some time she saw one tall sturdy man coming towards her out of darkness. When he came nearer Mataji could see that he was a robber with dark complexion, thick hair, and carrying a baton. He tried to threaten with a loud voice, "Who is standing there at this time? Where do you want to go?" He came nearer. Maa replied with courage and love. "Bapu, my companions have gone ahead and I think I have forgotten my path. Will you take me to them? Your son-in-

law stays at Rani Rasmati's Kali mandir at Dakshineswar. Will you take me to him? He will give hearty welcome to you.” Before she could complete her speech, the robber's wife also came near. Mataji held her hand with compassion and assurance and said, “O mother, I am your daughter Sarada. With my good luck you both have come here. Otherwise how I would have managed?” Mataji's presence of mind, courage, unreservedness, simple attitude, full faith with confident and kind talk has helped to change heart of this so-called lower caste robber couple from “Bagdi” caste. It was as if both became her parents. Within one night all the three came so close to each other that separation brought tears in their eyes. Next day they walked so far that Mataji could join her pilgrim companions. On the way they plucked some green peas and gave to Maa and spoke with chalked voice, “Dear daughter Sarada, eat these peas also when you feel hungry.” Later on also they both paid visit to Dakshineswar thrice to meet their daughter and son-in-law with something or other as gift.⁴

Apart from this how Maa has protected herself from incident of sexual abuse by a well-known male devotee Harish, which can be read from the chapter “Revolutionary Maa” of this book.⁵

Gracefulness: A wonderful strength of nature is beauty. Nature has bestowed abundant beauty to women. But many a time they decorate their body with pompous ornaments and cloths and become instrument of pleasure and enjoyment for men. Men sometimes leave them behind after enjoying and using them. Many a time out of immaturity they consider these pompous decoration their strength. But it's too late

when outside beauty withers away and the whole life becomes painful.

This incident has been described by Maa Sarada's disciple. One day a lady came to Maa with decorated cloth and ornaments. She seemed uncomfortable. Addressing her, Maa said, “my child, keep in mind shyness is a woman's biggest ornament. A flower's ultimate achievement is to be offered to God. Some foppish men smell it for a while and say how sweet and next moment they throw them on the ground or crush them under their feet and move away.”⁶

Maa was not against outward beauty. As a small girl she herself was fond of wearing ornaments. When her niece Radhu had the urge to wear an anklet she fulfilled her wish but when she was coming off the staircase she advised her not to attract others with its jingling sound and told her to come down slowly.

Following customs and traditions radically:

Normally women do not accept and recognize require changes in customs, blind faith, superstition, caste differences, class distinction, relaxation for widow, etc. They remain very much orthodox in their attitude. This is the biggest hindrance to women's empowerment.

Normally Maa Sarada never used to hurt anybody by going against established customs and traditions. But there are many instances when she has opposed oppressions in the name of custom and usage and old outdated traditions. One girl who was married off at the age of ten became a widow at the age of fifteen and removed her hair. She became very weak due to strict rules and regulations pertaining to food

intake. Maa saw and asked her, “My dear, what do you eat on Ekadashi (eleventh day of month)?” “Earlier I used to take sago. Now I don't take,” she replied. Hearing this Maa at once told her, “No, no you must take Sago. It will keep your body cool.” Then she said with much dejection in her voice, “dear, you are following very strict rules and regulations. But now don't do it. You have become weak and lean. How will you be able to do meditation if your health deteriorates?”⁷ Thus she advised her to keep some relaxation around orthodox customs and traditions. Even Maa herself had never cut her hair and also kept on wearing gold bracelet after she became widow, standing firm and tall against orthodox society.

Oppose age old harmful customs and traditions without hurting anybody: She had very modern outlook with regard to marriage. A devotee's daughter did not want to get married, but her mother tried to pressurized her through Maa. Sri Maa said, “Spending life serving others, and living according to others' wishes, is it not painful?” Then she explained to her, “there are fear and obstacles if one does not get married but forceful marriage of those who do not want to get married is also an injustice.”⁸ She advised a female devotee not to pressurize her daughter to get married against her wish.

Educate and live life independently with self respect: In today's so-called modern families, sometime it happens that even though a girl child is bright in her studies and remains frontrunner during her primary and secondary school education, parents get married her off with a boy from an influential family, leaving her study half finished. Many

parents and even political leaders are of the view that a woman may spoil their family name if she becomes independent after completing studies. They are of the view that men and society as a whole should protect women. Though women have more common sense, due to lack of education and information they cannot use their legal rights properly and cannot protect themselves. Due to this reason women cannot make a good academic career and when such situation arises, have to depend on others for financial support.

Maa used to praise Suradidi who remained unmarried and was very effectively discharging her duty as Principal of Nivedita School, saying that, "How nice a girl she is, traveling alone in a car and also self-reliant."⁹ Though Maa Sarada never got opportunity to go to school, she used to make beautiful pillows, cushions and fans out of cotton jute and silk. She even has gifted one such fan to her foreign disciple sister Nivedita who has preserved it with love throughout her life. Thus it seems Maa Sarada was advocating for women's education and skill development training.

Be informed about current situation and learn English: Ma Sharda used to get news about first world war between 1914-1918 from her disciples. One day when Swami Arupanand came for salutation to Shri Maa, after enquiring about general well being she asked, "Ok my son give me some news about war. What a waste of life! Big machines have been invented just to kill people. Apart from countless small devices and machines, telegraph and trains are necessary for public welfare. But my son in our country there is scarcity of food and clothing. It was not there during

earlier time.”¹⁰ Thus illiterate Maa used to update herself about what is happening in India and abroad and for good or for bad.

Maa Sarada made various efforts and inspired the ashram celibate to increase their desire to get more information and knowledge. She used to say, “See many disciples will be here from foreign countries so please learn English language. In future requirement to converse in English will arise and therefore she insisted upon to learn English language. She didn't stop by just giving advice or insisting, she herself appointed Swami Dharmanand initially and Shri Krishna Bhushan from Dhaka as a teacher to teach English.”¹¹

Inability to work as team: Generally in family and in society, relations among women themselves are not cordial. Be it among mother-in-law and daughter-in-law or among sister-in-laws, cousin sisters, real sisters, aunts and nieces, mistresses and maids, relations are not very good. In the same way while maintaining relations with women colleague for those who lead social organization and with women disciples for those who lead spiritual organization one face innumerable problem and challenges. Reasons for the same may be attributed to perhaps short-sightedness of women, jealousy, and narrow-minded attitude of women. It has been observed that women lack mutual confidence, respect for each other, cannot supplement each other and can't give active support as team members.

Maa Sarada has shown how to maintain cordial relations at various ashrams of Ramkrishna Mission and devotees by putting the same into practice in her own life and thus has set a living example of women's empowerment. Incidents

pertaining to this can be read in detail in the chapter “Wonderful Leadership.”

Against Violence: There are various incidences in Ma Sharda's life when she has protested against injustice and exploitation done on women by their family and society which are narrated in the chapter Ma The Revolutionary. There are two incidences we will narrate here which happened in Ma Sarada own life. The first incidence occurred with a robber couple when she was going for Ganga snan. The man with dark complexion, thick hair, and carrying a baton tried to threaten her with loud voice, “Who is standing there at this time? Where do you want to go?” He came nearer. Maa replied with courage and love. “Bapu, my companions have gone ahead and I think I have forgotten my path. Will you take me to them? Your son-in-law stays at Rani Rasmati's Kali mandir at Dakshineswar. Will you take me to him? He will give hearty welcome to you.” Before she could complete her speech, robber's wife also came near. Mataji held her hand with compassion and assurance and said, “O mother, I am your daughter Sarada. With my good luck you both have come here. Otherwise how I would have managed?” Mataji's presence of mind, courage, unreservedness, simple attitude, full faith with confident and kind talk has helped to change heart of this so-called lower caste robber couple from “Bagdi” caste.¹²

The second incidence occurred with her very close man with devotee. Maa herself was such a shy and introverted person that she used to cover her head with her sari pallu as per the prevailing custom. She never spoke directly to any

man. Once, one of the disciples of Shri Ramakrishna, named Harish, became mentally unstable at an advanced age and began to stalk Maa. Maa, realizing his dishonorable intentions, started running towards the grains silo. When he still continued to pursue her, she pushed him to the floor and holding him down with her knee, she pulled out his tongue and slapped across the cheek so hard that her hands became red. Harish began to pant heavily and slowly walked away.¹³ Here Mother took a destructive form as Maa Durga when the occasion arose. These are to incidences by which Ma give a message to women that how one should behave to face violence.

Purity and love: Women's freedom movement is going on under banner of women empowerment. Sometime willfulness is treated as freedom and some women feel proud by maintaining relations with men other than her husband. Instances of breakdown of families are rising and future of children without mother and father is miserable.

Maa Sarada was incarnate icon of purity. Her husband Shri Ramkrishna once said about their married life that, "I would have lost my control had she not been so pure and ascetic."¹⁴

European disciple sister Nivedita, describing Maa's purity love and goodness, wrote a letter in 1910 stating that,¹⁵ "Maa, how full of affection and elated you are, your love is not impudent or fierce like our love, but it is gentle and peaceful, it is doing good to all, not being harmful to anybody like golden hue. Surely you are miraculous creation of God. We need to sit quietly without uttering a word in front of you except some movements of mischief! Truly all wonderful

creations of God are silent enters in our life gently without a word like sweet smell of flowers from garden, breeze, sunlight, like your memory, without any attachment and hate, like peace on peak of mountain, like dew on lotus petals aloof from worldly affair in heart beats of Shri Prabhu.”¹⁶

Motherhood: With women's freedom movement under banner of women empowerment, some women treat motherhood as hindrance for their progress and therefore they try to avoid it. During latter years of life some of them feel lonely, insecure and dull. But realization comes at a point when time is already over for them. Maa kept one boy of 11-12 years of age to look after cows. His name was Govind. Once he got infected by itch and it was not getting cured. One night, the pain started and it was so acute that he could not sleep the whole night and was crying continuously. Maa got worried. Next day she crushed neem leaves with turmeric, sitting at the verandah and made that boy stand in front of her and showed him how and where to apply medicine. Govind did it and after some time his itch got cured. When he grew up he said to one of the devotees that when I was small I was getting such skin infection and skin irritation even at my home. But my mother never gave a treatment for that.¹⁷

Be a wife and friend Married Life: When Shri Ramkrishna was staying at Dakshineswar his nephew Hridayram got appointed as priest. For years apart from priest duty Hridayram also served Shri Ramkrishna. Once Sri Maa came to Dakshineswar to meet Shri Ramkrishna alongwith her mother. On realizing that Maa will stay at Dakshineswar only Hridayram said with anger to Maa,

“Why you people have come here? What purpose have you got?” Looking at Hriday's impudent behavior Thakur didn't speak a word and Maa also returned without uttering a word.¹⁸

In society most men and women get married and start living together as a couple. Women's freedom movement under women's empowerment, there are some women who think and believe that women should have the right to live life as per her wish. Because of this thinking, a crack started appearing in married life. Instances of divorce are constantly increasing instead of living together by adjusting each other. As a result, children suffer the most without parents, along with aged senior citizens.

Maa adjusted with an ascetic husband and husband and wife lived a joyful married life and became complementary to each other, details of which have been narrated in the chapter Unique “Married Life” of this book.

As a woman and as a householder: In today's time of women's empowerment, some women treat special and specific qualities of women like tolerance, patience, sacrifice, purity as weaknesses of women. In Maa Sarada's life we can see that these qualities made her an ideal example of womanhood.

Maa Sarada, spent her whole life as an ordinary housewife. Her joint family consisted of selfish, arrogant, moody and queer natured niece, brothers and sister-in-law. Maa lived with all of them by keeping control on her mind, bearing with them, and forgiving their mistakes with co-operation and

unity. With her this attitude Maa has given very strong and effective message about how to maintain family relations. The details description is given in the respective chapters of this book.

Today women becoming financially sound because of higher education and higher post is a welcome situation. But at the same time, they do not find it necessary to keep and maintain various relations intact. But when things change and situation becomes adverse they cannot bear it and get depressed in absence of support and cooperation.

The way in which Maa Sarada has resolved inner conflicts among family members and among disciples during initial period of establishment of Shri Ramkrishna Mission is in itself is clear example of women empowerment.

4 Harmony of Religion

Maa Sarada was from a high caste Brahmin family, yet she never believed in discriminating against anyone on the basis of caste or religion. There are many instances from her life that prove that she was a truly secular woman. She was sympathetic to followers of Hindu, Christian, Parsi as well as Islam religions. Let us see some incidents in this regard.

Muslim Religion: Amjad, a Muslim, was bandit, who has helped to construct walls for Maa's house. Maa made



Mother feeding her muslim son Amjad

Amjad sit on the verandah so that lunch can be served. Nalinidevi, Maa's niece, believer of untouchability, was serving food to Amjad from quite a distance. Seeing this, Maa spoke loudly, "If you serve in this way no human being will be able to eat food. If you cannot, I will serve." When lunch was over Maa cleaned the dirty floor herself. She reprimanded Nalini saying, "Sharat (Swami Saradanand) is like my son, and Amjad also is like that."¹ At Jayramvati, Barshat Ali, living at nearby village, heard many incidents from his uncle. Their Sheikh family was tilling land and doing work of bullock cart ferry. Maa Sarada used to hire their bullock cart whenever she happens to go to Kamar Pukur, Kual Pada or Vishnupur from Jayramvati. The Sheikh family women used to visit Maa and share their confidential matters, and Maa used to listen to it very calmly. Maa had so much intimacy with Sheikh family that they used to give her all farm products like vegetables fruits, jaggery, etc. as presents. And Maa, with much coaxing and persuasion, used to accept with reasonable price. Maa used to address Salmabibi, the elder woman of this family, as "masi". During festival celebration at their durgah, Maa used to send sweets and offerings. Sheikh Mufta on seeing Maa's offering asked, "Maa, in spite of being Hindu why you are sending presents during our religious festivals?" Maa told while replying "My son, can God be different? All God sare one only." Sheikh Mufta once saw Maa in his dream. From then onward he accepted Maa Sarada as "Pir" (saint).²

“True Brahmin is not by birth but by deeds”:

A Kayasth doctor was of great service to Maa Sarda's family. Once, Radhu fell sick, she was treated by this Kayasth doctor.

After the doctor completed his examination, Maa asked her niece Radhu to prostrate before him, which she did. Some of the others who were present in the room, asked if he was a Brahmin. Maa replied that he was a doctor. One of the disciples asked, if he was not a Brahmin, why then did she ask Radhu to pay her respects to him? Maa replied, “Why should she not? He is as learned as a Brahmin and if she will not pay her respects to him, to whom will she? Son, do you not agree?”³

Christianity: In those tradition bound days, society would ex-communicate people who had any kind of interaction with the Europeans whatsoever. Europeans were not allowed to enter the temples. When Swami Vivekanand's European disciple, Margaret Nobel, who later on took the name of Sister Nivedita, came to Kolkata to serve the society, Maa asked her to stay with the orthodox women disciples so that she could become an integral part of the Indian society and be able to serve the nation. Swamiji was baffled by her attitude, but Maa stuck to her guns and said that she accepted Nivedita as her daughter and stayed with her at home. Later in a letter to his fellow disciple, Swamiji wrote, “Maa is here. Many European and American ladies went to meet her. Can you believe that Maa even had lunch with them? Such generosity!!”⁴

Rituals of all religions are Divine: One day Maa asked St. Nevidata and her fellow European disciple to explain the rituals of European weddings. Taking great delight in acting, sometimes as the bride and groom, and sometimes as the officiating priest, we explained the ceremony to her. Finally we came to the wedding vows. “For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to

cherish, till death us do part.” On hearing the vows, she was the happiest person and repeatedly asked us to say them again. She said, “Such divine and pure words!”⁵

In a book, Sister Nivedita has mentioned Maa's broad minded and secular outlook. She says, “Once Maa came to visit us at home during Easter. She went around the house and finally, sitting in the prayer room, she explained to me the significance of Easter. When Maa listened to the music and songs of Easter she realised the deep meaning behind them and we had a glimpse then, of the profound spiritual nature of Maa.

Parsi Faith: Once when Maa was very sick and bedridden, a Parsi youth came to meet her, from Mumbai. By then Maa had stopped meeting devotees or giving them “Mantra Deeksha.” This Parsi youth had read the writings of Swami Vivekananda and been drawn towards spirituality. Swami Sharadanand was very pleased to see him but did not allow him to go upstairs to meet Maa and asked him to wait in a room downstairs. Somehow Maa came to know about this and sent a disciple to fetch him. She met him, spoke to him and also gave him “Mantra Deeksha.” This young man was none other than Sohrab Modi, who went on to become a famous actor and producer in Mumbai.⁶

Today, when in the 21st century, there is a lot of tension between the various faiths and sometimes even between the various denominations of the same faiths. In the orthodox 19th century, many illiterate village women of different faiths, as well as the subjects of Hindus, set aside their differences to affectionately address her as “Maa” (Mother). This shows how truly secular Maa was.

5 Maa, the Revolutionary

Maa took many revolutionary steps during conservative 19th Century. In those days people of schedule cast was treated as untouchable. Maa Sarada never discriminated against people on the basis of their religion, caste, level of literacy, place of birth or their character.

Against Domestic Violence in Slum/Labour

Class: One day Maa was sitting in the first floor verandah



Mother stopping a man beating his wife

facing the roadside in “Udhbodhan” (meditative state) and saying her prayers. Across the roads were slums. In one of the houses Maa saw a man thrashing his wife mercilessly.

Initially he beat her with his fists. Then he kicked her so forcefully that she toppled and fell along with the baby in her lap. He still continued to kick her. Maa stopped her prayers. She stood up with the support of the railing and shouted angrily, “You imbecile, do you intend to kill your wife?” Though that man was still enraged, as soon as he heard Maa, he hung down his head and stopped beating his wife. On receiving sympathy from Maa, the lady broke down and started sobbing. Her only fault was that she had not cooked the meal on time. After some time when the man's anger subsided, he sat down with her to pacify his wife. The onlookers dispersed and went back to their respective houses.¹

Assume Bagala form to punish demonic nature:

The other incident involves Maa personally. Maa herself was such a shy and introverted person that she used to cover her head with her sari palloo as per the prevailing custom. She never spoke directly to any man. Once, one of the disciples of Shri Ramakrishnadev, named Harishbhai, became mentally unstable at an advanced age and began to stalk Maa. Maa, realizing his dishonorable intentions, started running towards the grains silo. When he still continued to pursue her, she pushed him to the floor and holding him down with her knee, she pulled out his tongue and slapped across the cheek so hard that her hands became red. Harish began to pant heavily and slowly walked away.² Maa became Bagala to punish with heroic hands the demands of Harish.

The first to give affirmation to the sadhus for service of humanity: “Aatmano Moksharth, Jagat Hithaya cha” (For the liberation of the Aatmaa as well as for

the welfare of the society) was the guiding principle of Swami Vivekananda behind the establishing of the Ramakrishna mission. A few sadhus, who believed in this, began serving the poor and the destitute in the mission. But the other protesting sadhus mockingly called them “Bhangi Sadhu” (low caste sadhus) and treated them as such. When Maa was on a tour of India, she personally went to see the working of the Sewashram hospital in Benares. Maa was extremely pleased to see how the hospital was being run, and said “See, Thakur himself is present here. All this is his handi work.” These emphatic and clear words of Maa Sarada, lay to rest any doubts that existed in people's minds about Swami Vivekananda's ideals of service to the poor.³

In those days Sadhus liked to go into seclusion and meditate. They believed that service to humanity was not appropriate for them. At that time, Swami Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna mission to instill the ideal of “Shivagyane Jeev Seva” (seeing God in man serving them) in the lives of the sadhus. In the initial stages he faced a lot of resistance from his fellow disciples as well the householder devotees of Shri Ramakrishna. They neither understood nor were they willing to accept this ideal and protested against this vociferously. But some of his supporters were inspired by Swami's words and established a Sewashram hospital in Benares (Varanasi) to serve the sick. Before the Ramakrishna mission was established, it was a generally held belief that those who wished to become one with the Lord should not involve themselves in domestic and daily practical routines. Sadhus were not supposed to run hospitals and schools for children or relief work to help to people affected by natural calamity.

Her views regarding widow: Usually Maa didn't wish to hurt the sentiments of anybody by going against established traditions. But she felt equally strongly that it was necessary to bring about a change in those beliefs that crushed the dignity of the common man. In that context, let us recount some anecdotes where Maa Sarada tried to bring about a change in the outlook of her disciples as well as herself.

Kshirodbala married at the tender age of 10, and widowed at the age of 15 was made to cut off her hair. Following the rigid customs of widowhood, she ate only the restricted frugal food as a result of which she became physically very weak. When Maa met her she asked the girl about the food she took on Ekadasi days. The girl replied that previously she would eat Sago (sabudana) but now she did not eat it. On hearing this Maa told her that she should continue to eat Sago as it would keep her body cool. Further, she advised the girl not to keep too many fasts as her body had become like a log of wood. She also asked her how she would be able to do Sadhana (daily disciplines for achieving higher goals) if her health deteriorated. According to prevalent customs Kshirodbala had tonsured her head. On seeing this Maa advised her thus: “When you were young it was right to cut your hair as you would have had to take care of it and it would have led to temptation. But now that you have grown up and are above desires there is no need to follow such harsh customs.”⁴ On the one hand Maa agreed to the sacrifice of desires but on the other hand she insisted that women should look after their health so as to be able to serve

the Lord. Thus we see a happy integration of compassion and spirituality in Maa.

Maa Sarada herself become widowed at the young age of 33, Maa endured the torture imposed on her by society as well as her family members. She defied them and refused to cut her hair, continued to wear a sari with a small red border and a golden bracelet on her hand.⁵

It moves us when we hear about the pitiable conditions of widows even in the 21st century. Even today, in some distant corners of our country, widows are forced to shave their head, break their bangles and wear only white saris and sometimes even commit “Sati” (burning the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband). There are many instances in Maa's life, where in we can see how she defied the then existing harmful traditions but kept alive and chose to follow herself. Is Maa Sarada not teaching us through her beliefs and practices that, if we do not adapt to changing times but continue to blindly follow inhuman traditions, it will cause our own downfall? It is up to women to challenge such customs and put an end to such age old practices.

Beyond caste, religion and country: Maa Sarada never discriminated against people on the basis of their religion, caste, level of literacy, place of birth or their character. An unemployed Muslim youth named Amjad took to looting to make ends meet. Earlier he had helped Maa to construct a wall in her house. One day she served him a meal on her verandah. Her niece Nalinidevi, who believed in untouchability stood afar and threw the food on to his plate. On seeing this Maa said “Will anybody eat food if they are

served like this? If you cannot serve, I shall do it.” Not only that, Maa waited till he had finished his meal and cleaned up the place. On seeing this Nalinidevi remarked “Aunt, now you are an outcaste.” Rebuking her Maa said, “Amjad is as much my son as Sharad (Swami Sharadanand) is.”⁶

Maa had many foreign devotees on whom she showered her love and learnt their customs. One evening in April 1920, a European lady whose daughter was very sick, came to seek Ma's blessings. Following their custom she shook hands with them and also greeted them in the traditional Bengali way. She presented her a lotus flower and “Bilva Patra” (leaf of the Indian Bel tree sacred for Lord Shiva) to her daughter and sincere blessings for her speedy recovery. The lady visited Maa frequently and took “Mantra Diksha” (an initiation with a sacred word or phrase) from her. Maa loved her deeply.⁷

Views on Marriage: Though Maa herself had been married off at the tender age of 5, as she grew up, her views were modern and she herself opposed child marriage. She supported those girls who did not wish to marry and also counselled their parents not to put pressure on them. One of her female devotees was very worried as she had five unmarried daughters. Maa told her not to worry about it and advised her to admit her daughters to Nivedita school where they would get educated, lead a happy life and be helpful to others too.⁸ Is not her viewpoint relevant even today? In another incident one of her devotees, who wanted to forcibly get her daughters married, came to meet Ma. Maa told her that though it was worrisome to keep a daughter unmarried, it was sheer injustice to get her married against her wishes.

Was it less painful to live like a slave and dance to somebody else's tune than to lead an independent life?⁹

Proponent of girl's right to self-determination and self-dependence:

Praising the unmarried Principal of Nivedita school Sudhiradidi, Maa told one of her devotees, “such a wonderful independent woman. She drives a car herself and is self-dependent unlike other women.”¹⁰ It was as if Maa wished to pass on a message to the unmarried girls as well as their parents that marriage was not the be all and end all. If a girl doesn't wish to get married, her wish should be accepted. It was more important to make the unmarried girls self-reliant and independent. Without any type of fear or embarrassment, they should learn to ride bicycles, two wheelers and four wheelers. They would thus be able to do their work within the city as well as outside, without depending on others.

Nurturing Girl Child: In those days of 19th century even girls from well-to-do families didn't receive formal education. When Maa's niece Radhu attained puberty, one of her women devotees said, “Now that Radhu has come of age, it is not proper to send her to school. She should stay at home.” On hearing this Radhu started crying. Shri Maa raised objection and asked, “What do you mean by coming of age? She should go to school as what she learns will not only benefit her but others also.”¹¹ Though Shri Maa had an intense desire to study, she never got the opportunity to do so. One day when Maa and her niece Lakshmi were reading a book in Kamarpukur, her nephew Hriday babu snatched the book from her hands and said “Reading and writing is of no

use to girls. Why do you want to read dramas and stories?" In spite of this, quietly, Maa went and bought another book and continued to read it with Lakshmi after school hours.¹² The enthusiasm to gain knowledge stayed with her. Even at the age of 33, when she was in Dakshineswar, she learnt how to read from Bhavnath Mukherjee's daughter.

Laid the foundation for girls' education: Maa not only learnt to read by herself but also encouraged Radhu and the daughters of her disciples to continue their education. In November 1898, when Swami Vivekananda's Irish disciple, Margaret Elizabeth Noble - Sister Nivedita started a school for girls, Maa inaugurated it in the presence of Swamiji and other members of the Ramakrishna Math. Maa gave her blessings and good wishes for the school, saying that the students should receive the blessings of Goddess Jagadamba (Universal Mother) and turn out to be ideal citizens¹³.

One evening when many girl students from Nivedita School came to meet her, Maa asked them about their studies. When she learnt that they knew English, she requested them to translate a sentence. Maa was extremely pleased when one of the girls did so. Then Maa asked them if they knew how to sing. When they replied that they could, she requested them to sing a song from South India. Since the girl was the daughter of a devotee from South India, she readily complied. On hearing the song Maa expressed sheer joy as she thought that it was important for the girls to learn English and Music.¹⁴ Thus Maa who had no formal education laid the foundation for the education of girls.

Protest against British Government: Though Maa had many foreign disciples whom she loved deeply, she knew that the British government was ill-treating and torturing her fellow Indians. The following two incidents depict the treatment meted out by the British government to the freedom fighters and revolutionaries. This is the incident where the police had ill-treated two women from Bakunda village. One of these women was pregnant. Suspecting that they were involved in some revolutionary activities the police arrested them and took them on foot to the police station. Though the villagers requested the police to take them in a vehicle, they did not listen. On hearing this Maa was aghast. Shuddering with rage she said, “What are you saying?” Agitatedly she continued, “Was this a direct order from the company? Is this a sign of their bravery? I have never heard of such behavior in the reign of Queen Victoria. And if this is how they are going to conduct their affairs they will not continue to rule for long in India. Was there no man present who could have slapped the police and freed the woman?”¹⁵

Many freedom fighter youth who were in hiding or on the run or had been freed from prison, would come to seek her blessings. When the police got the information about this, they came to conduct a search of her house. Fearlessly this brave rustic woman faced the police and continued to give shelter and her blessings to these freedom fighters.¹⁶

Both these incidents send a message about how even uneducated rural women of peaceful nature can become revolutionary and fiercely fight injustice meted out to others like Maa did.

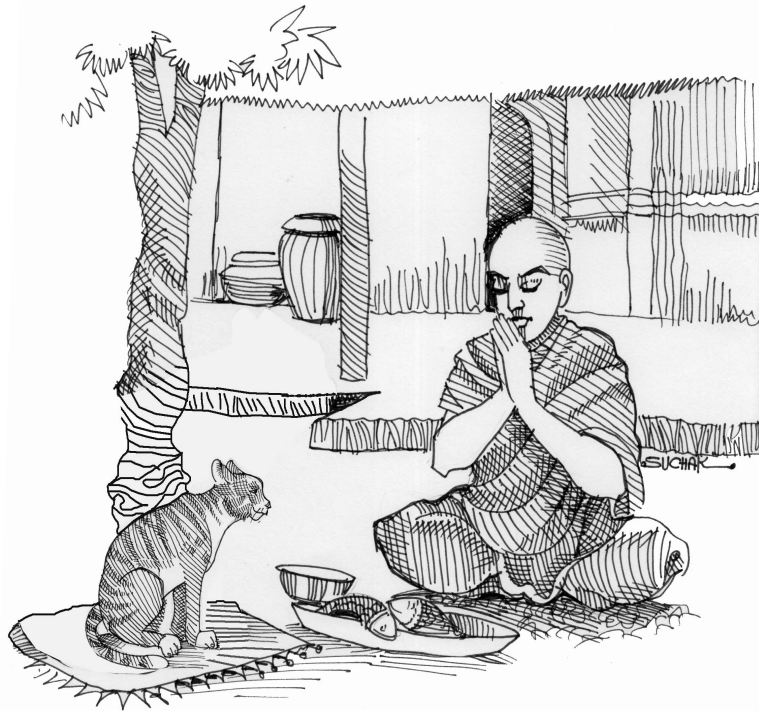
In the Chapter “Jagat Janani” (Universal Mother) we will come across various instances from Ma's life which depict her broad minded outlook wherein she treated all people whether they are foreigners, wicked people, sinners and of low caste with equal compassion and behaved with them in the same manner without any discrimination.

Thus, Maa is a living example to the modern women of today, as to how they can use their presence of mind, self-confidence and their latent inner strengths to protect themselves in times of need. Don't you think these are the revolutionary step taken by Maa?

6 Follower of Practical Vedanta

The main target of Vedanta is to stay in the midst of struggle for life, and to experience undivided divine luster every where and in all and to give pleasure to all and everybody around. Maa Sarada has brought dry and complicated subjects like Vedanta from caves, tops of mountain and solitude of forest to the worldly battle for common men.

Same Divine Spirit resides in all living beings, including animals: There are many instances in the life



Guided by mother a monk looks up at cat as God

of Maa Sharda pertaining to animals like cat, cow, birds like parrots, where she treated all of them equally. Maa's niece Radhu had one cat as pet. This cat used to enter ashram kitchen again and again and put her mouth in milk and curd. Disciples who were in charge of the kitchen used to get annoyed and beat her. Or sometimes used to dash on ground lifting her tail. The cat also used to run and press herself lovingly near Maa's legs. "Even cat will also feel hungry and thirsty, give her due share," Ma advised these disciples. When she went to Kolkata those celibate never beat her, not only that, though he was vegetarian he used to cook fish and feed cat. What a unique way of practicing Vedanta in practical life. ¹

At Jayramvati one calf was bellowing near Maa's house. He was tied up separately from his mother in order to be milked. On hearing its sound Maa immediately came out and freed the calf. ²

Maa kept one parrot at her home and named it "Gangaram." She herself used to give baths, feed him, clean his cage, and morning and evening used to go near him and taught a few words like Gangaram, Hare Krishna Hare Ram, Ram-Ram, etc. The parrot used to imitate accordingly. Those celibates staying with Maa used to address her as "Maa", and the parrot imitated them, and used to call her saying "maa o, maa." And Maa also sensing his thirst and hunger used to give him water and gram. ³

There is one more of such an incident. Maa's niece Radhu kept one male and one female cat as pets. She named them as

'Rang' and 'Ramni'. Both were well in Maa's household. They never used to pollute food by putting their mouth in the milk vessel. They used to be satisfied by whatever Raghu or Gulabmaa used to give them to eat. One day 'Rang' spoiled Maa's disciple Rasbihari Maharaj's bed, and out of anger he took him away to the jungle early one morning, far away from ashram, and left them there. Maa unhappy and worried said, "How shameful it is. Why Rasbihari behaved in such a way in the early morning? Even though he is a sadhu he does not have soft feelings." Raghu and Gulabmaa were very upset. 'Rang' returned to 'udbodhan' after few months. But was very weak. After few days he died outside in the street. His dead body was immersed in river Ganga. Normally special food is served after a person is deceased. Maa Sarada, collecting money from devotees, served special food on thirteenth day of Rang's death in which she invited guests, celibates, and sadhus from Belur Math. On this occasion sadhu sang some devotional and narrative songs for Goddess Kali. Even Thakur's favourite song was also sung. Thus, respect, rites and rituals that are performed for deceased human being were performed for this animal, a cat.⁴

Treating non-living items with respect: Once at Maa's home one female devotee had thrown a broom quite far, after cleaning the courtyard. Seeing this Maa exclaimed, "Oh what have you done? You threw away the broom after work was done? You require equal time for both, whether you throw away or whether you keep it carefully in a proper place. Should you treat it as worthless since it is a small thing? You will be taken care of by those things only which you have

preserve. And again you will require it. Above all broom also is a part of household. Therefore it has got its own importance. Even smallest work should be done with faith.”⁵

Above all discriminations: Capability of Maa's mind amongst various individual, situation and work agendas had a continuous flow of love and compassion which originated from her soul. It quenched all and everybody's thirst without any discrimination, be it a human being or bird or animal, living being or lifeless like broom crossing all limit and rising above everything. If we look at Maa Sarada's family life, difficulties and problems that she got from all her family members of different and strange nature like nephew Ramlal, nephew Hridayram, selfish brothers, stubborn and queer nieces, and mad widowed sister-in-law, Maa beared them all with a peaceful mind, without any clash or complain, kept all of them together and she herself also stayed with them throughout her life. Same way she has set an ideal example by putting into practice herself, for heads of different ashrams of Ramakrishna Mission and saints and celibates staying with them, on how to maintain mutual relations by lovingly respecting each other with trust. Incidents with reference to these are depicted in chapter “Women's Empowerment” and “Extraordinary Leadership” and are suggestive of Maa's life as a practical Vedantist.

The basic principle of Vedanta says that hidden divinity is there in everybody, one should ignite that divinity keeping faith in oneself and others, and identify oneness with others' divinity, experience eternal joy and peace. The execution of

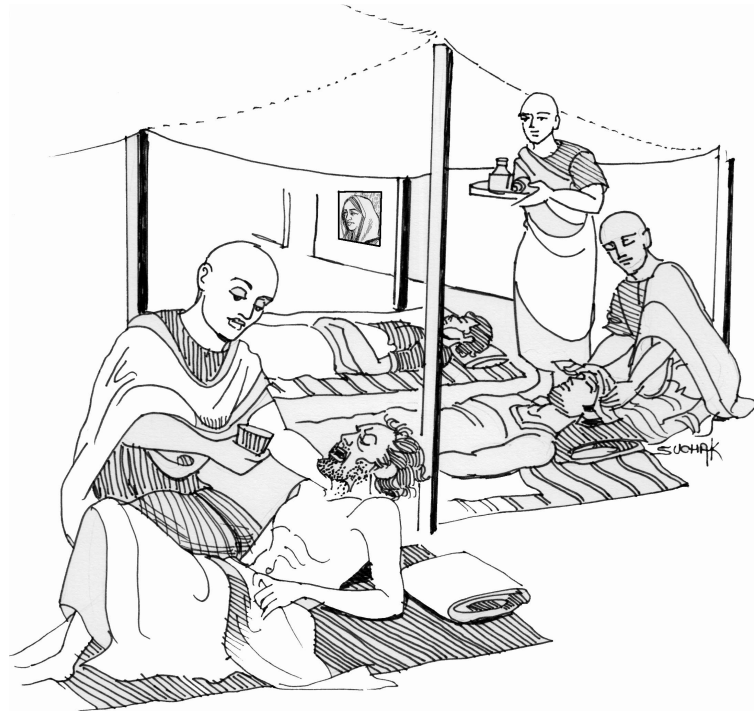
all these principle is reflected in Maa's life. The last five days before her final journey she had replied to question by her female disciple and with that she has given her last message to perplex, tormented and tired of hatred human race that if you want peace, ignore others' faults, and if want to see them, look at your faults. Embrace the whole world; nobody is an outsider here, all are your own. Through this last message Maa Sarada appears as a follower of practical Vedanta.

7 Karmayogi Maa Sarada

Maa Sarada was established as an ideal Karmayogi by working until the last moment of her life. During her childhood days at her father's home she used to help her mother in kitchen, cleaning of utensils, bringing fodder, as well as taking care of her small siblings, playing with them and distributing baked and parched dry eatables among them.¹

After marriage her time was spent in serving her mother-in-law and ascetic husband, and then serving devotees. All the work she used to do efficiently with practical vigilance, although she used to speak, behave and deal according to place, time and person. She used to work continuously even then. She was very peaceful from within. She never let her heart besmeared for anybody or get restless. She used to give proper decisions in varied situation keeping herself cool quiet and even-minded. Let us read some incidents and messages from life of karmayogi Maa.

Shiv gyane jivseva: When Ramkrishna Mission was to be formed in 19th century at that time saints and ascetics of various religion and sect used to prefer to stay in solitude for spiritual practice. Serving humanity was treated to be against scriptures and holy books. When Swami Vivekanand started the Mission with an aim of 'Shiv gyane jivseva' (seeing God in man and serving them). There was severe opposition from many, including his fellow brothers, householder devotees of



Blessed by mother monks serve men as God in hospital

Thakur, and the general public. There is one incident during the beginning period where in Maa Sarada supported Swamiji's Mission with her stamp. During November 1912 Maa was on pilgrimage to Kashi-Banaras along with some female devotees, Mahendra Nath Gupta (writer of 'Kathamrut') and other sages and ascetics. She was very happy to visit and see that Sevashram Hospital was working well. She also gifted Rs.10 for hospital. That day itself one devotee asked Maa while saluting her that, "Maa how is Sevashram working?" Maa replied gently, "I visualized that Thakur himself is present here. Therefore it is going on. I think It is his work only." When Swami Brahmanand came to know about it he informed Swami Shivanand. At that time

Mahendra Gupta also came to Adwait ashram. He had mental retention that to take vow and to do social service without accomplishment does not match with the ideology of Shri Ramkrishna Dev. Swami Brahmanand knew it. So when he saw him arriving he sent some devotees and celibates nearer him to ask a question that, “Maa says Sevashram's work is Thakur's work. Thakur himself is present here. Now what you have to say?” Everybody started asking questions. Maharaj also joined them. So finally Mahendra Gupta said laughingly, “Now this thing cannot be denied.”²

Do small or big work efficiently: During same time when she was still at Kashi in year 1912 Mataji visited an elderly women ashram run by Shri Ramkrishna Mission. During her visit she said, “To serve these helpless old women is like serving God. Oh, how beautiful work these boys are doing.”³

During same period some other ascetic, who has given up the world, came and said, “It is opinion of some people that to run Sevashram Hospital, selling books, maintain accounts etc. works are not suitable for saints. Because Thakur never did it. If at all somebody wants to do something, they should involve themselves in worship, rosary, meditation etc. All other works attracts mind towards sensual pleasure and one becomes averse to God.” Maa listened to whatever he said and then replied emphatically, “If you don't work, what you will do for whole day? Can you meditate for 24 hours? And you are saying something about Thakur? He is a different person altogether. You get food because you work

here. Otherwise are you going to roam from one house to another just for fist of food? Please go ahead as per God's wish. This Math will run in this way only. Those who cannot bear it may leave.⁴

Once at Jayramvati she spoke about meditation and rosary, “how many can do meditation and rosary for whole day? It is better to work keeping mind steady without being wavering. If mind remains unoccupied, it creates difficulty and problems. Knowing this my Naren has started work which is free from desire of fruit.”⁵

Treat all the work as worship of God: Mataji's follower Rasbihari Maharaj at Jayramvati narrated one incident of Maa's reminiscence to Mataji's householder devotee Chandra mohan Dutt. One day, with a burning heart, Rasbihari Maharaj asked Maa whether he will have to spend his whole life doing work like supervision of building construction, account maintenance, purchases from market, etc.? Maa replied to him very calmly, “My son, tell me what else you would like to do? Presently, to have perception of God, Swamiji has shown this precise path. You will definitely get emancipation if you treat all the work as worship of God without thinking about results. What else you would like to do? Do you want to do penance at Himalaya? You will see sadhu there fighting among each other for a piece of roti or blanket for protection against cold. If you leave all this work to go to forest or caves or mountain and sit there quietly closing your eyes, do you think you will find God in front of you? Don't you think that path shown by Narendra is better

one? What you will prefer to do compared to this work? Whatever you are doing is service to God only. You imagine that you are doing for God only. Why do you think that this is all your work? Look at me.” As per her command I looked at her. Instead of simple sober Mataji I saw living Goddess with heap of luster sparkling all around. I couldn't look at that Goddess for more time. Speechless and frightened, I closed my eyes. After some time, he again heard the familiar voice of Mataji. “Rasbihari what happened to you suddenly? Why you have shut your eyes? Look at me.” And maharaj opened his eyes and again he could see a very familiar face with a smile.⁶

Think that you are doing God's work only:

This incident has been narrated by Mataji's householder devotee Kumudbandhu Sen. Swami Trigunatitanand was reading one letter addressed to his fellow brothers. Swamiji has instructed to read it in front of Mataji and her female devotees. Swamiji has specially appealed to his fellow brothers to serve Thakur and to spread and propagate for sacrificed life. After reading the letter Maa said, “Naren is an instrument of master. Naren is medium to realize Thakur's idealism. Thakur is inspiring Naren to write such words to give inspiration to his disciples and devotees to serve people of whole world. Whatever Naren is writing is very much true. This message will have big impact in coming year in future on world.”⁷

One day Rammoy Maharaj was spreading mats for lunch. Maa was just looking over from verandah. When Maa told

him that he has not spread mats properly he again started spreading it in his own way. Maa again told him that mats still has not been spread properly. Now he got confused and couldn't understand what exactly Maa meant. Maa came inside from verandah. All the mats were kept parallel to each other with equal space between two mats, and considering front portion all mats made one straight line. By keeping disciple's mind steady, Maa has given training on how to reach supreme power.⁸ Thus she, along-with inner purity of spiritual life and maintaining speech, behavior and dealings of day-to-day life used to synchronize outer cleanliness herself and from disciples also. Thus even smallest work she was doing with true conception and efficiently and got it done from others also.

There is long list of work done by Maa, who kept herself busy continuously while maintaining detachment. We will see one such incident in which she advised her disciples to keep their mind occupied. During the year 1912-13 she saw some of her disciples wasting their energy due to swadeshi movement in worthless talks, wandering here and there, chanting some slogans like "Vande Mataram." Maa said, "see, please do not waste your energy in this way. Bring loom and start weaving cloth. All of you start working." She didn't stop just at giving order, she said that if she gets a spinning wheel she will also start spinning.⁹

Do not waste your strength in useless talks, start doing constructive work: Now let us talk about her detachment feeling. Through out her life, Maa also took

care of her niece Radhi, who has lost her father. She was the apple of her eye. But at one point of time she told her disciple Swami Ishanandji that “please take these people from here and keep them at Jayramvati. Just see that they do not come to me again.” Seeing this detachment, her family members never had courage to get closer to her. Raghu's small son came close to Maa's bed, walking on his knees and started riding upon Maa's chest. Seeing this Maa said, “now I have released myself from all the attachment. Now you will not be able to bind me.”¹⁰ Sister Nivedita has herself experienced Maa's unattached daily routine and has wrote in one letter that your memories are without any attachment and hate, like peace on peak of mountain, like dew on lotus petals a loof from worldly affair in heart beats of Shri Prabhu.¹¹

Maa has established a path: by remaining detached, a human being can remain active, so that the mind remains delighted and can establish an ideal of service to humanity as away to attain God.

8 Maa Sarada, the Scientist

In this 21st century, scientists have provided comforts and facilities to mankind beyond one's imagination through a variety of scientific breakthroughs. Sitting at home within the brief time of batting an eyelid, one can contact anyone anywhere in the world. But on the other hand, in many technologically advanced countries, due to disruption in family lives people experience loneliness, insecurity, uncertainty and invisible fears. When we see children, devoid of love from parents with disturbed mental conditions, moral conflicts, the environmental degeneration etc., we wonder: what has science and technology really achieved? More problems have arisen than solutions.

The Integration of Science with Spirituality requires mental discipline: It is difficult to bring into day-to-day practice the hidden knowledge and philosophy of spirituality. It is important that one maintains a steady mind as a habit while carrying out one's duties, small and big. Mother had an eye for details. Let us hear an incident in this regard from her disciple Ramamay Maharaj. "One day I was laying out sal leaves to serve as plates for taking food. After having shaken them and sprinkled a little water on them, Mother broke in, "Oh, no! My boys will be having their food; wash the leaves well, else the dust will remain. When I was well I used to wash the leaves one by one and wipe them with a piece of cloth." Another day when I was placing the asanas



Mother washes leaf plates

at mealtime, from the veranda adjoining her room she observed, “They are not placed straight.” Even after I had rearranged them a little, she commented, “Not straight yet.” I was confused as to what was amiss, she came herself had been placed parallel to each other, equidistant, their fronts presenting a straight line.¹ Thus there is perfect harmony of spirituality, science and practical approach in her life.

The general definition of science in today's world is the systematic study and practical analysis of subjects where in the results can be experienced and quantified using our various senses. Most people also think that science is meant to

improve the living conditions and comforts of our lives and make one happy; but this happiness is short-lived. Ancient knowledge and wisdom have sustained the society for thousands of years, but can we reject these as old-fashioned ideas and bid them permanent goodbye?

Such complex and knotted problems were answered by an uneducated village woman, Maa Sharada in the 19th century. Many incidents from her life show a deep understanding of these issues. In her life story one comes across seemingly contradictory thoughts and ideals; between ancient and modern and science and spirituality. But she has been able to integrate these very well.

Integration of Modern and Ancient Ideals:

Maa Sharada, while working for the development of young girls and removing the various harmful societal practices imposed on widows, adopted modern technology and combined it with the ancient thoughts to bring about a change in her own life and the lives of all around her. In the 21st century, we hear of many countries who oppose learning and speaking of languages of other countries. In particular, English as a medium of communication is objected to by many, we are told. In contrast to this, in the 19th century, partially literate Maa desired that rural people who were her devotees learn to communicate in English. She used to tell them that when foreign students and devotees visit the Mission, they would have to communicate with the foreigners in English. She did not stop at giving the advice to them. She employed an English teacher for this purpose.²

When the British disciple Nivedita started a girls' school, she came to know that many girls already knew English. She was very happy that they could translate a sentence in Bengali to English and congratulated them for this. Once a European lady came to visit Maa and while shaking hands with her, Maa said, "Please come, when in Rome, do as the Romans do".³

The Integration of Science with Spirituality:

Many people think that science and spirituality are opposite ideas. With some deeper understanding, one can see that these two are the two sides of the same coin. Then one realizes that for a comfortable and peaceful life, both need to be integrated together.

In physical sciences, theory is postulated and then proven through experimentation. One needs necessary materials, chemicals and proper procedures for this purpose. Similarly, in the life of Maa Sharada, for establishment of scientific and spiritual knowledge she used Vivek (discrimination), Vairagya (detachment), and pavitrata (inner purity) as the means. Thus she was able to see the one and only principle in all living and non-living beings, moving and immovable things which is pure love. In all the small and large incidents of her life, this pure love was the foundation of all her work and interactions. One can see this aspect of her in all the interactions, speech and behavior throughout her life. She guided people in using the railways and other facilities provided by the British judiciously which shows her amazing understanding and integration of thoughts. This can be seen through some incidents.

Maa said to one of her disciples that “I hear that there are also many small and large inventions made for the welfare of people like telegraph and railway. For example, yesterday Rasbihari left for Calcutta and he has already reached today. In earlier days, for going to Dakshineswar one had to walk so much and it took many days to reach and with so much effort.” Encouraged by these words of Ma, Prabodhbabu, Headmaster of Badanganj School, started praising the advancement of western countries. He said, “British people have improved the lives of common people a lot.” She nodded to this at that time, but after some thoughts, she said that there is acute shortage of food and clothes now, which was never the case earlier.⁴

One day, her disciple Swami Arupanand came to Shri Maa to pay his obeisance. After enquiring about his health and well being, she told him, “Son, the news of the World War is so frightening. How they have invented machines just to kill people!” What a loss of life. Thus she guided people to use facilities provided by the British judiciously.

9 Maa Sarada, the Friend of Environment

In this 21st century, many problems have arisen due to the damage to the environment caused by various human activities for which countries are blaming each other. Global warming is the main challenge faced by us. While the whole world is trying to face this challenge and working to find suitable solutions, it seems more than 150 years ago Maa Sarada realized that this is going to be a major problem to be faced in future. We can find many incidents in Ma's life in this regard which points to simple solutions practiced by her for these problems that can be followed by each and every person in his or her own life.

Real Love for Environment: While returning from



Mother waters plants on the road side

bathing in Ganga, she carried a water filled pot with her. She watered the various plants and trees on the way back. She also took care of these plants.¹ Thus, she utilised her time and effort caring for the flora and fauna around her. These qualities and traits of Maa show the real love she had for the environment.

Not wasting resources & using them frugally:

Once a devotee brought a basketful of fruits which were offered as Prasad to the God. He gave the fruits to the brahmacharis. Later the devotee enquired with them as to what to do with the empty basket. They asked him to throw it away in the lane nearby which he did. Maa who was sitting there, observed this and said, “How can you throw away a good basket? They are not bothered but how can useful things be discarded? It can be used for collecting the waste of vegetables, the fruit peels and the seeds etc. which can then be fed to the animals.” She then asked the man to bring back the basket. It was washed and kept in a suitable place thereafter for reuse.²

Integration of Cottage Industries with Modern Technology:

It is said that even before Mahatma Gandhi started the non-cooperation movement and home weaving of khadi, Maa encouraged cottage industries (home based industries). Those days, British companies were doing business in India. Due to the policies of the foreign rulers, there was acute shortage of textiles in the country. The women found it difficult to get sufficient cloth to even cover their modesty. Due to not having clothes, they even found it difficult to go outside their homes!! There were many stories reported daily of women committing suicide to protect their

honor. When these reports made a deep impression on Maa, tears came pouring down from her eyes and she started weeping. She asked, “When will these people (British) leave this country?” When she became calm, she said, “Earlier, spinning wheel used to run in every house, the fields used to grow cotton and people used to make the cloth as needed by themselves. There was no shortage of cloth. Now the British companies have come and ruined everything. Due to the desire to be happy, people started buying the foreign cloth offered by them and became lazy. The 'charkha' (spinning wheel) disappeared. Now all are dependent on imported cloth.”³

Now the campaign “Save the Planet” is spreading all over the world, in developed as well as developing countries. Many programs, discussions and other events are being organized to create awareness. Due to various technologies, natural resources are being exploited excessively. Now it has become important to save energy by moderate use of natural resources like firewood, coal and other fuels and use of renewable energy sources, thus reducing the carbon footprint. Now scientists, social workers and spiritual leaders are jointly bringing awareness about judicious use of the natural resources and preventing the world from total destruction.

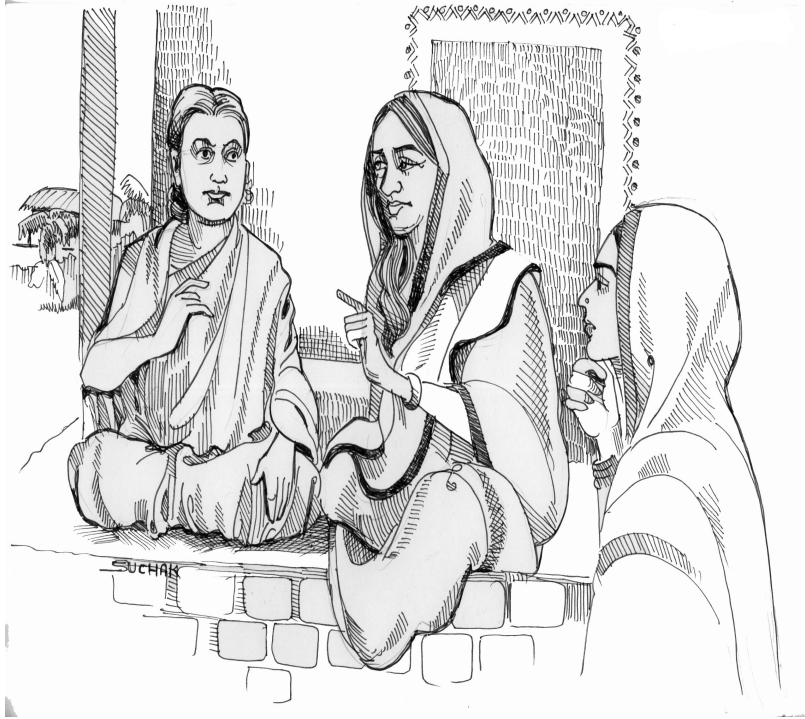
We need to live our daily lives in harmony with nature, while using the natural resources frugally, without wasting these valuable resources, and also using renewable energy sources instead of depleting sources like fossil fuels. During her life, Maa Sharada had simple solutions to today's environmental concerns.

10 Vinodini Maa

The general belief is that those who have attained the pinnacle of spirituality appear serious and do not take any interest in day-to-day life. This is far from true, as one can see from various events of Maa's life. Spirituality is one's journey towards truth and as this journey progresses one experiences true bliss and inner happiness. In the lives of Maa Sharada and Shri Ramakrishna Dev, one can see this transformation through various incidents.

Outwardly Maa always seemed shy and calm, but behind this appearance she was a joyful and fearless person perfectly in synergy. Those few persons and disciple who were close to her and had the opportunity to interact with her closely knew her real nature. Her joyful nature frequently surfaced in her talk, work and in her relationships.

This incident gives us a glimpse of the jocular and playful nature of Maa Sharada which happened during a trip to Kashi-Benaras (Varanasi). Once a few women came to meet Maa when Maa was sitting in one corner of the verandah with other devotees and disciples. Ma's devotee Gulabma was also sitting on the verandah. Seeing her age and devotional nature, one of them mistook her for Maa. She prostrated before her and started addressing her with due respect. Gulabma understood the mistake and told her, "Maa is sitting over there." Seeing the simplicity of Maa, the visitor thought that Gulabma was joking with them. Only when Gulabma quite seriously told them did they believe her and then went to meet Maa. In a playful manner Maa said, "No,



The playful mother

no, she is Maa.” The woman was totally confused as both of them talked in a similar way and she found it difficult to understand the truth from their talk. When she started walking back to Gulabma, she reprimanded her, “How can you be so foolish? Can't you see the face of a Goddess in her? What is the countenance of a person for? Can't you see?”¹

Maa is as merry as a small girl : Maa accepted Sister Nivedita as a young daughter and therefore they interacted closely and used to joke with each other with open hearts. In one of her letters, Sister Nivedita talked about how they used to be playful. Once in Maa's rooms, all the women were

sitting together talking, laughing and having fun. Suddenly someone announced that a male devotee has arrived to take Maa's blessings or on some other serious errand. On hearing this Maa suddenly covered herself head to toe with her sari. She also stopped talking and sat soberly. A female devotee sat in between her and the male devotee who came. The female devotee listened to what the male disciple had to say and softly conveyed the same to Ma. After listening carefully, Maa softly conveyed her answers in the ears of the female devotee who loudly conveyed the same to the male disciple. Sister Nivedita narrates that she used to get amused and wonder. I would again repeat same thing to Maa and listening to it she would laugh loudly

Sister Nivedita writes that Maa was sweetness personified. "She was affectionate, tender and was always happy like a small child. Maa's laughter is worth listening to. You should have heard her laugh the other day when I insisted that the Swami must come up and see us at once or we would go home. The monk who had brought the message that the master (Vivekananda) would really see us was quite alarmed at my moving towards my shoes, and departed post haste to bring him up, and then you should have heard Sarada's laughter! It just pealed out. At such happy times, I wished that my guru Swami Vivekananda would come immediately upstairs and see me, otherwise I may go home. I wanted to send a message to him to come immediately. The messenger, whom I was to send the message with, would have taken much time to bring Swamiji to the first floor. As I rushed to put my footwear on, he got quite concerned and immediately rushed to bring Swamiji. Watching all these happenings

around her, Maa was highly amused and laughed heartily which was worth seeing”.³

In another anecdote, Sister Devmata has written that she had brought a toy for her 8 year old niece Radhu. This toy was just a box from the outside, but as soon as you open it, a joker jumped out. Maa found this contraption so amusing that every time the box was opened and the joker jumped out, Maa would laugh loudly in a shrill voice like a small child.⁴In this manner Maa would become like a child.

One should contemplate on God's divine and wonderful games and be lively and happy:

Maa once told Swami Vasudevananda that sadhana (spiritual disciplines) is not just remaining absorbed in dry discussions. If you do this, your mind also becomes dry or dull. Therefore one should contemplate on God's divine and wonderful games played by them and be lively and happy.⁵ “When I was about 10-12 years old, I lived with Shri Thakur. Since then I realised within me that the pot of happiness was permanently set in my heart.⁶ I always remained happy. After the passing away of Thakur even when I lived in abject poverty, I did not feel any unhappiness within me.”

Make Gods and Goddesses happy through singing and dancing without inhibitions:

Ma's life also was very interesting. She tasted the pure delight of life and made others taste the same. She participated in plays conducted in open places and musical evenings. Many times she also sang and joined the singing sessions. She used to say that one should sit in presence of Gods and Goddesses and make them happy through singing and dancing without

inhibition. Once in Belur Math during Durga puja days, on the day of Visarjan of Durga, Kanjilal was doing strange gestures and actions in front of the idol. Seeing this, everyone started laughing heartily. Then one brahmachari objected to this in a polite manner. Thereafter one sadhu complained about the brahmachari to Maa who was watching all that was going on in front of her. She said, “There is nothing wrong in such playful activities in front of the Goddess.”⁷ In another incident, in Jairamvaati in front of Jagadhatri idol, a devotee was dancing and singing without inhibitions. Watching this, Maa called him aside and said to him. “You should always remain like this. The Universal Mother will keep you happy forever after seeing your playful behaviour in her presence.”⁸

There is another incident narrated by Smt. Sarayubala, a devotee of Maa about her sweet and child like simple happiness. Maa said, “When I first came to Kolkata, I had never seen a water tap. Once I went to the bathroom and opened the tap, I heard a hissing sound like that of a snake coming from the tap. I got frightened and ran to the other women and shouted loudly, “come fast, there is a snake in the tap,” They laughed and told me that it is not snake, but the sound of water before it starts flowing in the tap. “Then I also laughed a lot.” Recollecting this, Maa chuckled- such sweet and simple laughter!! Seeing her simplicity, Sarayubala says, she experienced surprise and could not help smiling.”⁹

Maa was amused by the outward ostentation of some of her devotees. By observing such nature of the worldly devotees, she could get a deeper understanding of their inner thoughts and character. One could not hide anything from her.

Through natural and normal talk, or by quoting the words of our shastras or Bhagavad Gita, she could make fun of such people. However, this kind of fun talk was never sarcastic or hurtful. On the other hand, she used these words to make the devotees realize the futility of worldly attachments.¹⁰

This World is a Divine play human beings are just small pawn in the hands of the Lord: Once Maa said to a devotee, “one whose mind is always centered around God (Ishta), nothing bad (anishtha) can happen to him.”¹¹ Clarity with which Maa has shown difference between good and bad (Ishta and Anishtha) is not mere juggling of words; rather, it has a deep spiritual understanding. Maa believed and also demonstrated through her own life that this world is only a divine illusory play. Man is a small pawn in the hands of the Almighty in this play. When we study life incidents of Maa Sarada our faith towards such holy words becomes all the more firm and lasting.

Her innate qualities like purity, straightforward nature, and humility always filled her with inner happiness. There are many humorous incidents which demonstrate these qualities.

11 Universal Mother

Maa Sharadamani Devi did not have a child born of her and she lived the pure life of a celibate (brahmacharini).



Mother blesses her drunk son

However, she was a mother to not only her devotees, but innumerable members of the society whether they were of lower or higher caste, educated or illiterate, rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim, good or bad natured, Indian or of foreign origin. This shower of motherly affection quenched their thirst for love and care and soothed them with peace. This facet of her we understand from various accounts.

Maa, guide of misguided: At Mahendranath Gupta's school there was one student by name Vinodvihari Som. He became Thakur's disciple. Later he joined one drama company and started drinking wine. Many a time, out of intoxication he used to shout angrily for Maa's appearance near Mataji's house. Mataji's disciples who used to stay with her didn't like such behavior since it might disturb her sleep. They gave instructions that please do not open either door or window even if Vinodvihari shouts or requests. But Maa used to get up and open window of her room. Devotees used to object at Maa's such behavior, Maa had given reply that, "He has been tainted by mud and mire, I cannot refuse and turn my back at his bawl."¹

One old lady servant who was a prostitute in her youth became religious afterward. This woman used to come to meet Maa Sarada alone many times. Maa used to talk to her. Many upper caste women devotees didn't like it. Even her husband Shri Ramkrishna also opposed it and said, "Shit, she is a prostitute. One should keep away from her." Even then Maa continue meeting her.² After Ramkrishna's death this lady has confessed about all her sinful deeds with open heart and true feeling of repentance in front of Maa. Maa hugged her warmly and said, "do not get frustrated for whatever you have done. You will be able to rise above from all your sinful conduct. Come I shall initiate you."³

One young educated noble virtuous devotee from a nearby village fell in love with a child-widow. With his help even a hermitage was also established in the village. Though that young devotee used to come to Maa regularly with same

devotion and faith, the rumor about his disgrace reached Maa's devotees through hearsay. Devotees got angry and told Mataji that she should not allow him to come there. Maa was sad and unhappy with stigma of his son. But she said, "How can I prevent him from coming here. It is not possible for me to use harsh words." So his visits remain continued as earlier. Not only that, one day he even brought the girl. Maa scolded that girl for diverting his son on disgraceful path and cautioned her to remain careful. Not only that she even behaved affectionately with the girl. With Maa's uninterrupted flow of love slowly there was feeling of repentance in young man's mind. He realized his mistake and asked for Maa's forgiveness. After that he was on right path.⁴

Thus even if somebody is wicked or sinful she used to forgive and bless them & guide with motherly love. Maa would say not a single person is innocent. Her disciples used to get annoyed and angry sometime with Maa's such behavior and wouldn't allow sinful or wicked person to meet Maa. But when she would come to know she would say, "if my son comes after playing with dust or mud, I must take him in my lap after cleaning."⁵

Mother for poor and miserable: There are many incidents indicating Maa's love and sympathy for poor and miserable people. During first world war there was huge scarcity of food and clothing for poor people of our country. During this period there was one poor householder, a Vaishnav devotee by name Haridas Vairagi from village Deshda who. He used to earn his livelihood by singing devotional songs and narrating legendary tales in front of

disciples, devotees and villagers in the verandah of Maa's house and thus aroused reverence in them. As he grew old his health started getting deteriorated and he found it difficult to run his household. Once he spoke to Maa about problems he was facing and said that he does not even have enough cloth to cover up his full body. Hearing this Maa got very much upset and when he came to meet her before leaving, gave him her own cloth which she had just hung outside to dry, and told him, "Nowadays due to the shortage, a gift of cloth is very rare. I do not have new one but this one I have used only 2-3 times. It is almost like new. You must take it." Haridas was feeling hesitant but Maa insisted and said, "I have enough clothes. You just take it."⁶ There is one more instance when her disciple Sarladevi informed Maa that Thakur's wealthy devotee Balram Babu's son has allotted quite a big amount for Thakur and saint and sages livelihood in his will after death, instead of getting delighted she asked, "has he done anything for poor and miserable?"⁷

Let us go through one more incident. Maa was staying at a small village and many devotees used to come to meet her. Being small in size, necessary things and items were not available in required quantity in that village. Devotees who were staying at big village used to send day to day requirements alongwith somebody. Once one devotee had forwarded some goods alongwith a female labourer. She reached there almost at noon. Maa took things and arrange for her bath, food, and some rest. This woman was suffering from malaria and so got very tired while carrying luggage. Instead of sending her back same day Maa arranged for her night stay in verandah. During night she had some fever and

was in semi-conscious state and therefore couldn't get up early in morning but Maa being early riser saw that she spoiled her bed. Maa thought that if other people in house comes to know about it they might scold her, and maybe they will hate this helpless and miserable woman. Worried, she gently woke up the semi-conscious labourer under deep sleep, gave some jaggary and parched rice in her hand and gave water to drink and said lovingly, "My dear, go home before noon and before sun becomes too hot." The labourer woman also bowed down to Maa and departed after taking good rest. Maa also coated verandah herself with cow dung and clay after she left. She even cleaned the mat and put it out under sunshine in such a way that nobody would come to know.⁸

On the other hand there are references of incidents in which Maa has accepted smallest of small things happily presented to her by some poor and untouchable caste devotees who has nothing to offer materially, but earn their livelihood by making some article big or small with knowledge of craft or skill they have. There is one incident which gives advice that such poor people should not be exploited by rich people. One day one poor lady came up to sell her blankets. Maa's niece was haggling a lot to fix up the price. Displeased with it Maa said to her niece, "Just to save a penny how much do you bargain? This poor lady is trying to earn some money to feed her family by carrying big bundle of blanket on her head, and you are wasting her time to save a penny. And also you do not need a blanket."⁹ Thus Maa advised rich people to reduce mental poverty.

Mother of Foreigners : She never used to accept the difference between an Indian and foreigner. Swamiji's disciple Margret Noble was from England, and when she returned from Kashmir she insisted upon staying with Maa and her female devotees, so as per her guru's order she can work better by becoming one part of Indian society. Her resolution created a problem for Swamiji and he started thinking about a solution. At that time uneducated woman from remote and unknown village who were not familiar with the world gave succor to Swamiji and said, "Nivedita is also my daughter, she will stay with me." For three weeks they stayed together in one room at Maa's Baghbazar building. While taking lunch, Maa Sarada used to make other orthodox female devotees sit along-with sister Nivedita.¹⁰ None of them would know each other's language. In the same way, foreigners like Sister Christine and Sara Bul also were touched by Maa Sarada's motherly feelings. Amongst them nobody would know Bengali and Maa would not know English. But that didn't become a barrier for their mutual love and admiration. As per Western etiquette Maa used to shake hands and kiss their hand, cheeks and chins. Swamiji's other disciple Mary Macleod also said about Maa that, "In photographs Maa looks exactly same the way she is..but from beneath, beautiful and miraculous. When affectionately she used to hold my face with two hands I used to get overwhelmed with that touch of love and childlike smile. Shri Maa was simple and gentle, like Mother Mary."¹¹

Rammayi Maharaj writes, "One day when I was taking out old clothes from Maa's bag for drying, and I came across a torn and worn out small sky-blue piece of silk fabric. I asked

Maa, since this fabric has become so old and torn out, should I throw it away?" Maa affectionately replied immediately, "No, no, don't throw away. That one has been gifted to me lovingly by 'Khuki'. I have used it many times."¹² (In Bengali 'Khuki' means small daughter. She used to address Swami Vivekanand's foreign disciple Nivedita as 'Khuki'.)

Maa on one side was inspiration for freedom heroes, but also used to treat British also like her progeny. One revolutionary while talking about tyranny of British said, "Maa speak from your mouth that 'let British get destroyed.'" Maa immediately said, "I am mother. How can I talk about destruction of son? Are the British not my children? I will always say that let all become prosperous." During Durgapuja festival Maa had asked one celibate to bring some new and beautiful clothes for family women and children. This celibate also was a revolutionary. He used to insist for use of Indian-made things. So he bought things made from thick material by local mill with somewhat less attractive borders. Women at Maa's house didn't like it. So they asked to return and bring some beautiful thin material in exchange. That Brahmachari got irritated and said, "Those are all foreign goods. Who will buy them?" Maa was sitting nearby. She heard this and said slightly smiling, "My dear, they (foreigner) are also my children. And I need to take care of them also. How can I be partial? Bring clothes they wish to have."¹³

Mother to ascetics : This story dates back to the time when young disciples used to stay with Shri Ramkrishna, practicing spiritual discipline under the master's guidance. As overeating hinders constriction of mind, he kept a strict

eye on their food regimen. Maa was instructed to serve as per their regimen.

But her motherly love for young sannyasi disciples remain unchanged. One day Thakur learned from young disciple Baburam Maharaj that Maa is serving him two chapattis more than the decided quantity. Consequently Thakur complained to Mataji, “if you are doing such thing out of blind love it will spoil their future.” Maa objected to this and said, “Why you should worry if he has had two more chapattis? I will take care of their future.” Thakur didn't say a word to Maa's reply, returned immediately smiling and honoring the great strength of her motherhood.¹⁴

Mother to the mission's Saanyasi: Maa was guiding force behind establishment of world famous Ramkrishna Mission. Initially many young disciples of Ramkrishna Dev used to do social welfare service staying under tree and sustaining on alms. In 1890 Mataji went to Vrindavan, Kashi and Gaya and could see prosperity of Buddha vihar at Gaya and realized that ascetic disciples of Shri Ramkrishna Dev were facing great troubles and doing endless efforts and exertion. She prayed to God to see that those who leave their home in your name should not be bereft of maintenance and moderate residence.¹⁵ Even God must have listened to her prayer so that at present here in India or outside India a systematic arrangement for staying, food etc. and doing various welfare activities has been made for Ramkrishna Mission Swamiji.

Alongwith providing good food Maa Sarada used to provide proper guidance to young ascetics by making them aware

about obstacles and dangerous spots of ascetic life. Many examples can be cited. Once a topic came up that some of the monks are going to live with the householders when they fall ill. The mother said “Just because of illness, why should monks live with householders? There is the monastery. A monk is the ideal of renunciation. A monk should not associate with women to such an extent that if an idol of a woman made from wood is lying on the ground, one should not pick it up or see it.”¹⁶ She also said that hoarding money is another risk to avoid. One may lose even one's life on account of it. She maintained a story of a monk living on the seashore in Puri. He made a little money. Getting scent of it, two of his disciples could not control that greed. They murdered the monk and went with his money.

Maa of Untouchables: One day Mataji was sitting on charpoy under tamarind tree at Koalpada Jagdamba ashram. One lady from the untouchable community came to Maa and said with tears in her eyes that due to some mistake while preparing food her husband got angry and ditched her. She left everything for him. Now she is without shelter. Maa also became sad upon hearing her difficulties. She called up her husband and scolded him affectionately saying, “She left everything for you and for so many days you have accepted her service and care. If you leave her now it will be injustice. You won't get place in hell also.” After listening to Maa's words his heart melted and took the woman to her home.¹⁷

Mother of those facing worldly struggle: One winter morning a devotee from the village Gadbeta alongwith his wife and four daughters reached Jayramvati, Maa's village. They had started their journey the previous

evening by bullock-cart from their village, reached some other village early morning and from there they walked down almost one and half mile and reached Jayramvati. All the children were small. One of them was still suckling and suffering from malaria. That devotee was very much confused. Again and again he was worrying and doubted that he might have caused inconvenience to Mataji. But Maa treated them in such a way that within no time their hesitation disappeared. His wife started moving here and there freely as if she has reached to her mother's place. Mataji immediately made all arrangements in her small house. Even provision was made for medicine and bed for sick small child. That female devotee reached a pond for taking bath with other women and return with pot of water on her waist like the daughter of the house. After completing puja, husband and wife took initiation. Their return was three nights, a long journey. So after taking lunch in noon they paid obeisance to Mataji and departed with tearful eyes. Mataji uttered devi Durga's auspicious name three time while sending them off. She stared at their path till they were visible. Then she sat on verandah and with deep sigh she said, "Though her children have come from far off place with great difficulty, they couldn't take proper rest, couldn't chat much, and went away without having good food." By that time somebody saw that they had forgotten one towel. Maa said, "Mistakes ought to happen. They couldn't stay for one night and didn't have much time for leisure talk. Mind does not want to depart in this manner. So such mistakes are bound to happen." Seeing Mataji's grief celibate Gopesh said, "They must not have gone far. Can be reached by brisk walk." Thus when celibate came

back after returning towel somebody saw the female devotee's sari on bank of pond spread for drying up. One woman brought it and started teasing that woman. Other woman said, "How much care she will take, she has so many children." Hearing all these ridicule Maa spoke with deep sigh, "Oh, my daughter will recollect sari while going for bath, will search and then will remember that she has forgotten at Maa's home." Celibate Gopesh again got ready for brisk run and he delivered that sari to woman.¹⁸

Mother of Revolutionaries: Some devotees of Maa Sarada had joined the freedom movement. Some of them were imprisoned and some were under police watch. Once a boy devotee escaped from police observation and came to meet Maa in the evening, wishing for initiation. In those days, ashram was under strict police vigilance; therefore the head of the ashram asked him to go away. When Shri Maa came to know about it, without thinking of police torture or threat, she said, "Oh, with how much difficulty and eagerness that boy must have come. You please arrange for his night stay at somebody's house. I will give initiation tomorrow early morning and ask him to go away." Next morning without waiting for holy water from river Ganga and special seat she asked to make dry grass seat, made that boy sit, and she gave initiation.¹⁹ There are many such instances of providing shelter and consolations to patriots.

Maa's one saint disciple who was also freedom fighter used to get ill often due to malaria. Maa's other disciple who was also a doctor, and at his insistence this freedom fighter stayed with him for treatment. The doctor's two brothers were also fierce revolutionaries who were wandering here and there under

the disguise of leaving their home. This doctor's house was under constant watch by the British government. This saint patriot when went there for treatment, and thinking him also to be revolutionary, the British government tried to arrest him. But since the doctor was appointed a higher post by the British government, he became surety for this saint patient with payment of higher amount on the condition that whenever asked for, he will present himself in front of the police. After some time, due to good care of the doctor, his health improved, and he returned to the ashram to stay with Maa. But when people of that village came to know that he has been released because of huge payment and surety given by doctor, they expressed their unwillingness to Maa and said till his police case is not dissolved please do not allow him to stay at ashram. Sent him back to stay with doctor. This disciple was also ready to go to avoid any problem for Maa. But Maa was not ready to leave this Saanyasi son under any circumstances. Maa said with tearful eyes, "It will be God's wish whatever will happen, but this son will stay with me only." As a way out from this difficult situation the disciple departed from ashram after convincing Maa lovingly.²⁰

Maa had many such patriot male and female disciples. They were engaged in destructive activities; therefore, Maa's ashram was under constant vigilance of the police department and they used to keep careful watch. Everyday night a chowkidaar would visit the ashram and take down details of newly arrived guests, their name, address, from where they have come and to where they will proceed and same was submitted to police station. To make sure that Maa does not have any problem, those patriot disciples used to

come early morning, pay obeisance to Maa, take lunch, do some rest, and leave ashram before evening. Somehow British government got this information and chowkidaar started visiting ashram anytime during day for inquiry. One officer was also appointed above this chowkidaar. After someday news came that DSP himself will be coming to visit Maa's ashram for inspection in his palanquin. Previous day one lawyer disciple had come to meet Maa. Devotees requested him to stay at ashram only. Next day evening police officer came for inquiry along-with chowkidaar. The lawyer started explaining everything carefully with due respect. Meantime Maa invited and took him inside, served him lovingly a warm sweet dish prepared by her and offered roll of betel leaf. She blessed him happily when he took her leave. His heart changed with Maa's such simple and informal behavior and as if he was taking food next to his own mother, he enquired with Maa whether ashram people get afraid of frequent police visits. And he added that it was their duty which they were doing. Maa also replied in sweet soft voice as if a little daughter talking lovingly to his father, "Yes my child I do feel frightened."HearingthisMaa's sweet and soft voice Strict DSP's heart got melted and changed the way the father behaves talking to his beloved daughter. He said while leaving, "Maa please do not get frightened. I will get everything straight before leaving." Thus neither Maa's patriot disciples nor day to day working of ashram got affected by unjustifiable conduct of British government. This was Maa's love for patriots and her magic of sweetness.²¹

Maa's love and compassion has flowed for everybody without any discrimination, be it men or women, offender or

outrageous, guilty, sinful or righteous, Brahmin or untouchable, Indian or foreigner, poor or rich, irrespective of caste, creed, religion or sect. Whoever may have come, his or her virtue or vices would not affect Maa's love. As it is said that like the magical mythical stone parasmani which turn seven iron into gold on its touch. Ma's divine touch had a life changing effect on all who came in contact with her and they accepted her as mother. Various incidents can be read in other chapters of this book.

12 An Ideal of Womanhood

Our scriptures consider woman as the epitome of power and strength (Shakti) and respect her. A human being's birth, nurture, care etc. are not possible without the help of a woman. Woman plays important role in family as well as in society.

The Inherent Qualities of a Woman: Maa was endowed with the special qualities inborn in a woman such as patience, motherly feelings, service to others, beauty, humility, simplicity, fearlessness, endurance, ability to bear with all situations, truth, sweetness in talk, glorious sharp intellect, awareness towards one's responsibilities, memory power etc. There are many instances which demonstrate the presence of these qualities in her and thus Maa has encouraged and influenced women in carrying out her duties and responsibilities using her innate strengths and qualities as a woman, wherever she was or whatever situation the woman was in - any age, young or old, literate or illiterate, rich or poor, householder or sanyasin, unmarried or mother of children, Indian or foreigner.

Patience & Tolerance: There are numerous incidents of balancing a situation with tolerance and patience in Maa Sarada's life. After the demise of husband Shri Ramkrishna Dev, she had to bear with family members of different nature. This includes Ramlal, who stopped Maa's monthly pension of Rs. 7,¹ selfish brothers, nice with moody and queer nature, nice Nalini who believed in untouchability, mad widow sister-in-law with her stubborn daughter. In spite of

taking care of all of them, sometimes they have a tendency of selfishness.

Once mad aunty Surbala rushed to hit Maa with burning firewood.² She bore all troubles without any complain or resistance. Maa used to tell that difficulties are a part of life and will always come, but will not remain forever. It will flow like water under bridge. Sorrow is gift from God.³

In this context let us see an incident that happened in Maa's life. Once when Shri Ramakrishnadev was staying in Dakshineshwar, Maa along with her mother Lakshmi Didi and other relations came to meet him. Hridayram who was



Mother bears insult silently

servicing the needs of Shri Ramakrishna used to take care of him day and night in all situations. When he came to know that Maa has come to meet Shri Ramakrishna with her relatives, he said in an annoyed voice, “Why are these people coming to meet him? What work do they have here?” He insulted Maa and others in this manner. Ma's mother and Hruday belonged to the same village. After getting insulted by the rude words of a person closely known to her in this manner, Ma's mother said, “Come, come, let us all return.”⁴Maadid not express any anger or displeasure to her husband. She also did not get annoyed with her nephew Hruday, she remained compassionate to him. She did not harbour any hatred, anger, revenge or grievances to anyone. With patience, she would keep quiet and suffer all such insults and situations and managed to maintain good relations with everyone.

Motherly feelings: Maa Sharada lived a celibate life and did not have any children born of her body. However, she became a mother to lakhs and lakhs of people around the world and they addressed her as 'Maa'. Even today our society looks down on any woman who is unable to give birth to a child or anyone involved in social service or leading a spiritual life who does not wish to become a biological mother. Maa's life is an example of how any woman can give motherly love to poor or orphaned children and experience the motherhood inborn in them.

There is no Virtue like contentment & no wealth like patience: A disciple of Maa, Kshirodbala who became widowed at a young age approached her and told her how she has no family, home or money. “I still fear to interact with the people around me and I am worried about

their criticisms - Maa, please keep me away from such people.” Maa told her, “Be content in all situations, always remembering God and taking God's name.”⁵ As Maa consoled her and counselled her in a loving and caring manner as if talking to a child, she felt at peace and lived a contented happy life afterwards. Maa herself, after her husband's death, had suffered poverty and loneliness, but learnt to live a contented life even under such adverse circumstances.

Service and Sacrifice: The qualities of service to others and sacrifice are inborn in women and one can see these in their family lives and societal lives. A mother is always ready to sacrifice her needs and comforts for the sake of her children, including her own necessities like food and sleep. All this is done without any compulsions or fear. This is a great gift given by nature to women. Maa Sharada has served and cared for others. One day a devotee of Maa sent some things with a female laborer. By the time she reached Ma's place, it was afternoon. Maa arranged for her to freshen up, have food, and a place to take rest. As she was suffering from malaria, she had become very tired carrying the load. So Maa asked her to stay that night and return the next day after good rest. Maa also made arrangements for her to sleep on the verandah. As she was running fever and fell almost unconscious in the night, she couldn't get up early. As per her habit, Maa got up early and was the first to get up. When Maa checked on the female laborer, Maa found that her bed was soiled. Maa got worried that if others wake up and find this out, they would insult the poor unhappy woman and throw her out. She woke up the woman from her deep slumber, gave her some jaggery and puffed rice and after giving her water to drink, lovingly said to her, “Child, you proceed

home before sun becomes hot.” The woman was happy to hear the words of Maa and left for her home. After she left, Maa herself cleaned the verandah with cow dung and soil, absorbing the dirt with it. She washed the rug also so that no one would know about the incident.⁶

Nature has gifted woman with the special ability to care for the whole family, from young children to elders and sick members. In spite of not having any children of her own, by serving all the needy persons with sincerity and love, Maa was a living the role model of an ideal mother for all.

Inner Beauty and External Attractiveness: Inner beauty is a wonderful power bestowed on women by nature. Nature is filled with beauty. The daily spectacle of sunrise and sunset, the snow covered peaks of mountains, the vast blueness of oceans, the twinkling stars of the night, the cool light of moon, the variety of colors of the flowers of the gardens all these impart to us the experience of peace and beauty. Everyone loves beauty. To be beautiful and to see beauty around us is but natural and there is nothing wrong in it. For women, beauty is a natural gift, Maa believed. She was not against the external beauty; in fact, she also liked to wear jewellery and her husband sent her beautiful jewellery to wear in his presence during his lifetime. For her niece Radhu also, ornaments and anklets were made and gifted. Maa used to say that ornaments are meant for external beauty, but they should not be for attracting attention of others and should not create any obstacle in your work. One day, when her niece Radhu wearing anklets was climbing down the steps, due to the jingling sound of the anklets, others got distracted and disturbed in their work. Seeing this situation, Maa softly told her niece to come down slowly without making noise.⁷

Along with caring for one's external beauty, always maintain beauty of innate character:

Maa Sarada used to say that along with the outer beauty, the beauty of innate character should be visible in the daily transactions and even small and big work that is done. External beauty only helps to make one happy for a brief time. But in the long term, it can lead to unhappiness. In this context, there is an incident when one evening some female devotees came to see Maa. One among them was a quite gorgeous woman in dress and ornaments. Referring to her, the Holy Mother said, “For a woman, modesty is her ornament. Flowers are best used in the service of the Lord. Otherwise it is better that they fade away in the trees. I feel bad when I see foppish gentlemen make a bouquet of flowers and casually put a flower to their nose and admire: 'Ah! What fine scent!' Oh dear, perhaps the very next moment they throw it on the floor and trample it with booted feet.”⁸

Affectionate and Peace Loving Nature: Among all the natural powers, it can be said that the most adorable quality is tranquillity (Shanti) & gentleness. The person who is endowed with the qualities like perseverance, humility, restraint of senses, detachment, love, compassion, patience, steadfastness, simplicity and intelligence, will be of affectionate and peaceful nature. The one, who is happy within oneself, gives happiness and peace to those in her/his presence.

Swamiji's disciple Josephine, Smt. Legete has said about Ma: “In the pictures of Shri Ma, her inner beauty and magical nature can be seen. When she held my face in her hands with love and respect, I felt humbled by her loving touch. She had a child-like smile and simplicity like Mother

Mary, mother of Jesus Christ... She is the divine Madonna of this new religious order... I visited all her rooms, objects, images and pictures and thought of the similar simplicity and almost poverty of our Madonna who must have been like her at fifty.⁹ Maa's love for her relatives, devotees and disciples was with no expectations in return, desires and attachment. Her love and affection for her niece who was fatherless appeared deep. But she was able to detach herself in a moment when the time came to let go. Sister Nivedita has written in a letter about Ma's fondness for others. "Ma, you are always overflowing with love, your love is not the same as ours, it is not even intense, it is not of this world, it is divine, gentle and peace giving. You are always doing good deeds for others, seeing no evil whatsoever in anyone.... You are a wonderful, faultless creation of Lord, quietly entering the hearts of everyone like Sun's rays, sweet fragrance of flowers, the purity of the water of river Ganga.... Remaining unattached like the drop of water on the lotus leaf."¹⁰

Speak the truth, that is beneficial to others and without hurting others' feelings: How a person should speak has been prescribed in detail in various scriptures. One should speak the truth, it should be beneficial to others, and also not hurtful others. Let us see an incident in this context. Gulabma, a devotee of Maa who was close to her was always truthful and expressed her views openly. Due to this, many times she would speak in an abrupt and hurtful manner and this became her habit. This type of speech of Gulabma often hurt Maa. She would say, "Gulab, what is happening to you? Even if it is the truth, hurtful words should not be spoken like this." Once in Jairamvati, when someone said insensitive words about the younger aunt, Maa

said, “Child, why do you behave in this manner? Should you speak in a manner to bring unhappiness to others? Even if it is the truth, if it upsets others' feelings, one should refrain from saying it. Otherwise it will become your habit and when you stop respecting each other's feelings, you will become an obstacle in others' lives. Everyone will shun you.”¹¹

Forgiveness: Maa used to say that it is but natural that people will have some shortcoming and they make some mistake or other. But very few people are able to understand this and ignore such mistakes of others. People have the habit of noticing the defects of others and due to this they often lose their mental equipoise.

It was the year 1920 and the last days of illness of Ma. She was living in her 'Udbodhan' residence in Calcutta. Her health was deteriorating day by day. She slowly withdrew her mind from all external things and people. One day, a female devotee, in a voice choking with sadness, asked her, “Maa, what will happen to us?” In a compassionate and feeble voice, Maa said, “Whom or what do you fear?” After sometime, slowly she said, “Keep this in mind, child.” “If you wish for mental peace, do not find faults in others, look for fault within you. Learn to own up the world as your own, there is no one in the world who is not yours, child, world is yours.”¹²

Memory-Remembering the requirements of every- one: God has endowed woman with the memory power due to which she can remember for a length of time anything she has seen, experienced or understood. A woman is able to fulfill her social and family responsibilities and maintain her relationships. She is able to remember more than 100 ingredients needed in the kitchen for cooking and run the household efficiently.

In Maa Sharada's life, this quality is seen in many incidents where she was able to fulfill small and big needs of others, leading to happiness in them and in turn making herself happy. For Narendra and Ramachandra Dutt, she would make thick chapattis and chana dal (chickpeas), for Baburam thin mung dal. Jayramvati was a remote village where hardly anything was available. Nevertheless, Mother had arranged to obtain milk, fish and an assortment of vegetables, having personally contacted the milk man, the fisherman's wife and local vegetables producer. Some of the newcomers were accustomed to taking tea soon after waking up, and so she would limp about with her rheumatic feet to get some milk from somebody's house whose cow may have been milked by then.¹³ She was always happy remembering devotees' individual requirements and did all work personally to make others contented.

Purity: Maa was the embodiment of purity. This incident about Ma's purity has been noted by the foreigner disciple Josephine Mclavade. One day she went from Belur Math to Ma's residence 'Udbodhan' to meet Ma. When she was returning at night, a brahmachari was accompanying her with a lamp to escort her to the Guest House where she was staying. The brahmachari heard her saying in English lovingly to herself "I have seen you.... I have seen you." Suddenly the brahmachari looked around him and softly started saying, "Maa is the personification of purity and I have seen her." In a state of happiness and ecstasy, he kept on walking not caring where he stepped his feet, saying 'Ma', 'Ma', 'Ma'.¹⁴

Maa, through her life as an example, gives a message to today's women to develop all these qualities. About the innate

abilities like forbearance and inner beauty, one can read in the section of this book on Women's Empowerment. Maa Sharada, the rural woman who had no formal education, lived her life with these exemplary qualities and became a true role model. Many incidents of her life are not known to us. But her life has left a deep impression and influenced many people in a positive manner. Sister Nivedita, Swamiji's foreigner disciple, has rightly said that Ma's life is an ideal model for not only Indian women, but for women all over the world.

13 An Ideal Householder

From the Hindu point of view there are four ashrams. 1. Brahmachari Ashram, 2. Gharusth Ashram (Householder), 3. Vanprastha Ashram 4. Sanyas Ashram. Persons living as a house holder takes care of the other three



Mother as a householder with her mad niece and child

ashrams. This may be the reason of saying that this is the supreme ashram. Maa Sharada's life is a perfect role model as householder. In the world most of the people live as an householder. Maa Sharda's struggle and suffering while

living with people of various disposition and different circumstances is a glowing example for us. Various incidences about this is given in the chapter Women Empowerment of this book. How to lead a life that is both active and contemplative, how to adjust one's action through forbearance and forgiveness, how to cultivate peace and joy in householder daily life is a role model. The culmination of womenhood is becoming a mother. As a mother because of her unselfish love and self-sacrifices, she commands the highest respect in the family. Maa Sharada lived her whole life as a brahmacharini not having her own children but she had infinite love and affection, compassion forgiveness each like a worldly mother but without any barriers and limitation. Maa Sharada commands highest respect in the heart of countless people all over the world. She was a role model in various relationships as daughter, sister, aunt in her parental home as well as daughter-in-law, wife aunt in her in-laws home.

At father's home as Daughter, sister, sister-in-

law etc: Right from a young age, Maa fulfilled all her responsibilities as an ordinary woman to the full extent. Her younger brother Kaalimama said about her work as a young girl at home: "For our well-being, what all things she did! She used to take all of us, younger ones daily to the Amodar river and bathe us, she used to feed us and wading in neck-deep water she carried cut grass for feeding the cattle. Our mother involved her in the work in the field, especially for collecting the cotton from the cotton plant and making the thread needed for producing Janoi (the sacred thread worn by Brahmins) which was sold in the market for buying us

clothes and other things. Additionally, the work of husking the paddy, feeding grass to the cattle, cooking meals and a lot of other household work was also done alone by my elder sister.”¹

When Maa was a young girl living in Jairamvati, she used to go with other girls to the river to fetch water and also play a lot of games with them. Usually young girls used to play games of housekeeping or other fun games. But Maa used to play games of doing pooja and prayers with her friends. While playing they used to quarrel and make up also. During such incidents Maa would make everyone understand and settle the issues amicably too.²

At in-laws home daughter-in-law, wife, mother, aunt etc : After marriage, Maa led the life of a married woman skillfully. The various incidences about an ideal wife is given in the chapter “Unique Married Life “ of this book. To most people she was a calm and quite shy woman from a rural village who was engaged in the routine work at home. On seeing how Maa was fulfilling her responsibilities, Swami Premanandji noted, “It seems as if Goddess Rajarajeshwari herself on her own will is plastering the floor with cow dung, cleaning the utensils or removing the dirty dishes of the devotees. The one who advised others on household duties, herself struggled in her life. She has tremendous strength within her, limitless compassion and most of all was free from ego.”³ In addition to the family responsibilities, she also strived to care for the disciples and devotees of her husband keeping all their requirements in mind. While she prepared dal and chapatti, the favourite items for Narendra and Ramachandra Dutt, for some others who had weak stomachs,

thin dal and kichdi were prepared and served with lots of love and concern. For the British disciple from Calcutta, as per his habit, tea and snacks were served in the morning after getting up very early and walking 5-7 km to bring the milk and other materials. In this context, many instances have been recorded in their books by Rasbihari Maharaj and Gopesh Maharaj.

Preserve one's family relationships by developing forbearance and with patience:

Maa lived in a joint family with nephews, nieces, brothers and sisters-in-law who were selfish, arrogant, foul-mouthed, temperamental and eccentric in nature. In such an atmosphere and with such a group of people it was common to have misunderstandings and angry exchanges over small matters, sometimes even to the extent of getting physically assaulted. Maa kept a controlled mind and behaviour under these circumstances, bearing all insults and forgiving others for their lapses. Through inner harmony and cooperation, she managed her married life. We will see some incidents in this regard.

After the passing away of her husband Ramakrishnadev, she had to cast her lot with family members of various nature. The members of the family included her nephew Ramlal who stopped the small pension of Rs. 7 that Maa was getting; another nephew Hrudayram who repeatedly insulted her; selfish brothers; moody and strange natured nieces; niece Nalini who believed in untouchability; a mean natured widowed sister-in-law; and, her stubborn daughter. Even though Maa took over the responsibility for their care, they

behaved selfishly with her many times. Once the mentally disturbed aunt Surbala took a burning piece of wood and ran towards Maa to hit her with it.⁴ In spite of all such behaviour, Maa showed no hatred, anger or vengefulness and did not complain about them. She always strove to see the inner goodness in each of them and maintained her relations with them.

From outside viewpoint it appeared as though Maa worked hard day and night to maintain these relationships. Seeing this one Sanyasi disciple once asked her, “Why do you have so much attachment, like someone who is totally entangled in worldly life? Why are you so much bonded towards family?” On hearing this question, Maa said, “I am a woman and I follow my womanly instincts and nature.”

Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law

Relationship: Ma's devotee Shri Ramachandra Ghatak's wife who was younger than Maa went to meet her once and asked, “Ma, I wish to conduct Shiv Pooja.” Maa replied to her, “You are still very young to conduct this pooja properly; therefore you come back at a suitable time when you are older and then I shall explain to you and you will understand the same. Right now you spend your time serving the elders in the family.”⁵ Once the daughter of one of her female devotees wrote to Maa from her in-laws' house expressing her wish to meet Maa and also saying that she did not wish her in-laws to know about this. Shri Maa on reading this and understanding her wish said, “I do not like anyone coming to see me surreptitiously.”⁶ An old disciple behaved very strictly with her daughter-in-law. On learning about this, Maa said to her, “Your daughter-in-law is still a young

girl, her wish to dress well and eat well etc. is very natural. Why are you so strict with her? This is not a wise thing to do as we need to be flexible in our attitude.”⁷ Maa gave such messages to both elder mother-in-law and young daughter-in-law to have a smooth relationship and happy life at home.

Courteous Human Relationships: There are many incidents recorded in which Ma's quality of maintaining good relationships have led to successful outcomes. One such incident took place with the disciple Gulabma who was close to her husband. When Thakur was very seriously ill towards his last days, his disciples brought him to Calcutta for treatment. One of his disciples Gulabma said, “I feel Thakur is angry with Shri Maa and that is the reason for his coming to Calcutta.” When Shri Maa heard this, she immediately came to Calcutta by a vehicle and asked Thakur, “Is it true that you came away to Calcutta because you were annoyed with me?” On learning that his disciple Gulabma had said this, he became very angry. When Gulabma came to meet Thakur, he, in an irate tone, told her to go immediately and ask the forgiveness from Ma. She went that instant to Dakshineswar where Maa was staying and weepingly told her, “What all things I have been doing to hurt you, I have no idea.” Maa kept silent, only smiled and then patted her three times on her back to calm her and said, “Gulab, O Gulab.” Immediately she became calm.⁸ In this manner Maa showed how to keep good relationships with others in all situations. A true role model!

Societal Values and Protection of Morals and Ethics: Maa largely respected all the established values and ethics which give stability to the society. To remove any

difficulties faced by her devotees in their family lives or for fulfilling their normal wishes, if they wished to, Maa used to encourage them to conduct poojas for Goddess Simhavahini or Goddess Jagadhatri. During the time when her husband was ill, she went to the temple of the Goddess and conducted poojas there. Thus, one can see that she did not wish to bring about any major changes in existing beliefs. Once when a student whose family guru was still living went to Maa requesting for Mantra Diksha, she said, “It is appropriate to follow your family traditions. If you live in this world, it is better to respect and adhere to your own caste-based traditions.”⁹ In this manner she advised others to follow the prevailing customs based on caste. When a 15 year old girl Kshirodbala became a widow and went to see Maa after shaving her head as per the customs, Maa said to her, “This is the right thing to do. If you keep the hair, for some time you will feel like keeping the hair styled.” But when she grew up in age, Maa said, “You have already done intense penances and achieved the results, now it is not necessary to cut your hair anymore. You have overcome the attachments.”¹⁰

In this manner, she advised changes in society to remove oppression, particularly of women, and bring about changes in established customs, and even opposed them when she found it necessary.

In any society, women protect the morals, maintain and secure the societal values and impart stability in the lives of community members. But they are unable to bring about changes as needed in the current times in the wrong and harmful traditions as also superstitions, suspicions going on in the society for generations after generations which affect

the women. For example, unkind treatment due to differences in race, caste and creed, widowhood and inability to give birth to children, and also attitude towards those women who do not wish to get married are the major ills of our society. Such women are looked down upon and subjected to hostility. In the 19th century, in a world entrenched in old and conventional traditions which are often harmful and unnecessary, Maa counselled and tried to remove them. She was widowed at the age of 33 and had to live in the traditional society among villagers and her own family members who strongly believed in the customs of the time. She remained strong and brave when they forced their oppressive ways on her and did not yield to the many traditions like shaving the head. She wore small red-bordered sari and continued to wear gold bangles, against the prevailing customs of the time.

Glory is that quality in you for which people remember you and get inspiration from you even after your death : In today's world, the person who has wealth, position, power, ability to speak aggressively etc. is able to win over others and achieve higher glory. Such people are considered powerful. But such glory or fame is not long lasting.

During her life, Maa Sarada knew very few people. But today, due to her noteworthy qualities like tolerance, simplicity, humility, patience, forgiveness, forbearance, compassion and tranquillity, lakhs and lakhs of people in India and all over the world draw inspiration from her. Her glory and fame is on the rise even after 100 years of her passing away and her following is growing day by day.

Maa Sarada was a rural women who had no formal education but lived her life with these exemplary qualities and became a true role model for householders. The different roles of a woman such as the little girl in her parents' home, loving sister, sister-in-law, responsibilities like aunt to nieces and nephews etc. are fulfilled without any complaints. Ma's life is an ideal model for not only Indian women, but for women all over the world.

14 Ma, the Bestower of Peace

In this world, each and every person wishes for comforts, peace and happiness. Many people begin to lead a spiritual life to attain peace and tranquility. Among them many, while remaining in family lives, approach a Guru and take Mantra



Mother bestows peace in her silence

Deeksha to start the various disciplines needed in this regard. A very small number of persons renounce their worldly lives and opt for the life of a renunciant or Sanyasi. Maa Sarada herself led a tranquil life while remaining as a householder. Further, all those who came in contact with her also experienced this tranquility.

Many seekers experience inner conflicts due to contradictory thoughts and desires. As a solution to such disturbed lives, Maa set an ideal example for people to follow on how to live peacefully with others having a variety of dispositions and in different circumstances. Moreover, Maa was able to resolve the various questions raised by her disciples and their confusions. Many incidents in this regard will be useful for seekers.

No one can spend 24 hours doing Jap and Dhyan: one has to occupy oneself in some activity: Many disciples used to approach Maa and tell her that due to a busy work life, they are unable to follow spiritual disciplines. They were unable to find time to do Jap, Dhyan etc. as needed. Another disciple left work and stopped earning the necessary income in order to do the daily sadhana properly. He started begging for alms for his daily needs. After a while he lost his mind and became a mental patient. Maa said at this point, “How can a man who doesn't do any work have a healthy mind? No person can remain 24 hours of the day in jap and meditations. So one has to occupy oneself in some activity. Mind remains happy and at peace then.”¹ Another disciple expressed his unhappiness because of bad thoughts overtaking his mind and then said that his mind does not remain calm.

One brahmachari asked Maa about the unpleasant thoughts that come in his mind, “what will happen to us after you pass away? I am disturbed when I get such thoughts.” After listening to her, Maa said, “Whose child are you? Under whose protection are you living? You always remember.

Whenever such bad thoughts occur, you tell your mind: Being Ma's child how can I have such lowly notions? Then you will see that your mind will become calm and the noble thoughts you get in this way will destroy your bad thoughts. Keep chanting holy names, meditate on them. Remain in good company and keep your ego in check.”²

Doubts and question will always be there.

With god's grace, faith will come: The mind of some of devoted followers also becomes unsteady due to their own weaknesses or bad habits. How to attain peace in such situation let us read some of incidents. Maa's close disciple Yoginmaa used to get suspicious since she could not understand real self of Maa. Seeing her busy in household chorus, she used to think that though husband Shri Thakur has renounced this world, Maa is totally engrossed in worldly affairs. Once when she was doing meditation on bank of river Ganga she saw the corpus of a newly born child encircled with ore. She also saw Thakur standing in front of her. Thakur said, “Do you think Ganga is going to become impure because of the corpse of this child? Consider Maa Sarada also as pious as Ganga. Do not doubt her. She is identical with me. She is just within me only.” Same day after returning from river she touched Maa's feet out of veneration and said, “Maa please forgive me. I doubted you. But now I realized truth.”³ Listening to this, Maa said to Yogin Maa with a smile that doubts and questions will always be there. With God's grace, faith will come. Yet another disciple approached Maa and told her, “I am a very unfortunate person. Even after taking God's names, I have not achieved anything, I don't like to do

jap and dhyan (meditation). My confusions, desires and anger rule over me. Now I do not have the strength to do naamjap (chanting God's names) as my mind becomes restless whenever I try to do. Now please take back the naam mantra you gave me.” After hearing these words, Maa told him with love and affection. “Okay, now you do not have to do mantra jap.” These words of Maa could not be comprehended by the disciple. He got frightened and started getting anxious. He said, “Ma, am I on the path to destruction?” Maa once again lovingly told him, “Being my child, how can you be on the road to ruin? Whoever is my child, they are certain to be liberated. Not even God can harm you as I am with you and am your mother. Why do you fear?” These words of Maa removed his fears and anxieties and thus Maa gave him the boon of fearlessness.

No one is totally innocent. If my children play in dirt, I have to clean them and take them in my lap: Maa used to say that no one is totally innocent. One disciple got so perturbed and anxious about the behaviour of a devotee that she came and told Maa not to allow him near her. In response to this, Maa said, “If my children play in dirt, I have to clean them and take them in my lap.”⁴ Thus, Maa never harboured any apprehensions about any devotees or disciples. It is human nature to misunderstand and question others. Spiritual seekers need to introspect and bring their egos under control. Then they should realise their own faults and mistakes. Subsequently, accepting these flaws in oneself, they should seek the mercy of Lord. Then God will remove all weaknesses of the devotee and impart peace and tranquillity.

Do not be afraid, whenever you face difficulties in life, tell yourself and others that I have Ma :

Due to the restlessness of the mind and impurities within, the devotees lose hope and become frustrated. While blessing them she would say that remember that I am your Maa. Thus, she was able to impart peace and tranquillity to all her devotees and disciples.

Worldly Duties and Spiritual Disciplines are not different: Usually the spiritual seekers separate their worldly duties and spiritual disciplines into two compartments; as there is no relation between the two. Due to this lack of understanding, there is no harmony within and one becomes confused, losing one's peace of mind. When one sits down to meditate, one's mind gets occupied with worldly thoughts and while doing one's worldly duties, one experiences guilt about being not able to do jap and dhyan (meditation) properly. We do not find this problem in the life of Maa as well as those who were close to her. They were able to combine seamlessly the spiritual disciplines with their day to day duties. Being skillful in their work, qualities like truthfulness control of sense pleasures, love and compassion as well as ability to serve and care for others came to them naturally and effortlessly. Many seekers find obstacles to finding peace and tranquillity in their lives, with many problems faced in life resulting in dejection and despondency.

Creation is a play of God, we are mere pawns in his hand : Maa imparted such firm conviction that the whole world belongs to God. All happenings in the world are

being conducted by Him. He has created it for His own play. We are only characters in the plays. In whatever circumstances God places us, we should accept the same and live happily. Due to our past deeds alone we experience happiness and unhappiness. We should not blame anyone else for our sorrows and struggles in life. With total faith and devotion to God, we should surrender to God and perform service to others as well as practice spiritual discipline per our ability. In this manner Maa advised everyone to come out of their feelings of suffering by surrendering to the Almighty.⁵ Thus complete submission to God's will is the perfect solution to attain mental equanimity and peace.

Do not be in a hurry, be patient, have faith in your Guru and personal God: Many disciples after receiving Mantra Deeksha do not progress in their spiritual path as per their expectation. As they are unable to perform the meditation as per the guidelines set by them, they feel troubled and anxious. Swami Parameshwaranda told Maa once: “Ma, my mental state is such that sometimes my mind becomes very restless. I feel afraid that I may even drown.” Maa said in reply, “Why son, why do you feel you will drown. That will never happen, you are the son of Thakur and he will protect you.”⁶ Maa would assure such devotees that daily disciplines like pooja, jap and dhyan along with prayers both in the morning and evening form the rudder of your boat which will give stability to you.

jap and dhyan along with prayers both in the morning and evening form the rudder of your boat which will give stability to you: When you

meditate in the evening think of all the wrong acts done by you during the day and then compare the state of your mind with that of the previous day. Alongwith daily work, perform disciplines also, which will be pleasing to the mind.⁷ Through these incidents, Maa is informing disciples that the path to spirituality through various disciplines is long and difficult. However, if you do them patiently and methodically as taught by the Guru, and follow the path shown by the Guru, these disciplines become the rudder of the boat and you will certainly reach your destination.

“This creation is full of pleasures and pains. If there is no pain, how can one experience pleasure? How can all be contented simultaneously ?”: A sanyasi devotee asked Maa once, “If God is there, why is there so much sorrow in the world ? Can't He see the sufferings of people ? Doesn't He have the power to remove the undesired situations in life?”

Then she told the story of Ram and Sita. Once Sita asked Ram: Why are you not removing the sorrows of people? If you want, each and every subject of your country can live in happiness. Shri Ramachandraji replied, “Can we make everyone happy at the same time?” Sitaji replied, “Whatever you wish is possible. Why don't you satisfy all their desires from your treasury?” Ramachandraji said, “Yes, it shall be done.” Then he called Lakshman and told him, “Go and inform all my subjects that all their needs will be fulfilled from my Treasury.” When people came to know this, they all came and presented their needs. The treasury was opened and the wealth was distributed to

people as per their requirements. Everyone started to live in contentment. After a few days, there was a crack in the roof of the royal palace due to which water started to drip down. For the repair of the broken roof, mason was called. But neither mason nor any labourers were available to carry out the work. All subjects of the country also had similar complaints due to which their houses and even palaces were falling down. When there was no solution to be found for the problem of leakage, Sitaji went to Shri Ramachandraji and said, “One cannot remain wet like this, please return back to the original condition wherein we can find masons and other workmen. Now I understand that each and every one cannot be happy simultaneously.” Ramachandraji, said, “Yes, it shall be done.” Immediately things were back to where it was before the wealth distribution. People started getting workmen and other services needed for the society. Sitaji said to him, “Lord, this creation is your marvellous play, this is the ultimate truth.”⁸ Narrating this story, Maa said, “No one remains unhappy their whole life.”

What you sow, you reap. From happiness to sorrow, all are linked to their cause and effect :

One disciple asked her what the root cause of all of this was. Can one deed can be the remedy for another? She replied, “When a person remembers the Lord's names and prays to Him and thinks of Him always, the effects of wrong actions can get reduced. Although everyone has to endure the consequences of one's actions done in his or her life, instead of getting hurt by a sharp sword, one gets the prick of a needle.”⁹

Body is an instrument for realisation of God.

Keep it healthy : A young widow disciple used to do many sadhanas like fasting etc. Due to this, her body became thin like a piece of wood. Maa called her and told her, “If your body is not healthy, how can you do such severe self-restraints?”¹⁰ Maa always advised her devotees to take good care of the health of their bodies. A disciple who was a working woman was looking after the family, the household, the children and work life, neglecting her own health. Maa told her, “A person has to first take care of one's own health.” At the same time she also used to reprimand others who were always concerned only about their external beauty. She used to tell them that after your death this body is going to be cremated. Then all that remains will be the ashes.

Desires are root cause for all the suffering: Maa used to say that desires are reason for all suffering; so long as the ego exists and one is attached to this body and identifies with it, one has many desires. A disciple of Maa explained to her about the confusions arising in his mind due to various desires. He said, one desire leads to another. Maa replied in this manner: “So long as you consider yourself as your body, many desires will arise in you continuously. Without giving much further explanation, she said that those who want to be happy, have to keep their faith in God and perform all the work or duties well. Thereafter God will give the required strength to face all situations.”¹¹ A woman nurtures her own child with love and gets happiness from the same. But the same woman hesitates to care for a child of another family. While bringing up her niece Radhu, Maa faced several

hurdles. Remembering this, Maa said, “Under no circumstances, one should hesitate to care for others. We must fulfil our duties to all, but have love only for the Lord. By loving others, you face many miseries.”¹²

The householders need to earn and save money for their comfortable life as well as for supporting the sanyasis : Regarding accumulation of wealth, she used to tell her sanyasi disciples to be cautious of wealth. On the other hand, she would tell her householder devotees to earn and save wealth, but to use it wisely. Once one gruhastha (one who has a family) devotee brought fruits and vegetables to Maa's residence. She reprimanded him for spending so extravagantly. She told him further, “Don't you know that the money can be put to use for your own family's needs as also for taking care of the sanyasis. If you do not have any resources, what will you offer in alms to them?” In this manner Maa gave wise counsel to both renunciants and householders and helped them lead a peaceful contented life.¹³

In the name of God, If a chaste woman opposes the undue desires of her husband, she will not incur sin: A chaste disciple who had good self-control once asked Maa about the conflicts faced by her while opposing the desires of her husband. “Maa, it is said that husband is the Guru and God for a woman, it is said in our scriptures too that a woman should find supreme happiness in the service to the husband. Will the woman through arguments and discussions with her husband opposes his

wishes even to a small extent and strives to lead a life of sense control, incur sins?” Maa replied, “If it is done in the name of God, it is not sin. People should certainly keep their senses under control.”¹⁴ Through such instances, one can see that Maa has given the answer to many questions and confusions that arise in the minds of virtuous women, imparting them peace of mind.

One who is cautious will be successful:

Akshaykumar Sen, the poet of 'Shri Shri Ramakrishna Poothi' came to meet Maa and called her 'Maa'. She replied, “Yes, child”. Then Akshaykumar said: “I said 'Maa' and 'Maa' said 'Yes'. Now what can I be afraid of?” Immediately Maa said, “No, child, I said: whoever is cautious, he will overcome fear.”¹⁵ In this beautiful manner, Maa gave profound advice to her disciple. When Maa replied to Akshaykumar by saying, “Yes, child,” then Akshaykumar became free of fear. Many a time people of high intellect can write and speak well. The world admires and praises such people. Many such disciples get deluded by the praise and prestige bestowed on them before they complete the spiritual disciplines. Through the above incident with Akshaykumar, Maa warned all disciples to be careful of getting carried away from one's goals in life. To proceed in the path of spiritual life, the seekers have to be careful about not deviating in other directions. Even after reaching your destination, to remain steady there, one has to be alert and cautious, Maa advised all her disciples.

Eagerness, full faith and trust will lead to glimpses of your personal deity:

One coolie from north India, upon seeing Maa, eagerly approached and

started saying in his dialect, “You are my Janki Maa. I have been searching for you for so many days. Where were you?” Saying this, he started to cry. Kindhearted Maa asked him to bring some flowers. He offered at Maa's feet. Maa gave her initiation also and coolie had glimpses of maa Sita in Maa.¹⁶ This incident had happened when Maa was at Vishnupur railway station for her onward journey to Kolkata. In the same way, the intellectual Surendra Sen insisted on taking initiation from Swami Vivekananda after getting impressed by his personality. That loyal devotee was shown glimpses of Maa Saraswati without him being aware. There was a devotee Shivram, who had full faith and trust in Maa, and his wife, who was very eager to marry off their daughter, ignoring the wishes of the daughter and other family members. That arrogant wife was shown the direct perception of frightful Goddess Bagladevi, and thus her temper cooled down. There was a bandit couple who used to do robbery in a dense forest and who used to worship Maa Kali daily before starting their activity. Maa arranged glimpses of Goddess Kali to them. She showed direct perception of various family God and Goddess to her many disciples. Thus all these incidents not only strengthen faith of devotees, it provides immense peace of mind to them.

Through the peace in her silence, Maa filled the minds of devotees with bliss: This incident happened in the ashram at Bengaluru when Maa was travelling in Southern India. A big crowd assembled to hear Ma's discourse. As soon as they heard the sound of her car and saw the car approaching them, they all got up and did prostrations to her. Maa got down from her vehicle and blessed them all standing there in silence for about 5 minutes.

All around there was complete silence and peace. It seemed as though an unknown power was present in this serene atmosphere, as told in our scriptures that the peace born of silence can remove the doubts in the minds of one and all. Ending this intense silence, Maa told her sanyasi disciple, “I cannot understand the language of these people, if I can speak a few words, I can make them happy.” The disciples said this in their local language to the crowd of audience. They all said in unison, “No, no. This was enough, our hearts have been filled with her presence and there is no need for words.”¹⁷ In the world over, eloquent speeches are delivered in many languages and people get impressed with these. At such times, a quiet person of humble nature gets ignored even. From this incident, one gets to understand that in these modern times when people are attracted to external appearances, Maa who had a quiet composure and who could control her speech was able to make a positive and great impression just by her silent presence.

The path to liberation will be clear with total surrender to God & remembering Him always:

Many spiritual seekers are unable to bring about a significant change in their behaviour in spite of doing various disciplines like helping the needy, prayers, jap, association with holy people etc. Many devotees enquired about this to Maa. One day Maa said, “You may say that I have done so much work for the needy, so much jap, but I have not got any benefits from all this. Until the time your delusions are removed, you do not gain anything. My children accept unconditional surrender to God. Only then with the grace of

God, your paths will become clear for your spiritual progress.”¹⁸ Most people are under the impression that whatever they have achieved in life, like wealth, family, children, position and fame, are only through their own physical, mental and intellectual efforts. Due to this wrong understanding the people become restless, lose their peace of mind and become unhappy. Maa is telling people that whatever you have achieved are the gifts from God. You can surrender everything at the feet of God. Remember Him always. All your confusions, conflicts and questions of the mind can be placed at His feet. With fortitude, continuously remember Him, you will be led in the right path that will lead you to eternal peace and bliss.

For peace of mind, people need to have attachment to God alone: Once during the pooja for Jagaddatri (Goddess), one disciple asked her whether Maa was coming to her village for the same. “No, no, I haven't decided yet,” Maa replied. The disciple said, “If you come everyone will be happy. They all crave to see you.” Maa replied in a heartfelt manner that one should develop attachment to God. Peace is the main element which all people need. We all have the experienced that we feel happy fulfilling the desires of those whom we love but those whom we consider ours are subject to change, and even destruction. Any time we can get separated from them, but we cling to them. We forget the one true entity who is indestructible, eternal and formless, who governs this whole world whom we refer to as Paramatma or Ishwar. Instead of recognising this, we forget this ultimate truth.

From the above it can be seen that Maa is advising seekers that by seeing their Guru as an individual and having love and attachment only for him or her, one should develop attachment for Ishwar, the eternal Lord. Only God has absolute love for you and has no expectations in return. Therefore, Maa has counselled all her devotees to unconditionally love and develop attachment to God alone and such persons experience the true love of the divine, becoming free of all worldly attachments.

For Peace of Mind, do not find faults in others, find your own faults; Make everyone your own nobody is outsider in this world: This was her final message to all her disciples and devotees. All those who strive to internalise and own up to this message can be sure to have peace of mind and eternal happiness. Just 5 days before Maa left her mortal body, a female devotee came to meet her. By signals, Maa called her to her side. In a voice choking with emotion, the woman asked Maa, “Maa, what will happen to us?” In a weak and compassionate voice, Maa replied, “What are you afraid of?” Then slowly she continued, “Child, understand one thing. If you wish to have peace, do not find faults in others, recognise your own faults; learn to own up the whole world as your own; no one is there who is not yours, all are your own.”¹⁹

Thus, Maa was able to clear the confusions and doubts arising in the minds of the disciples of various levels of spiritual development, who have passed through different layers of understanding. The examples cited here show that the advice given by her was effective in enabling them to

handle the day-to-day difficulties faced by them. As per their nature, some people were given simple advice in sweet manner, while some others were made to understand the same through basic philosophy and logic of our scriptures in a poignant manner. Sometimes comparisons, sometimes proverbs were used by Maa in order not to hurt the feelings while advising others. Her methods of interactions seemed truly amazing. Whatever the state of life of the person, wherever living, under whichever conditions, Maa Sharada through her words of consolation and counsel enabled them to live a contented, peaceful life.

15 Divine Mother Maa Sarada

If we go through the history of mankind, in all religions, women is worship through various form of Goddesses. In India she also known as divine Mother and as Adya shakti. Creation, preservation, and destruction all are her play. Divine mother takes various form according to time and situation. While killing demons, she takes a destructive form like Maa Durga or Maa Kali. But for her devotees she assumes a benign loving and compassionate form. She can be “softer than a flower and yet harder than a vraja.”

Shri Ramakrishna spoke of the Mother as the Goddess Saraswati came down to impart wisdom. In Maa Sarada's life we can seeher different forms through various incidences as Maa Saraswati, Maa Sita, Maa Kali, Maa Durga, Maa Radha, Maa Jagdamba etc. In this connection, incidents are presented here to make the point clear.

Maa Saraswati: Surendranath Sen, a young man from East Bengal, was a great follower of Swami Vivekananda. He went to Belur Math and requested initiation from Swamiji. On an auspicious day, Swamiji initiated three persons in the shrine, one after another, and then finally called Surendra: “Master has told me that I am not your guru. He has shown me that the person who will initiate you is greater than I. Don't be discouraged. You will be initiated at the right time.” Broken-hearted, Surendra thought: “Who could be greater than Swamiji? Considering me unfit, he did not initiate me but rather got rid of me.” Sometime after this even Surendra had a dream in which he was him self seated on the lap

of Ramakrishna. The luminous form of a Goddess appeared and said,“Take this mantra.” “Who are you?” Surendra



Her name is Sarada
She is Saraswati
She came down to
impart wisdom

asked. “I am Saraswati,” replied the Goddess. She then muttered the mantra and asked Surendra to repeat it at least 108 times a day. But Surendra never repeated that mantra. Seven years later, in 1906, Surendra and his friend Dr. Lalbihari Sen went to Belur Math to attend Durga Puja. Sharat Chakrabarty, a disciple of Swamiji, asked them to go to Jayramvati to meet the Mother. After Durga Puja, Surendra and Lalbihari went to Kamarpukur and then to Jayramvati.

On these cond day, Holy Mother called Surendra, asked him to take initiation, and suggested that he bring some flowers that next day, which was Lakshmi Puja an auspicious day. Surendrar called: “During the initiation the Mother put herrigh than don my head and left hand on my chin, and then imparted the mantra. As soon as I heard the mantra, the whole episode of my dream initiation flashed though my mind and I felt dizzy. Momentarily I lost outer consciousness, but I felt inner bliss. Regaining normal consciousness, saw that the Mother's form and the form of the Goddess in my dream were the same. As soon as I said, 'Mother, I received this mantra long ago in a dream.' She said, 'Well, my son, does it not tally? You received the right mantra. Don't you see the Master no wand then?’”¹ Maa Saraswati is also known as Maa Sarada. Surendranath Sen's incidence about his vision of Saraswati in the from of Maa Sarada gives the testimony of it.

Maa Sita: There are two incidents where in Maa revealed herself as Maa Sita. Brahmachari Krishnalal, who was an attendant of the Mother and who visited Rameshwara with her, said to Sarala Devi one day, that on looking at the uncovered Shiva image, the Mother soliloquized, “It is just as I had left it. The devotees that were near at hand inquired, “What did you say, Mother?’ The Mother at once corrected herself and said, “A meaningless something escaped out of my lips.” After the party had returned to Calcutta, one day Kedar Babu of Koalpara asked the Mother at the Udbodhan, “How did you find Rameshwara?” And the Mother replied, “He is just as I had left him, my son.” Then the ever alert Golap-ma was passing by the verandah. As soon as these

words fell on her ears, she stopped and asked with enthusiasm, “What did you say, Mother?” Taken aback, the Mother said, “Why, what should I say? I was only saying that I was very much delighted to see it just as I had heard from you.” But Golap-ma was not to be put off so easily, and she said importunately, 'No, Mother, I have heard everything; it won't do to retract your words now. Isn't it, dear Kedar?’ And she whisked away without waiting for a reply to tell everyone of the good tidings. The devotees believe that the same personage who incarnated in the Treta yuga as Sita, the ever faithful consort of Ramachandra, and worshipped a Shiva image made of sand on the sea coast of Rameshwara, descended again as the all-enduring and ever gracious Holy Mother, so that the sudden sight of the uncovered image carried her mind unconsciously across the vast span of thousands of years and the past appeared as a vivid present; and forgetful of her immediate environment she made that spontaneous remark.²

The Mother was waiting on the railway platform at Vishnupur for her train to Calcutta when an upcountry porter discovered her and hurrying to her side said fervently, “You are my Janakimata; what a long time I have been searching for you! Where had you been so long?” And he began weeping. The Mother took mercy on him, consoled him, and asked him to bring a flower. The man offered that flower at her feet, and she gave him the mantra.³

Goddess Chandi : There is a prayer in the Chandi: “O Mother, you are the infinite power of God and the supreme maya, which is the source of the universe. O Devi, you have enchanted the whole world with your divine

enchantment. When you are gracious, you bestow liberation upon human beings.” Some saw the Mother as a Goddess in dreams, which, however, appeared to them none the less real on that account. A woman disciple named Sumati dreamt that she was worshipping the Mother as the Goddess Chandi by offering her a cloth with a broad, red border. She then came to the Mother with such a piece of cloth, but as she could not express her desire out of shyness, she communicated the anecdote to the Mother through an intermediary. On hearing this the Mother smiled and said, “The Universal Mother sent you the dream, don't you agree, my dear?”⁴

Maa Kali: There are two occasions which occurred with Mother's nephew Shivram, to whom Maa Sarada revealed herself as Mother Kali. Once Maa was coming to Jayrambati from Kamarpukur long after the passing away of the Master, and her nephew Shivaram, who was then very young, followed her with a bundle of clothes. When they reached the field in the vicinity of Jayrambati, some idea crossed Shivaram's mind and he stood still. The Mother, not knowing his mood, proceeded a little and then missing the sound of his footsteps looked back to find him motionless. She said with amazement, “What's the matter, Shivu? Come forward.” “If you tell me one thing,” said brother Shivaram, “then only shall I proceed.” “What's that?” inquired the Mother. “Will you tell me who you are?” put in Shivaram. “Who should I be? I am your aunt,” pleaded the Mother. “Then go,” said Shivaram nonchalantly. “Here you are near your house. I won't proceed further.” The sun was setting; and so in a worried tone, the Mother said, “Look at that! Who can I

indeed be, my dear? I am a woman, your aunt.” “Very good,” persisted Shivaram. “You can as well go.” Finding Shivaram still standing at his post, the Mother said at last, “People say I am Kali.” To be doubly sure Shivaram asked, “Kali? Truly so?” The Mother said, “Yes.” That delighted Shivaram, and he said, “Now, come, let us go.” Then he followed her to the village.

Second incident occurred when Maa was going to Kolkata. She called Brother Varada again to instruct him to accompany Shivaram with the bundle up to the river Amodar. This he did. But a little later, Shivaram was seen crying with his head on the Mother's feet, “Mother, tell me what will be my lot? Do tell me.” The Mother said, “Shivu, get up; why should you worry? You have served the Master so much, and how greatly he loved you! What anxiety need you have? You are already free even in this life.” But Shivaram persisted, “No, you take over my burden, and tell me if you are really what you had had earlier told me you were.” The more the Mother consoled him and patted him touching his head and chin, the more he cried and said, “Assure me whether you have accepted all my burden, and whether you are Mother Kali herself.” The Mother had been moved by Shivaram's tears and tenacity; now his yearning produced so great a change in her that it struck Brother Varada standing by her, that she was at that moment no human being. In that elevated state she laid her hand on Shivaram's head and said solemnly, “Yes, that's so.” Shivaram at once lifted his head and kneeling before her chanted with folded hands the mantra of salutation from the Chandi, Sarva-mangala-mangalye, etc. The Mother kissed him by touching his chin

with her hand; and he wiped away his tears and started for Kolkata, his eyes beaming with delight, and the bundle of fruits and vegetables under his arm. At the Mother's bidding Brother Varada went for the second time to help him with the bundle up to the river. Outside the village Shivaram turned happily towards Brother Varada and said, "Brother, Mother is Kali herself. She's the wielder of people's destiny; through her grace comes freedom. Do you understand?"

The Mother declares her divinity not only indirectly through action, but also by word of mouth. The third person, Brother Varda, who happened to be there, did not understand the Mother's declaration as mere empty words for mollifying Shivaram; rather, he accepted it as a solemn and sincere avowal. Moreover, on the second occasion the Mother was not helpless; she could afford to deny, and such denials were not quite unknown. Whenever a devotee's assertion seemed to be nothing more than idle fancy or baseless sycophancy, the Mother never stooped to encourage such morbid sentimentalism, but rather denounced it severely, though there, too, a discriminating mind could discern the underlying truth that her depreciation was not tantamount to a denial of divinity, but emphasized her preference for playing the human role more thoroughly for some reasons best known to herself.⁵

This incident occurred with a robber Bagdi couple who saw Mother Kali in form of Maa Sarada. During those days of 19th century roads were deserted in absence of electricity and transport. Mataji along with some other women went for Ganga snan (bath at holy river Ganga). The road was

deserted and distance was long. In between there was an area where there were deadly robbers. Mataji got tired while walking. She told other female companions to go ahead without being worried for her and kept on walking down alone in that deserted area. After some time she saw one tall sturdy man coming towards her out of darkness. When he came nearer Mataji could see that he was robber with dark complexion, thick hair, and carrying a baton. He tried to threaten with loud voice, “Who is standing there at this time? Where do you want to go?” He came nearer. Maa replied with courage and love. “Bapu, my companions have gone ahead and I think I have forgotten my path. Will you take me to them? Your son-in-law stays at Rani Rasmati's Kali mandir at Dakshineshwar. Will you take me to him? He will give hearty welcome to you.” Before she could complete her speech, robber's wife also came near. Mataji held her hand with compassion and assurance and said, “O mother, I am your daughter Sarada. With my good luck you both have come here. Otherwise how I would have managed?” Mataji's presence of mind, courage, unreservedness, simple attitude, full faith with confident and kind talk has helped to change heart of this so-called lower caste robber couple from “Bagdi” caste. It was as if both became her parents. Within one night all the three came so close to each other that separation brought tears in their eyes. The next day, they walked up to so far that Mataji was able to join her pilgrim companions. On the way, they plucked some green peas and gave to Maa and spoke with chalked voice, “Dear daughter Sarada, eat these peas also when you have hunger.” Later on also they both paid visit to Dakshineshwar thrice to meet their daughter and son-in-law with something or other as gift.

Mother once asked her Bagdi parents, “Why, my dears, are you so attached to me?” They replied, “You are not, in fact, an ordinary mortal, for we saw you as Kali.” “How you speak my dears! How could you have seen me so?” remonstrated the Mother. Unabashed they said in an aggrieved voice, “No, Mother, there was no mistake about what we saw. You want to hide this from us since we are sinners.”⁶

Maa Durga: Taking advantage of the absence of the Master's nephew Shivaram from his village, his wife wanted, in collusion with the village potentates, to marry her little daughter Panchi to a family, supposed to be comparatively lower in social position; and lest someone should undo her plan, she kept the child locked up in a room. Finding Ramlal, the other nephew of the Master, in an embarrassing position, Shri Prabodh Chatterji of Arambagh and another devotee of Jayrambati skilfully released the child and carried her to Jayrambati before nightfall. They had done this without the Mother's knowledge; but after arriving there they related everything to her to free their conscience from the sense of guilt. The first thing that the Mother wanted to know from them was whether this had the support of her elder nephew Ramlal. When they replied in the affirmative, she said that they need not worry any more. In the course of the conversation Prabodh Babu expressed his misgiving that the village dignitaries might take offence and create difficulties in future about the construction of the temple of the Master at Kamarpukur. Of course, that was not a very serious matter in his estimation, for the Master did not care for temples and memorials; besides, there was no dearth of either even in those days. This remark hurt the Mother, and she said, “How

do you speak, my dear boy? The birthplace of the Master is a sacred place, a seat of his constant presence, and a holy resort for pilgrims. Should one speak of it in such a strain?" Prabodh Babu again apprehended that brother Shivaram's wife might go off her head and set fire to the houses. This made the Mother remark in an unusually sharp, drawling tone, "It will be fine if it happens; it will be fine if it happens! It will be just as the Master liked. He liked funeral places, and all will be turned into a crematory." And she burst out into a peal of laughter, in which the others present also joined at first; but as it persisted for long and by stages developed into a side-splitting roar, as it happened during Mother Durga killed Demon Mahisasur. the others, filled with a supernatural awe, stopped and looked on with trepidation. The very next moment she stopped and broached another topic to divert their attention.⁷

Maa Radha: Mother asked Shailabala Chaudhry to think her as a Maa Radha and repeat her name. Shailabala Chaudhry who asked the mother, "Mother, you instructed me as to how I should do the Japa on the master's name; how shall I do yours?" The Mother replied, "You may do so (thinking of me) as Radha or any other (Goddess) - in fact, under any guise you find convenient. If you can't conceive of me as anybody else, it will do to think (of me) as simply the Mother."⁸

Maa Jagdamba: This incident is narrated by Swami Haripremanandji. One evening, I began to massage her feet. They were so thin and shrivelled ! At that time, Mother had wasted away physically. As my hands passed over her feet,

suddenly a doubt arose - was Mother truly the Mother of the Universe? Would the Mother of the Universe have such emaciated feet? Mentally nursing this doubt, I continued stroking her feet silently. Gradually I came to feel that the feet were certainly not those of an old woman, they were the well-formed feet of a young woman. In the light of a nearby lantern, I clearly saw two incomparably beautiful feet with alta bordering them, half moon shaped nails enhancing the beauty of the close-set rounded toes. Gold anklets, inlaid with pearls and precious stones adorned the feet. Whose feet had I been tending?

Speechless with wonder, I tried to fix my gaze on Mother's face. I saw the image of Jagaddhatri with a golden hue, three eyes, four arms and decked with numerous ornaments. There was a crown on her head and weapons in her hands. A sublime effulgence radiated from her. Before I had had a good look, I cried out "Mother! Mother!" and lost consciousness. How long I remained in that state I can't say. When I regained consciousness, I found Mother stroking my back and saying, "Hari, O Hari, what has come upon you, get up, get up!" I sat up. I saw Mother, old and thin, sitting with her gaze fixed upon her suffering niece. This then was Mother, Mother of the Universe, Saradamani, the consort of Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna in his divine play. Glory to Mother! Glory to the Master!⁹

Divine Mother: Vainkuth Babu, one disciple of Mother, said to Maa, I do not have the capacity to do Japa and Dhyana. Whenever I try to repeat a name, I find my mind agitated. Either you make my mind concentrated on God so that no evil thought assails me, or you take back the holy name! These

words brought tears to the Mother's eyes. With great feeling she said, "Well, you will not have to repeat the Mantra anymore." This implied that she herself would do whatever was necessary on my behalf. But I failed to grasp the import of her words, and fear and apprehension gripped me. Thinking that my connections with the Mother were going to be snapped, I passionately said, "Mother, are you snatching away everything that I possessed? What shall I do now? Well, Mother, am I now doomed to annihilation?" On hearing these words, she said emphatically, "What! You being my child, can you be doomed? Those who have come here, those who are my children, have already achieved liberation. Even God can do no harm to my children!"¹⁰ Mother gave assurance to her dejected child that I am your mother you have already achieved liberation.

One of the female devotees of Maa Sarada said that, "None could understand the mother unless she made her self known out of her mercy. The Mother's divinity consists in this that in her there's no trace of egoism. All mortals are full of self conceit. See, for instance, how thousands of people prostrate themselves at her feet calling her, 'You are Lakshmi, you are the Mother of the Universe.' If the mother were a mortal, this would puff her up with pride. Can a mere mortal digest so much of honour?" The Mother only cast a smiling glance at the devotee.¹¹ Normally she has assumed the form of mother which can be read in the chapter of universal motherhood.

Bearing all these facts in mind, Swami Premananda once told Swami Keshavananda and other devotees, "You have seen with your own eyes, how the Mother, who is in reality the Great Goddess ruling over those who wield the destinies of

kings and emperors, has yet elected to become a poor woman plastering the house with cow-dung, scouring utensils, winnowing rice, and clearing the leavings of the devotees after their meals. She undertakes all these tasks to teach the householders their domestic duties. What infinite endurance, limitless mercy, and absolute absence of egotism are there!” And in a letter he wrote, “Who has understood the Mother? There is not the least trace of splendour. The Master had at least the brilliance of wisdom. But what about the Mother? For her, even that glow is wanting. What a great power is that! Glory to the Mother! Victory to the Mother! Glory to the powerful Mother! The poison that we cannot assimilate, we pass on to the Mother. The Mother takes everyone on her lap. Infinite power, limitless pity! Glory to the Mother! Not to speak of us.”¹²

Chronology

Maa Sarada: Annals of important events of life.

Birth	22 nd December 1853
Marriage	May 1859 5½ yrs
First meeting with husband at Dakshineshwar	March 1872 18 yrs
Shodashi puja	5 th June 1872-18½ yrs
Robber- Mother and father	1877 24 yrs
Cancer strikes to husband	March 1885
Attending husband	September 1885
Husband's suggestion to serve people	1886
Husband's death	16 th August 1886
First pilgrimage	30.08.1886 to August 1887
Loneliness at in-laws house and poverty	September 1887 (8 months)
Vivekanand-blessing for all-India visits	July 1890
Vivekanand Blessings for western country visit	31 st May 1893
Blessings for founding of Ram Krishna Mission	29 th April 1897
With western disciples	17 th March 1898
Inauguration of Nivedita School	13 th November 1898
Belur Math Maa's visit	20 th December 1898
Presence during first Durgapuja at Belurmath	18-22 nd October 1901
Photo taken at studio	April 1905
South India Visit	February 1911 to April 1912
Visit of Sevashram Hospital	9 th November 1912
Stay at Koalapada Jagdamba Ashram	1914
Maa's new home	May 1915
With British police officers	February 1918
Mahasamadhi	21 st July 1920

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**O Mother
You bestow peace and succour
In life's trials and tribulations.**



**O Mother
You lived as
An ideal householder
Exemplary karmayogini
and unique married life.**



**O Mother
you showed
Amazing leadership
By the power of
motherhood.**

**O Mother
You showed the way
To absolute peace and bliss.**

