

# Modernity & Holymother

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## I

ॐ A LFkik; p /keL; l oZ/keZLo: fi .kh A vorkj ofj'Bk; jked'.kk; r ue%AA  
ॐ A ;Flkxunlkgdk "käh jked".ksfLFkrk fg ;k A l oZfo|k Lo: ika rka l kjnka izkeE; ge-AA  
ॐ A ijrYos l nk yhuls jked'.k l ekK; k A ;ks/keZLFkikujrks ohj'ska ra ueE; ge-A

**PREAMBLE:** I am glad to be here at the Ramakrishna Math Mumbai to present my offerings to Holy Mother Sri Saradadevi in the most modern city of Mother India sometimes called 'other India' by old timers. A city dear to us due to its temple and play of Mahalaxmi contributing almost half of the total yearly income of the country. A city still retaining its Marathi rustic strength is the most cosmopolitan metropolis in the country almost forcing everyone who comes here to work smart & hard in producing wealth in a modern way.

The Holy Mother's shrine here is also special in its ambience and uplifting atmosphere especially on Saturdays when a group of women from different quarters of the city regularly congregate to sing Bhajans. So having spent a long time in the early part of my life here I am privileged to pay homage to Modernity that this city represents and Holy Mother that it cherishes, on a day when modern world is celebrating new Year and traditional the Kalpataru day, at 150th Birth anniversary celebration 2004-2005.

You must be wondering whether besides this emotional eulogy of today's subject, whether there is any remote relation that exists between modern civilization with its spaceage machines and internet, equal rights and women's empowerment, speed of life and media blitz on one side, and Sri Saradadevi, an orthodox Bengali Hindu Brahmin woman of bygone age of British Empire, rigid caste system, purdah system and superstition.

Secondly, some of you may feel disinclined to judge and analyse her everyday life as it may lower your faith in her. I used to harbour this view that we should keep her exclusively in our hearts till I came across her own view that one should not entertain such godly attitude towards her but have human attitude of own mother so that you can carry-on your work and let her carry on her own. She never liked to be seen in awe which creates a distance between guru and disciple, mother and child.

**MODERNITY:** Modernity has its origin in European Renaissance where they built a new outlook on its old Greek heritage. Commercial revolution, industrial revolution and now, knowledge revolution gradually evolved modern civilisation. Broadly speaking there are seven facets of modernity :

1. Humanism, where human beings individually and collectively are given importance.  
Man is the centre of concern, equality, liberty, fraternity are the watchwords, democracy is the form of government & secularism is the new Religion.
2. Internationalism or Global thinking or vision, where even concept of nation is taking a back seat and no one can remain isolated. We are in a global village - you have to think globally and act locally. MNC's are everywhere, cross-country mergers of companies is routine, international travel is easy, communication has reduced distances, Infotech, Internet, WWW are the buzzwords, Intercontinental BPO is common.
3. Triumph of reason over faith, Science over Religion and consequent removal of superstition as also introduction of scepticism. Technology is Applied Science and changes as per discoveries and resources available.

4. Drive and motivation of an individual to evolve against all odds and to excel towards perfection.
5. Self-confidence, having personality and strength of character.
6. Love of life and its various facets like arts, sciences, architecture, music, drama, dance etc.
7. Demand of Freedom, rights and justice by the masses and especially women.

India, an advanced civilisation up to the 13th century, fell into a stupor & isolation under foreign rule only to come face to face with modernity during the British rule who established modern means of communication and introduced Macaulay's system of education in 1835 to perpetuate their empire. The impact of modernity and its conflict with tradition was felt and tackled by Raja Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Lokmanya Tilak, Rabindranath Tagore & others. But a comprehensive answer came in the form of Sri Ramakrishna. Born in 1836, he avoided modern education, lived purely the life of an orthodox Bengali Hindu Brahmin, saw God, lived with God, demonstrated God to a few persons and then commissioned Swami Vivekananda to take the battle to the heart of modernity, the United States of America in 1893. However Sri Ramakrishna was a Tyagi par excellence beyond the reach of a common person. Swami Vivekananda reestablished Hinduism and outlined creation of a modern India built on ancient foundation. But Swami Vivekananda was a Sannyasin, and a man in a hurry with very little time to demonstrate the path that he outlined. So it was left to Sri Saradadevi who was trained by Sri Ramakrishna, to show the world, spirituality in work-a-day life of a householder, on whom depend a child, old persons, Sannyasins and the whole society, for almost 34 years after the death of Sri Ramakrishna.

## II

Let us see how her life of Practical Vedanta shows us the way to build modern India on a traditional ancient heritage.

**HUMANISM:** is recognising importance of every human being, giving due respect and looking at all with same sightedness *samadarśitva* (समदर्शित्वा), above differences created by caste, creed, colour, position, status, religion, language etc. Democracy is Government, by the people, for the people and of the people and tries to make everyone equal in the eyes of law. Over and above there is an international watchdog of Human Rights Commission.

If Sri Ramakrishna was a child of divine Mother and saw her in every being, Holy Mother was the divine Mother herself. The relation of the mother is with the inner reality of the child and she is somewhat indifferent to the *upadhis* of a child. It is well known what a profound influence a mother exerts on her child in the womb in growth and picking up "Mother tongue". Holy Mother's such spontaneous motherliness is extended to Amjad, a Muslim mulberry-robber sent to jail several times, and, Swami Saradananda, the General Secretary of Ramakrishna Math & Mission who served Holy Mother to her last. She was compassionate mother to women of questionable character when they called her 'mother', as also to women of foreign land, Nivedita, Macleod, whom she called her daughters. She wanted the British rule to end due to its tyranny & economic drain increasing poverty but she also felt that British also were her children. Day and night, years after years she took care of children: whether they be Sannyasins or householders, low caste or high, worked and prayed for their secular and spiritual welfare. Without any rest she cooked and fed her children coming from distances long and short, took their sins on herself, did extra japa for them, fulfilled their whims & demands, sympathized in their agonies and made them her own, to demonstrate the need, of strength of character in secular life and of regular practice in spiritual life.

Her motherly attitude made her incapable of finding faults with others. This motherliness was due to her fullness of heart where a pitcher of bliss always overflowed in her heart due to highest spiritual achievements. And she considered no greater Dharma than the service of the needy physical, mental and spiritual. She was the mother of the wicked and the virtuous and took the responsibility of cleaning, just as a physical mother does, her child.

Her humanism extended even to subhuman species, animals, birds and she would ask others to

respect them. Gangaram the parrot, Mini the cat, the cows of the household were all given their due. Honour was given even to the ordinary and commonplace things and articles useful in the work-a-day life, like a broom, a vessel, a basket etc.

If the Upanishads of our tradition talk about *bṛk ok; fer; l oā ; rcdÆ txR; ka txr-* (īśā vāsyamindaō sarvaō yatkiñca jagatyāōā jagat), then here is a example in practice. If *^uṣr uṣr\*\** (neti neti) Vedanta of Sri Ramakrishna showed *dkedkæ.k R; kx* (kāmakāñcana tyāga) way of renunciation of the world, Holy Mother' s *bfr bfr* (iti iti) Vedanta shows way of rēnunciation in the world through her all encompassing, selfless, unconditional and non-discriminatory Motherly love for all: be it the oppressed, the persecuted, the untouchable or the outcaste.

**GLOBAL VISION:** Holy Mother's motherliness transformed into making the whole world her own, crossing all geographical boundaries, as no one remains a stranger for her. In the time of *kalapani* when Hindus were forbidden from crossing seas, she permitted Swami Vivekananda to go to Chicago when he himself was in two minds. She dined with Nivedita and others surprising even the Swami. She taught the Hindu way of life to Nivedita and learnt Easter songs from her. She had great faith in the Christ, and Nivedita used to think of her as Mother Mary due to the similarity of serene personality. She showed that world peace can come only peacefully and with a compassionate heart. This is important when we meet the world at International, National and Social levels where essentially the fundamental approach is subjective and personal. Hence Self-culture is vitally related to all true efforts of solving world problems. When the Holy Mother, who used to keep track of the news of world war, heard about the declaration of Allies at the end of the war, she commented that it is only superficial *edkLFk* (mukhastha) and wished it could be from the heart *vurLFk* (antastha). Holy Mother's global consciousness was out of her deep love for the entire creation.

**AGE OF REASON:** Modern age is that of supremacy of reason over faith, science over religion and of removal of superstition. Technology is applied sciences, and change, as per the latest discoveries and available resources. Hence modern attitude is the scientific attitude. So Swamiji says that religion must face scrutiny of science or die. In the western Semitic context, religion is on the vane due to defeat at the onslaught of scientific discoveries, made by scientists starting from Copernicus, Galileo to Einstein and Hawking. Only Vedanta or Indian spirituality as lived and demonstrated by Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda has given proper answers to Science. Certain Indian traditions and Hindu superstitions have been removed. Holy Mother never tried to break tradition violently but when necessary gently bypassed it to overcome superstitions and shackles of caste-system, don't-touchism etc. She was a votary of English education and sent Radhu, her niece to Missionary School. She also asked Sadhus, and Brahmacharins to learn English to get a grasp of scientific thinking. She would say that an educated Sadhu is like an elephant with gold-gilded tusks. When a devotee couldn't perform the marriage of her daughter, Holy Mother asked her to educate the daughter at Nivedita's school which was itself started with Holy Mother's blessings.

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna not only did she not wear the widow's dress, she also continued to wear ornaments in the form of her gold bangles. She even sat in front of a camera at the arrangement made by Western devotees. She possessed an open mind ready to reason out things even when against faith held sacred by many. She did not allow animal sacrifice at Belur Math during Kalipuja (Pumpkin is cut instead as a symbolic substitute) though it is still done at Dakshineswar Kali Mandira. She travelled extensively visiting many places in train & automobile. To her there was no compartmentalisation of Secular & Spiritual both holding equal consideration through reason. Though she couldn't clean a lantern or wind a clock and was afraid of a hissing noise that comes from a water tap, she had regard for those who could operate machines.

**SELF EVOLUTION:** Self evolution towards perfection is modern. So Swami Vivekananda says *education is manifestation of perfection in man*. From an ordinary rustic village girl of a remote Jayrambati who could only read Bengali and could hardly sign her own name, today Saradadevi is virtually worshipped as *Jnanadayini*, *Vishvajanani* and *Sangha Mata*. She had to continuously swim against the current of superstition, caste & custom restrictions and bondage of women folk.

She had to stay in Nahabat at Dakshineswar (which is no better than a cage) for 13 long years and, in *purdah* at Kashipur & Shyampukur while serving Sri Ramakrishna. After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, as a Brahmin widow of thirty three facing excruciating poverty with only rice to eat sometime, she had to take upon herself the load of supporting a large family of her brothers. But crossing all hurdles she surpassed herself towards perfection and divinity. With no schooling she got educated and trained by Sri Ramkrishna in matters both secular and spiritual: how to behave with people, how to keep daily routine, the intricacies of various spiritual practices, the process of initiation and so on. The training was so thorough that Sri Ramakrishna asked her and empowered her to do much more than what he himself had done. This striving for excellence overcoming all limits posed by rural background, a female body, lack of formal education, poverty and social restrictions, is the greatest sign of modernity. Today Ramakrishna Math & Mission can claim its international recognition due to her initial efforts and guidance and her prayers at Bodhgaya for welfare of Sannyasins, her full support to Swami Vivekananda when he had initial difficulties in establishing Ramakrishna Sangha. As a matter of fact the fledgling Order could have split except for her efforts to keep it together. She remained in the background but gave positive directions like when she supported Swami Vivekananda avoiding formal worship of Sri Ramakrishna at the Advaita Ashrama in Mayavati, hailed the social service done by Sadhus at Varanasi Sevashram or when she stopped the proposed sale of Belur Math property for funds to do relief for plague victims or when she gave instructions to Swami Virajananda who was then a young novice who had fallen seriously ill to go home, get cured and come back when well. Even today Ramakrishna Mission is together as organisation due to the showering of love of Holy Mother and following her advice that the Sangha is based on love.

**STRONG PERSONALITY:** "In her one sees realized that wisdom and sweetness to which simplest of woman may attain, and yet to myself the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind are almost as wonderful as her sainthood", says Nivedita about Holy Mother who had her own personality and the strength of character to support it, a very modern quality for a woman. When Sri Ramakrishna asked her to restrict the diet of his young disciples she considered feeding as her own department and took the responsibility of the disciples' future. Sri Ramakrishna himself used to say, if the one who is residing at Nahabat is cross with some one for some reason it is beyond even his power to save that person. When she was asked whether she wanted to go to Panihati for a festival with Sri Ramakrishna, she decided rightly not to go so as to avoid public criticism. For great Swamis like Swami Vivekananda & Swami Brahmananda her word was law in all matters. When a servant was removed from Belur Math by Swamiji for stealing, she reinstated him due to the servants prayers & poverty. Swami Premananda used to say that what poison they themselves could not swallow, such people with bad tendencies were sent to her for initiation. She took only 2-3 minutes to initiate a devotee and that also any suitable time or place, like for a Porter who approached in all humility on the railway platform itself. The perfect blending of integrity, sacrifice, patience, purity and compassion had given the strength of character to her to develop a gentle but strong personality. *otkrfi dBljlf.k enqih dđ qkrfi* (vajrādapi kaōhorāi i mīdunā kusumādapiā). She could not bear injustice done to a pregnant woman Sindhubala tortured by Police or a woman abused by her husband. When pursued by Harish a mad devotee, after trying to run away, she turned around, pulled him down, put her foot on his chest, pulled his tongue & slapped him. She used to say, mind is everything and had capacity to read others mind, read past & future of a person. When Swami Nikhilananda offered Dakshina at time of initiation she refused to take it stating she does not take it from Sannyasins of the order though he was an outsider at that time. She did not take money given by a Mārwarī as that would be tantamount to acceptance by Sri Ramakrishna who had initially avoided taking it. She never talked about her spiritual experiences but through her behaviour conveyed a sense of the infinite in a tangible manner. When asked she told that there exists no living being on any planet other than earth. She showed that, spiritual ecstasy does not incapacitate one from performing normal duties.

In all activities her involvement was total at the same time she was always serene, calm, never getting passionate, being detached when necessary. When Radhu' s mad mother abused her she

never reacted negatively. When Radhu threw a big Brinjal at her hurting her badly, she prayed for Radhu's welfare. In her attachment & detachment she shows modern trends in her behaviour. Objectivity, in judging a situation along with own reactions together & then reacting. Look at the soft skills she had. *Stress management* by not finding faults with others and not worrying about impending sorrows, taking sorrow along with joy as companions. *Conflict management*, being flexible and non-partisan in creating mutual understanding between the quarrelling relatives. *Negotiation skills* in creating trust towards agreement on intricate matters. Once when asked by a devotee on one instruction of devotee's family guru, first she avoided, then opined tactfully as to avoid crossing the gurus instructions. *Participatory leadership* with ability to conquer any context, never being authoritarian, suggesting remedies but not ordering anyone. *Dignity of labour* by performing menial work meticulously. *Time management & planning* by observing time in her routine. *Decision making* in giving definite directions when required. *Interpersonal skills* when dealing with exacting, quarrelsome, selfish relatives on one side, and spiritual seekers on other. *Communication skills* even with foreigners and those who did not know Bengali as in visit to South India, without hurting the feelings of any. *Motivation* in getting up in time every day at 3 :00 a.m. without fail.

For the modern age she has become a role model in her own way. As an eldest daughter she helped her poor household just like a son, even taking her old mother on pilgrimage, helping father in the field. As a sister she took responsibility of the house hold of the brothers' families keeping them together as far as possible and helping every person individually, lovingly, in spite of the selfishness of the brothers, natural jealousies of nieces, Nalini's mania for ceremonial purity, the insanity of Radhu' s mother and perversity of Radhu. Her love was not due to any social pressure but was based on her own conscience and initiative. As a wife she was a *gṛhīṇī* (sahadharmacāriṇī) as Sri Ramakrishna married to go through the samskara and with her consent Sri Ramakrishna lived a God-centered life. Once when it was reported to her that some gentlemen who used to visit Sri Ramakrishna have remarked that the Master had done injustice to her, in utter surprise she said "How they talk! Why should the Master be unjust to me? Those people only knew one relation with their wives, which was physical so they talked that way. Sri Ramakrishna had established the pitcher of bliss within my heart & I become full of that bliss. How profound was his love for me? What a great concern he had for me!,"<sup>2</sup> She looked upon Sri Ramakrishna as her child, father, mother, brother, friend and all in all. She showed to her mother-in-law the same respect she showed to her mother. Even to Bhairavi Brahmani, Sri Ramakrishna's guru & to Gopaler Ma, a devotee, she treated with respect as mother-in-law. Because of her personality we have Sri Ramakrishna successful in living a spiritual life and playing role of a world teacher. But she was also a teacher (Guru) in her own right when she asked Virajananda Swami to meditate in the heart instead of head or initiated Swami Yogananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna or gave advice "Through spiritual disciplines (Japa, meditation) ties of past karma are cut asunder. But realisation of God can't be achieved without ecstatic love for him. Do you know the significance of Japam & other spiritual practices? By these the power of sense organs is subdued."<sup>3</sup> As a *Devi* she was worshipped by Sri Ramakrishna as Shodashi who is the aspect of Divine mother worshipped by Puri Swamis at Sringeri. Sri Ramakrishna called her Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda called her Shakti and Durga, Swami Abhedananda as Kali and Parama Prakriti others as Laxmi, Jagaddhatri etc.

In the words of Sister Devamata, "Holy Mother showed that Religion was a sweet natural joyous thing, that purity & holiness were tangible realities that the odour of sanctity was literally a sweet perfume overlaying & destroying the foulness of material selfishness. Compassion, devotion, God union were her very nature. One scarcely knew that she possessed them. It was through the soothing benediction of a word or touch that one sensed their presence".<sup>4</sup>

**LOVE OF LIFE** : Modern man takes interest in various facets of life and patronises art, architecture, music, painting, travel, drama etc. Sri Ramakrishna supported Girish Ghosh. Holy Mother also was fond of drama and saw Pandava Gaurav, Vilvamangal, Chaitanyalila etc. Some actresses were initiated by her. She herself was a good singer with a sweet voice.

Some of the songs like *Vipadataran Tumi Nirayan, Giri Ganesh amar Shubhaktiri* etc. were

sung by her, at behest of some devotees. At Kothar, Orissa she attended their yatra performance. At Belur Math on Sri Ramakrishna's birthday etc. she would listen carefully to Kali Kirtan. Swami Saradananda at her behest had to sing at Udbodhan with a Tanpura (Tambora) and Tabala accompaniment. She extensively travelled seeing different places in North and South India by train. By Nivedita's automobile she visited Museum, Zoo, Botanical garden etc. She used to do her own cloth-cutting, tailoring and encouraged embroidery etc. There is an incident of one Prafullamukhi Basu preparing a woollen carpet with temple and photos of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda knitted & was praised by Holy Mother.

**FREEDOM:** Modernity gives importance to individual conscience over outside authority. Individual freedom of thought, expression and enjoyment is accepted by modern society as you can judge on 31<sup>st</sup> December all night bash. However freedom is misunderstood as license and results in chaos and strife. Human being is designed with senses looking outwards, and it is freedom from sensuality, not freedom of senses that makes a person truly human, as distinct from animals. A personality like Holy Mother though in favour of freedom of thought and expression shows control of senses as the path to enjoyment while avoiding chaos created by sensuality.

In this regard Holy Mother insisted on *lajja* or modesty as the ornament of a woman and advised separation of men and women in any group activity. She fully supported freedom of women to choose their own destiny, opposed child marriage, but didn't consider marriage as the be all & end all of a woman's life.

We find in Sri Ramakrishna's life importance given to women; he worshipped God as woman, was a devoted son of his mother, took first lessons in Tantra from Bhairavi Brahmani, respected his own wife as Shodashi, made her his first disciple and empowered her to carry on message of spirituality. No time in past an Avatar's consort has been empowered to take up the work this way. But during her spiritual ministry the Holy Mother never came in media blitz but remaining in background showed that woman is equal of man but is differently equipped; and that motherliness is the special privilege of a woman and as a matter of fact she is superior in that, to a man.

### III

Nivedita has commented whether Sri Saradadevi is the last of the old order or beginning of a new? We feel that she is the bridge between the two with her one foot in the past, one in the present & with her eyes on future she is at the same time ancient, modern and futuristic through her motherliness towards all. Her continuing presence helps, men control their carnal desires and women regain their forgotten dignity & self respect. She has this harmonious blend of four yogas, has demonstrated that spirituality does not make you otherworldly or old fashioned and Sannyasis & Grihastas are great in their own place if they follow yugadharma. She was divine yet human, motherly yet practical, gentle yet powerful, of fortitude yet courageous, of great insight yet innocent, self-effacing yet self-assertive, had humility yet possessed authority.

If Swamiji has said that man is the centre of the universe, Holy Mother has shown that woman is the centre of human society. Today when women are competing with men, which shows their lack of confidence, Holy Mother shows a woman's superiority in her compassion and non-discriminating, unconditional, unmotivated maternal love. When domesticity is stopped being seen as an appropriate source of self-esteem, Holy Mother shows performance of daily chores as housewife confined to four walls for thirteen long years of her life with full joy. Today when marriage as an institution is in doldrums and family as the most powerful unit of society is disintegrating, Holy Mother shows that a wife can earn the respect of a worthy husband by a dedicated service and build a global family by pervasive concern. When consumerism has taken toll of woman's modesty, Holy Mother shows a way to dignity for them. Today in the age of cut-throat competition of survival of the fittest, Holy Mother shows art of cooperation and taking everyone along or win-win attitude in work -a-day life can perform miracles. Today, when human being has lost faith in religion and believes more in head than heart, Holy Mother shows that human heart is the sanctuary of peaceful global civilization.

Sri Ramakrishna incarnated to establish Yuga Dharma, he was Yugávatár, Swamiji defined Yuga Dharma as Yugáchárya and Holy Mother demonstrated it as Yugajanani. For us modern India is Mother Sarada. If she were alive she would ask us to equal or surpass her. Let us pray to her so that she showers her blessings to do that & transform us to enlightenment.

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*(A lecture given by Swami Tattwajnanananda, Principal Ramakrishna Mission Shilpamandira, at Ramakrishna Math, Mumbai on 1st & 2nd Jan. 2005)*

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2. Sri Sarada Devi The great wonder (Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2001), 443.
3. ibid, 458
4. ibid, 304

Suggested Reading :

1. Prabuddha Bharat (Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Jan. 2004)
2. ibid, October 2004
3. Ma Karunamayee Sri Saradadevi (Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur 2003)