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Nirvāna

State of Spiritual enlightenment or illumination. *Nirvana* releases humans from the cycle of birth, suffering, death and all forms of worldly bondage.

in this issue...

Holy Mother Sarada Devi's birthday was celebrated recently at our Centre, as indeed at all centres, with programmes of special puja, chanting, bhajans and discourses. As an intellectual supplement, we bring you an article on Holy Mother by Nilanjana Sengupta, a Singapore-based free lance journalist who contributes to reputed journals in the region. She analyses Mother's life from the sociological background of mid-19th century highlighting the quiet but remarkable revolution she brought about in the life of the oppressed Indian woman. (p 3)

We continue with the thoughtful series on Swami Vivekananda by Dr Achuthan. In this issue he focuses on Swamiji's work on improving the lot of India's millions of Daridra-Narayanans. (p16)

Meanwhile in India the broad-based National Committee under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, inaugurated in January 2011, has already started its work. One of the first tangible results will be the release of a book "Awakening India" containing selected writings of Swamiji targetting the youth. This will be followed later this year by a "Future Leader Discovery" contest. In September there will be an Inter-faith Youth Convention to be inaugurated by former President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.

In Singapore a day-long Spiritual Retreat of chanting, bhajans and discourses helps the participants to recharge their spiritual batteries amidst long hours of work, social activities and numerous chores. (p.20)

In the continuing Ramayana series, Bharata leaves home determined to bring self-exiled Rama back to Ayodhya, a task complicated by doubts and suspicions about the young prince's intentions. (p.23)

Pearls of Wisdom

Uddhava Gita

Translated by Swami Madhavananda

Śrī bhagavān uvāca

Bhumyambhagnyanilākāśā bhūtānām pancha dhātavah

Ābhramyāsthavarādīnām śarirā ātmasamyutāh

Vedena nāmarūpāni viṣamāṅi sameṣvapi

Dhātuṣūdhava kalpanta eteṣām svārdhasidhaye

Deśakālādibhāvānām vastūnam mama satthama

Gunādoṣow vidhīyete niyamārtham hi karmanām

The Lord said:

Earth, water, fire, air, and ether are the five common factors of the bodies of all beings from Brahma down to a tree etc., and they are equally connected with a soul.

O Uddhava, though their bodies are thus similar, yet for their own good the Vedas have fashioned diverse names and forms for them.

O best of men, with a view to circumscribing work I enjoin merits and defects regarding things in accordance with the exigencies of place, time, etc.

(To be continued)



Hinduism and Water...

According to Hinduism matter is composed of five basic elements – earth, water, fire, air and ether. The result of permutations and combinations of these elements is this Universe. So water is one of the fundamental elements which sustains life on this earth. From ancient times water has been regarded as a great sustainer and purifier.

In the Vedas, the oldest Scriptures of Hinduism, waters, lakes and rivers in general are referred to with great reverence and are deified. Waters are spoken of as purifying (puna nah). The Vedas declare waters purify a person not only physically but also free a person of sins and wrong doings one may have committed. There are prayers which say – “May the divine water protect me”. (Ta āpo devirihā mamāvantu). There are hymns addressed to waters as divinities. Rig Veda says – gods are centered in waters. (āpo vai sarvadevatāh).

No worship of gods or religious rites either at homes or temples begin without water. Water is a must in all worships. A worshipper first purifies his mind and body by sprinkling water on his head. All worships begin with water and end with water.

Hindus look upon rivers and lakes not as natural objects but as sacred. Majority of their places of pilgrimage are on the banks of various rivers. It is believed that a ritual dip in the waters of these rivers sanctifies them. The spiritual atmosphere of such a holy place, and a purifying bath in a river gives much needed inspiration to draw ordinary people away from their everyday worries, problems and selfish pursuits. Of all the rivers Ganga river is held in high esteem, it is not a river but a goddess or mother. For most of the Hindus a bath in it is a life-time's goal. No religious act can be ceremoniously complete without its water being used in some form or the other. A few drops of its water poured into the mouth of a dying man will remove all the sins. Immersion of the ashes of a dead person's body in it will give that person liberation. Many religious texts praise the greatness and sanctifying power of Ganga waters. The biggest bathing festival, Kumbha Mela is held on the banks of the Ganga. Millions of devotees take bath in the river on this sacred occasion. In the world we do not find another example like Kumbha Mela.

Holy Mother:

A beacon of light to Women

Nilanjana Sengupta

“Why is it that our country is the weakest and most backward of all countries?”

Because Shakti is held in dishonour here.”

Swami Vivekananda

In the same quotation Swamiji mentions the Holy Mother who was ‘born to revive this wonderful Shakti’. Mother was born in 1853, i.e., in the post-Renaissance period when India was caught at a strange cross-road. The first stirrings of nationalism were being heard but a large majority of the masses still remained enslaved to the British, in mind and in body. While the upper classes prided themselves in their mindless emulation of Western thought and culture, the middle and lower classes were immersed in darkness, blindly following centuries-old rituals and practices. Indian women led lives of drudgery, incarcerated by unfair social practices like sati, child-marriage and ban on widow re-marriage.

Despite the best efforts of reformists like Raja Rama Mohan Roy, light of new thoughts and convictions did not penetrate the ‘purdah’ behind which women had been banished. It was at this time, when the country struggled at the confluence of cultures, that the Holy Mother arrived to lead us into the future.

However, Indian women had not always led such subjugated lives. Back in the Vedic ages women were held in high esteem and scaled peaks of literary achievement. In fact to quote the noted historian, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, “It may be stated without any hesitation that the general position and status of Indian women in the Vedic Age was much higher than in any other ancient society that we know of, those of Greece and Rome not excluded.”¹ The key to this lay in education which started at early childhood. Girls and boys alike underwent the Upanayan (sacred initiation) ceremony around the age of

eight to start their Vedic and secular studies. The period of Brahmacharya (studentship) continued for the next eight to ten years after which the girls were considered ready for marriage. The highest education was accessible to both sexes and many women distinguished themselves not only as Vedic scholars but also as outstanding philosophers, debaters and teachers. During the age of the Upanishads too, the level of education remained unimpaired and we had luminaries like Gargi and Maitreyi.

Winds of change swept over India during the Smriti-Purana period around 600 B.C. when the marriageable age of the girls began to be progressively lowered till Smriti writers of about 200 A.D. advocated girls' marriages around the age of twelve or even earlier. This change had a spiralling effect contributing to gradual degeneration in the social position of Indian women. As a result of early marriage, girls were left with little or no time to complete their Vedic studies, the Upanayan ceremony became a mere formality and was soon dispensed with altogether, a girl was to consider her husband as a social superior and had virtually no say over household matters. Thus

bereft of mental or intellectual growth, women were not only inferior to their husbands in education but in reality also often narrow and uninspired in their outlook. It is not surprising that the Holy Mother, many centuries later, was vocal in her protest against the custom of child marriage which had vitiated the lives of women to such an extent: "In our wretched country, before a girl turns eight her parents are anxious to change her Gotra (get her married). Poor Radhu (Mother's niece), if she was not married so early, would she be suffering so much?"²

At the time of Mother's holy birth, women's education in India was at a nascent stage. In 1854 (the year after Mother's birth), Sir Charles Wood³ had sent the famous 'despatch' to Lord Dalhousie mentioning the *need* of women's education. A handful of girls' schools were scattered over the country but these were mostly run by Christian missionaries to propagate their faith. In Bengal, though the Bethune School was established in 1849, it was a continuous struggle to get Hindu families to enrol their daughters. In Mother's village, Jayrambati, only one or two women knew how to sign their names in Bengali. Women lived

within the “narrow, domestic walls” erected by society, unaware of the “heaven of freedom” that beckoned.

II

“But is she the last of an old order, or the beginning of a new?”

Sister Nivedita

Apparently seen the Holy Mother was the embodiment of all that is sweet and simple in Indian rusticated life. Unlike other contemporary names like the famous social reformer, Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), or the noted literary talents Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932) and Toru Dutt (1856-77), Mother had little or no formal education. Her schooling stopped soon after marriage to Sri Ramakrishna at the age of five. Post marriage, largely through her own efforts, Mother learnt the first and second primers and could barely read the Ramayana and Mahabharata. We find a rather endearing picture of Mother putting her thumbprint on money orders or letters to convey her blessings to her disciples.⁴

Mother was always the epitome of old-fashioned feminine modesty and strictly observed ‘purdah’. She spent her days surrounded by women disciples and in the presence of men

the end of her saree would come down to nearly completely veil her face. In fact this was much to the chagrin of respected Swami Saradananda, who served Mother like a son and was her self-appointed ‘gate-keeper’. He was often heard grumbling that Mother covered her face in his presence as if he was her “father-in-law”!

Born and brought up in a remote village in Bengal, Mother spent her life serving and worshipping her husband, taking care of her many disciples as a loving, nurturing mother. And yet during her life-time, both in words and in deeds she conveyed to the world what it meant to be truly modern. As Sister Nivedita says, “... the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind are almost as wonderful as her sainthood.”⁵ Time and again Mother rebelled against the dead systems of the Indian society. With calm conviction she set aside the conventional restrictions of religion, caste, creed or country. The caste system which was and continues to be such a blemish on the Indian society, held no significance to her. She perceived human beings as individuals, with individual merits and demerits and not as representatives of a social

category. To her every man or woman was an embodiment of the all pervasive Divine Spirit. She was ever busy taking care of the needs of her disciples. After lovingly feeding them with maternal affection, she would not hesitate to pick up their plates and clean the place where they had eaten. When the dogmatic Nalini (Mother's niece) objected, Mother told her firmly, "Where do you see thirty six different castes? They are all mine."⁶ Again, after the death of Mother's uncle, Nilmadhav Mukhopadhyay, Ashutosh Mitra, a Shudra, carried his corpse downstairs. When Golap Ma⁷ protested, she said "Who is a Shudra? He's my son! Do devotees have caste-distinctions, Golap?"⁸ She saw only the inner spirituality of her disciples and ignored the external trappings imposed by tradition. For the same reason Mother did not waver in telling Radhu to touch the non-Brahmin Shyamadas Kabiraj's feet: he was a 'Brahmin' to her because of his intellectual attainment, though social norm might call him a 'Vaidya'⁹.

Mother was equally vehement in protesting against superstitions and meaningless practices prevalent at that time. Time and again she advised Hindu widows not to follow

pointless rituals and austerities that would physically weaken them. Fasting without food or water on *ekadasi* was useless if it kept them away from their spiritual lives. What Mother was concerned about was the cleanliness of the soul and not mere external manifestations. She was the epitome of self-sacrifice and self-control herself and yet as a Brahmin widow tasted rice cakes after sunset (taking a second meal of rice was prohibited to Hindu widows). One of the reasons was the rice cakes had been prepared for her by a devotee and being a true mother, she could not refuse this gesture of love. But equally important is the example she wanted to set before thousands of Indian widows who silently accepted the unfair treatment by society as a way of life.

As the Master's spiritual consort, Mother genuinely believed in his message to the world that all religions were uniform and merely different means to achieve the same end – Divinity. She would pray with the same religious fervour at the Dakshineswar Temple as at a Muslim Dargah in Chitpur¹⁰. The same unbending respect for all faiths resonates in her immortal

and oft-quoted words: "Just as Sarat (Swami Saradananda) is my son, Amjad (a Muslim and a suspected thief) is also my son."¹¹ Sister Nivedita speaks of the Mother's appreciation of the Christian faith: "... she bears unconscious witness to this association with the great. But in nothing perhaps does it speak more loudly than in her instant power to

penetrate a new religious feeling or idea."¹² So Mother, though ignorant of the language, had an intuitive understanding of the Easter music played on a small French organ at Sister Nivedita's chapel; just as she was deeply moved by the Christian marriage vow "For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health – till death do us part."



Holy Mother and Sister Nivedita

III
**“She is Sarada-Saraswati – has
come to impart wisdom.”**

Sri Ramakrishna

It was with this essentially humane and progressive world-view that Mother appeared on the human plane with a special message to women. She chose for her mortal *lila* a country where women were worshipped as the Mother Goddess and yet were subverted in status. She came at a time when women’s education was at a low ebb, when girls were married off before puberty, when young widows suffered lives of abysmal misery, when a woman’s life was a life of bondage, without any economic or intellectual freedom.

Swami Vivekananda said, “Women have many and grave problems, but none that cannot be solved by that magic word: education.”¹³ The Holy Mother too had a clear vision of the future role of women and repeatedly emphasised the need of education. She was instrumental in sending her niece Radhu to school even after marriage. When one of her devotees, Chandramohan Dutta consulted Mother about his daughter’s marriage, her forthright advice was

“Chandu, instead of getting Borokhuki (elder daughter) married, have her educated. Let her continue to read at Nivedita School.”¹⁴ The Holy Mother’s dream of witnessing a revival of the Vedic Ages and the awakening of the feminine spirit in India was largely fulfilled through Sister Nivedita.

Sister Nivedita came to India in 1898 and later the same year met Mother in her North Kolkata residence. The young Nivedita was completely overwhelmed by her “soul of sweetness”. On her part, Mother welcomed her with open arms and to the surprise of all, even shared a meal with her. Nivedita writes, “She has always been terribly orthodox, but all this melted away the instant she saw the first two Westerners...”¹⁵ The strength of Mother’s silent rebellion can be fully gauged when placed in the context of the then caste-bound society: a Hindu could be ostracized for touching a foreigner and his only redemption lay in a compulsory dip in the Holy Ganga. Regarding this incident a joyful Vivekananda writes: “...the European and American ladies went the other day to see her, and what do you think, Mother ate with them...Is not that grand?”¹⁶ Mother’s open hearted acceptance

of the Westerners meant the Indian society was a bit more hospitable to them. Nivedita writes, "This gave us all a dignity and made my future work possible in a way nothing else could possibly have done."¹⁷ So Sister Nivedita's school for girls opened on 13 November, 1898 in Baghbazar, Kolkata. Mother herself inaugurated the school and prayed: "May the blessings of the Mother of the Universe be showered upon this school, and may the girls receiving their education here grow up into ideal women."¹⁸ Nivedita, touched by Mother's benediction, writes, "I cannot imagine a grander omen than her blessing, spoken over the educated Hindu womanhood of the future."¹⁹

Mother remained closely associated with this school during her lifetime. She visited the premises regularly and was a source of encouragement to the students and teachers alike. During one of her visits Mother was vocal in admiring two girls from Chennai who were twenty or twenty one years old and yet continued their studies at the Sister Nivedita School without thoughts of marriage.²⁰ Nivedita held the first school exhibition of children's books and crafts in Mother's residence in 1899. In the

same year when Nivedita earned the ire of the narrow minded Hindu society for publishing photographs of her students in the "Empress" magazine, it was the Holy Mother who came forward to protect her. Nivedita was and always remained her blessed daughter, her pampered "Khuki" and her school flourished in the safe haven of Mother's love. Gauri-Ma was another person who played a key role in the holy scheme of things. She was a life-long activist for the cause of women's education and one of the earlier devotees of the Master. In fact he had earmarked her for serving the women with her "spiritual energy."²¹ But it was later in Vrindavan that the Holy Mother reminded her about her life's mission, "The Master said that your life was meant for serving women – the living goddesses."²² Thereafter, in 1895 Gauri-Ma established the Sri Saradeshwari Ashram on the bank of the Ganga in Barrackpore, near Kolkata. The Holy Mother visited the ashram and blessed Gauri-Ma's pioneering work. Later the ashram was moved to North Kolkata near the Mother's residence and a great number of dedicated women joined. Durgapuri, a young student of the ashram was Mother's special

favourite. Once when she faced criticism for learning English, Mother called Gauri-Ma and personally told her that the young girl should be allowed to study English.²³ This was perhaps against the wishes of Gauri-Ma who was a believer of ancient Vedic studies. Mother, with her far reaching foresight, knew that English education for women was a necessity if India was to carve out an international identity.

The Holy Mother while blessing the Nivedita School had said the students should grow up to be 'ideal women'. Echoing the same thought, Swamiji said "True womanhood, like true monkhood, was no matter of mere externals. And unless it held and developed the spirit of true womanhood, there could be no education of woman worthy of the name."²⁴ Both of them envisaged future women as a composite whole - effortlessly bridging old Indian spirituality with modern science. Just as Mother had looked beyond accepted habits and traditions, she was also capable of looking beyond the accepted norms of education. Education to her was not mere literacy but a means to shape better human beings. She wanted Indian

women to personify "Shakti" – strong in their moral fibre, independent in their outlook, aware of the world around them. Perhaps this is why she advised the young girls at Nivedita School that when they went anywhere they should keep a keen lookout for what was happening around them and gather all the local news²⁵; and perhaps for the same reason after a field-trip the girls were given little sticks and told to make a map of the place they had visited. It was because of Mother's vision that the girls were encouraged to study not only the Indian scriptures but also pick up vocational training which would bring them financial independence in the future. An alumna of Nivedita School reminisces that the girls studied not only history, geography and biology but also craft, painting and the martial arts. Studying microbes under a microscope and singing the 'Vande Mataram' – both were a part of their day. Ma wanted them to emerge as the new-age Sister Nivedita or Gauri-Ma: elevated in their convictions and spiritual practices and capable of unselfish service to their country.

Mother's dream image of the "ideal woman" found fulfilment in Pravrajika Bharatiprana. Bharatiprana, or

Sarala as she was called in her pre-monastic days, was a student of the Sister Nivedita School. She escaped from home when unwillingly coerced into early marriage by her family members. Sarala underwent a lot of hardships, living in penury, moving from one shelter to another till 1912 when Mother took her into her fold as one of her own *sevikas*. At that time Lady Carmichael was looking for some girls from good Hindu families to be trained as nurses at the Dufferin Hospital. Sarala's name was suggested for admission but Golap-Ma reacted rather sharply. It was unthinkable at that time that a Brahmin girl should work as a nurse: she would be an outcaste; nobody would eat food cooked by her thereafter. When the Holy Mother heard about this outburst, she quietly replied, "Why do you object Golap? After taking her training she will serve us only."²⁶ On the day she departed for training Mother gave her a blanket and affectionately blessed her saying, "My child, you need not fear."²⁷

Mother's prediction about Sarala came true. As a professional nurse, not only did she selflessly serve Mother but also nursed Yogin-Ma, Golap-Ma and Swami Saradananda

in their death beds. Later when the Sarada Math was established in 1953, Pravrajika Bharatiprana became the first President and remained in the same position for long 18 years. With her single minded devotion and self-sacrifice Holy Mother's 'Sarala' was an example to the members of the Math.

IV

"She never taught, seldom ever counselled. She merely lived. And who can tell how many lives were cleansed and exalted by that holy living?"

-Sister Devamata

The Holy Mother's image is so beautiful. The white saree that softly frames her face is as pure as moonlight. Her hair cascades down like the dark waves of a river flowing by night. Her fingers are inter-linked as the 'Jagatjanani' assimilates the entire universe in her arms. The bangles on her arms she never gave up even in widowhood, because she believed that her husband's soul was immortal. Mother's eyes look on with infinite tenderness and yet seem to look far beyond, at the painful cycles of births and deaths that a human needs to transcend. She is as familiar as our own mother – a mother who

has loved and cared and borne the pain of a son's death. But at the same time she is the embodiment of all that is pure, perfect, ethereal. Swami Abhedananda described her as 'Pavitrataswarupinnai' (the personification of purity), Sister Nivedita called her life, "one long stillness of prayer." Her intrinsic perfection does not need the seal of formal education because education is merely the "manifestation of the perfection in man."²⁸ Neither does Mother need an elaborate tome to convey her teachings to mankind: studying her sacred life, her deeds and gestures, steer us towards a life more fulfilling and noble.

Mother was the "ideal woman" herself – an ideal daughter, an ideal wife, an ideal mother and at the same time an ideal 'Sanghajanani' (Mother of the Ramakrishna Math & Mission). At every stage of her life and in everything she did, she is an inspiration to women. Her life abounds in little acts and deeds which apparently seen, seem as natural as the rising sun but like the sun can bring new hope and alter the course of our life's journey. Women can learn so much from her: from practical advice on running a household to elevating

oneself beyond everyday trivialities and leading a more devout life. Thus on one hand she says that in a household even the vegetable peels should not be wasted but should be fed to the animals; while on the other, "We are women and can't forget household matters. So I put the water to boil and while the rice is cooking do my *japa*. Again while the lentils are on the stove, I do a bit of *japa*..."²⁹

All along Mother made it clear that she did not support child marriage. But this does not mean that she disbelieved in the institution of marriage. She told a woman disciple, "Wherever a couple lives it becomes a veritable Ramrajya."³⁰ She proved with her own life the sanctity of marriage. Mother lived for years in the cramped discomfort of Nahabat, almost invisible to the world, serving the Master in sickness and in health. She sacrificed the personal gratifications that a normal wife seeks, to encourage her husband on his chosen path of spirituality. As Sri Ramakrishna acceded time and again, she was the true "Shakti" which made his sublime holiness possible. And yet never did she let her ego intervene, assert a claim on her husband which was different or

superior than other disciples: “One who did not know who she was, would never suspect, from speech of hers, that her right was stronger, or her place closer, than that of any other.”³¹ But her calm, Sita-like image did not mean she did not raise her voice in protest against the Master when she felt it necessary. Once Master asked her to promise that she would not allow his food to be defiled by anybody else’s touch. Her prompt answer was, “...if anyone begs me by calling me ‘Mother’, I shan’t be able to contain myself. Besides, you are not my Master alone, you are for all.”³² Their marriage was a true union of two compatible souls, based on respect, piety and renunciation. It was a relationship that sustains and not suffocate; a relationship that inspires the partner towards elevated planes of inner perfection.

The Holy Mother is at her most beautiful as the Mother of her disciples. Many images come to mind which evoke her boundless love for her children: Mother visiting her neighbours in Jayrambati requesting for little extra milk for her disciples who are ill with malaria, a tearful Mother standing at the doorway of her country home as she bids farewell

to a departing son, her sons have decided to celebrate her birthday and she needs to eat before they do – but she can’t force food down her throat while her children are still hungry. But no picture is perhaps more heart wrenching than the sight of Mother’s grief when Swami Yogananda’s body was being carried away for cremation. Yogananda or Jogin’s life-long association with the Mother began when he was a teen-aged boy. He was Mother’s first disciple and attendant. His respect for her was so deep that he never saluted her by touching her feet. Instead when Mother had left the place he would touch the spot with his head.³³ When after years of austerity, he passed away in Mother’s Kolkata home, her sorrow found expression in a ‘long wail’ that seemed to echo round the house: “Yes, he has gone to my Lord, I *know* that. But he was *my* Yogin and he was wrenched away from me.”³⁴ A mother’s broken hearted grief seems to merge inextricably with her belief that the *atman* is eternal and returns to the Infinite – dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

We see Mother in a different avatar as the ‘Sanghajanani’. This is her external life, away from family and

the female quarters of her home. Yet again she is the same Mother, calm, collected, incisive in her thoughts, serious in her convictions, independent in her opinions. She makes it a point to dictate thought provoking answers to the letters that her devotees send, have the articles from Udbodhan read out to her. After the Master's passing away, she visited Bodh Gaya and saw the Buddhist monasteries. It was here that the thought of founding a similar mission for the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna came to her mind. She realised an institution was necessary for the perpetuation of the Master's thoughts and ideals. Again it was she who went against social taboo and blessed Swami Vivekananda before his triumphant journey to the West. She ignored popular opinion and blessed the Ramakrishna devotees who were serving the poor, sick and destitute at Benaras Sevashram – thus initiating the Mission's motto of 'Nara-narayan Seva' (Service to Man as image of God). During the First World War, the Mission's survival was in jeopardy as the British Raj suspected an unhealthy nexus with revolutionaries. Some advised Swami Saradananda to get rid of those monks who had

been previously associated with the freedom struggle and so placate the British. When he turned to Mother for direction, she calmly counselled: the Master was a personification of Truth and at this critical juncture rather than taking recourse to falsehood, the Swami should meet the Governor General and sort out differences.³⁵ Holy Mother as the Mother of the Universe had assimilated all the contradictions of the world in herself: the old and the new, the Eastern and the Western, the monastic with the domestic. Her message to the future generations of women went far beyond the accepted doctrines of women's liberation. She did not envisage women as merely standing on an equal platform with men. She wanted women to look ahead and independently forge out a path for themselves. To her, moving forward did not mean moving away from our past heritage. Instead it meant a seamless union of the Indian ethos of patience, self-sacrifice, spiritual fervour with Western independence and open-minded acceptance. Education, for Mother was not merely a means to gain greater economic and social freedom. It meant true progress - an awakening of the mind to look beyond pointless

barriers of caste, race, religion and nationality. She wanted women to attain freedom from dead habits and recognize the unity of the universe. Mother envisaged an inner liberation – a flowering of the inner consciousness so that women moved closer to all that is perfect and divine. She wanted to see them soar far above everyday trivialities and *make the world their own*.³⁶

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32. Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi – Pg 85.
33. God Lived With Them, by Swami Chetanananda – Pg 236.
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36. Part of Mother's last words to the world: "...if you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own."

The Worshipper of the Down-trodden

Dr P.Achuthan

With his maiden speech at the Chicago Parliament of Religions lasting but a brief five minutes or less, the unknown monk from India became the world-renowned Swami Vivekananda. Besides, Hinduism came to be accepted as the Mother of Religions and Swamiji himself venerated as the world-teacher of Vedanta. This, indeed, was a unique victory which perhaps far exceeded the wildest expectations of Swamiji himself. In any case, it gave him the much-needed badge of authority of an āchārya, greatly helping him in spreading the message of his Master in the West. No doubt, it was only a beginning, but a beginning, all the same, of immense consequence and unthinkable for Swamiji to make in India.

However, anything like a systematic work on a permanent basis had to wait till 1898, an year after Swamiji's triumphal return to India, when he founded the Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission whose motto was, *ātmano mokshārtham jagat hitāya ca* - for one's own liberation and for the welfare of the world. This was Swamiji's real victory, less dramatic perhaps, but certainly more important

than the one achieved in Chicago, for this ensured the fulfilment of his mission in life. Moreover, the motto of the religious organisation founded by him made it clear that the physical wants of the poor and the needy were as important as the spiritual needs of the aspirants. Procuring food, clothing, medicine etc, to the sick and the suffering was as much as the Mission's concern as bringing spiritual solace to the seekers of God. Service to the lowly and the lost, accepted as an integral part of spiritual discipline, was a bold step, a novel experiment in Hindu monasticism

Service to the poor as conceived by Swamiji was no ordinary social work but an essential part of spiritual discipline called *Sevā-Sādhana*. It was training the mind to see Shiva in every Jiva (man) and to worship the God in him. It was practical Vedanta, the effort to realise the Vedantic vision of seeing every (human) being not as a physical entity but as the indwelling divinity. To Swamiji himself, service to man as worship to the God in him was no theory but its realisation. Therefore, he gave it the apt epithet, *Daridra-Nārāyana-Pooja*, worship of the poor Nārāyana (God).

It became immediately popular and roused the people from their age-old slumber. As Romain Rolland says, *"He had a genius for arresting words and burning phrases hammered out white-hot in the forge of his soul so that they transpierced thousands. The one that made the deepest impression was the famous phrase: "Daridra Narayana" (the beggar God)."*¹

However, it was not all that easy for Swamiji who had a time of it with his Gurubhais some of whom argued that God-realisation and not service to the poor was the core of Sri Gurumaharaj's teachings. Swamiji clarified that his basic inspiration for Sevā-Sādhana had come from the advice given by Sri Gurumaharaj Himself to a group of Vaishnava devotees. *"Jiva is Shiva (all living beings are God). Who then dare talk of showing mercy to them? Not mercy, but service, service. For man must be regarded as God."*² Finally, Swamiji was able to convince his Gurubhais and win their whole-hearted support which was no small achievement.

There were a few contributory factors as well, helping the concept of Sevā-Sādhana to become a practical, functional spiritual programme. Of these, the most important one was Swamiji's noble nature marked by profound love and compassion for the poor anywhere in the world. The Catholicity of his divinised humanism was reflected in his letters written to E.T.Sturdy and Mary Hale - *"What is*

*India, or England, or America to us? We are the servants of that God who by the ignorant is called MAN."*³ Again, *"... and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the special object of my worship."*⁴

Swamiji's experience as a wandering monk was a determining factor. It brought him into direct contact with the poor, down-trodden millions and their appalling, unending misery which cried out for urgent redress. In spite of his best efforts, help was not forthcoming from any quarter. And what could a nameless, penniless monk do except to shed 'tears such as angels weep', tears of his heart's blood. It dawned on him that what India then needed was not religion and spirituality, but food, clothes, medicines and the like - first food, then religion.

It was this Buddha-heart that spoke to Swami Turiyananda in tearful words and in a choked voice shortly before he left for America - *"Haribhai, I am still unable to understand anything of your so-called religion. But my heart has expanded very much and I have learnt to feel (the suffering of others). Believe me, I feel intensely indeed."*⁵

Belief in the futility of religion in the context of India's poverty and misery continued to receive emphatic re-endorsements from time to time at the hands of Swamiji, in words like these - *"... But I am poor, I love the poor... Who feels for them? Let these people be your God - think of them, work for*

them... Him I call a Mahātman (great soul) whose heart bleeds for the poor, otherwise he is a Durātman (wicked soul).”⁶ Again, “I do not believe in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow’s tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan’s mouth... Where should you go to seek for God - are not all the poor, the miserable, the weak Gods? Why not worship them first?”⁷ “For the next fifty years, this alone shall be our keynote - this, our great Mother India. Let all other vain Gods disappear for the time from our minds.”⁸ “As long as a stray dog goes hungry in my country, my whole religion is to feed it.”

The third factor was Swamiji’s American experience. But what made him go to America? Let Swamiji speak: “I did not go to America, as most of you know, for the Parliament of Religions... I travelled twelve years all over India, finding no way to work for my countrymen, and that is why I went to America. Who cared about this Parliament of Religions? Here was my own flesh and blood sinking every day.”⁹ Swamiji was even more forthright in his letter to Swami Ramakrishnananda, “I next travelled in search of funds, but do you think the people of India were going to spend money? ... Therefore I have come to America, to earn money myself, and then return to my country... As our country is poor in social virtues, so this country is lacking in spirituality. I give them spirituality and they give me money.”¹⁰

During the four years’ stay in

America, Swamiji could see for himself the strength and efficiency of organisation. He saw how the Christian missionaries were doing splendid service to the old and the orphaned and even in reclaiming social outcasts like criminals and condemned prisoners to become useful citizens. It encouraged him to think of the possibilities in Indian conditions and of moulding a new order of monks. About his plan, Swamiji wrote to Swami Ramakrishnananda: “The long and short of it is... We as a nation have lost our individuality, and that is the cause of all mischief in India. We have to give back to the nation its lost-individuality and raise the masses.”¹¹ Again to Swami Akhandananda, he wrote, “The Geruā robe is not for enjoyment. It is the banner of heroic work. You must give your body, mind, and speech to the welfare of the world...”. But I say, the poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted - let these be your God. Know that service to these alone is the highest religion.”¹²

Swamiji knew well that it was the age-long tyranny of the rich, the orthodox and the priestcraft that reduced the poor in India to ‘next-door neighbours to brutes.’ “The Pharisees and Sadducees in Hinduism, hypocrites who invent all sorts of engines of tyranny in the shape of the doctrines of Pāramārthika and Vyāvahārika.”¹³ But he felt that it was the duty of all to raise the poor to their lost human dignity and freedom. So, he wrote to Alasinga, more in sorrow than in

anger, reminding the youth of the country of their duty - *“Trust not the so-called rich; they are more dead than alive. The hope lies in you-in the meek, the lowly, but the faithful... I may perish of cold or hunger in this land, but I bequeath to you, young men, this sympathy, this struggle for the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed... Vow, then, to devote your whole lives to the cause of the redemption of these three hundred millions, going down and down everyday.”*¹⁴

Swamiji's or Sri Gurumaharaj's idea of *Jagat Hitāya* (for the welfare of the world) could be described also as Karma-yoga or Bhāgavata-dharma, the best and most practical way of worshipping God. Swamiji's advice to the worshippers at the Rameswaram temple, *“He who sees Shiva in the poor... really worships Shiva; and if he sees Shiva only in the image, his worship is but preliminary... He who wants to serve Shiva must serve His Children - must serve all creatures in the world first.”*¹⁵ Again, in one of his Madras lectures, *“Look upon every man, woman, and every one as God. You cannot help anyone, you can only serve: serve the Children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege... Do it only as a worship. I should see God in the poor, and it is for my salvation that I go and worship them.”*¹⁶ This is the living picture of Swami Vivekananda., the

worshipper of Daridra-Nārāyanās.

References:

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3. Letters of...; Page 248.
4. Ibid, Page 350.
5. Quoted from Swami Vivekananda; His Humanism by Swami Ranganathananda; Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1981; Page 27.
6. Letters of...; Page 147.
7. Ibid, Page 169-170.
8. Lectures; Page 231.
9. Lectures; Page 143.
10. Letters; Page 82.
11. Letters; Page 82.
12. Ibid, Page 93-94.
13. Letters; Page 41 and Page 42-43.
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15. Lectures; Page 46.
16. Lectures; Page 167.

Next Issue
The Humanist

Spiritual Retreat



Taking advantage of the Chinese New Year holidays, the Ramakrishna Mission organised a one-day Spiritual Retreat on 4 February 2011. The enthusiastic response saw more than 120 adult devotees taking part.

The programme started with the mass chanting of Sri Ramakrishna Ashtottara Satah Namam after which devotees offered the anointed flowers at the feet of the Master's idol in the temple. This was followed by the chanting of the Bhagavad Gita and a representative selection of devotional songs..

For the second part of the function, the gathering moved to the more

spacious and accoustically better equipped Sarada Hall. In a nearly hour-long address listened with rapt attention, Swami Muktirupananda, President of the Mission, took the audience step by step in the path to God-realization guided by the uncomplicated method prescribed by Sri Ramakrishna. He recalled how through the medium of story-telling and parables, the Master helped aspirants progress towards their desired goal.

He narrated the story of the fisherwoman who went to the city to sell fish and had to spend the night with a friend. All night she could not sleep and kept tossing right and left. When her host made enquiries,

the fisherwoman replied that she was probably “disturbed” by the fragrance of the flowers in the room and requested that the fish basket be brought to her. She sprinkled some water, kept the basket close to her and slept soundly. Here the fish and its smell (aroma to the fisherwoman) represented attachment to worldly attractions while the fragrant flowers denoted loftier thoughts.

Taking up the oft-repeated question whether householders can realize God, Swami Muktirupananda replied with an emphatic “Yes.” He said the spiritual leaders of all major religions - Hindu, Buddhist or Christian - had shown the way to aspiring devotees. In more recent times, Sri Ramakrishna had spent most of his life advising his disciples and devotees how to reach God through simple methods of love, devotion, renunciation and discrimination. Here it is also interesting to note that while large number of seekers thronged his Dakshineswar abode from far and near, many people who came in contact with him almost daily, such as the temple employees, were insensitive to the fragrant jasmine in their midst.

He always advised those seekers to discipline their minds, do regular prayer and meditation, try to renounce (mentally at least in the beginning) worldly attachment, occasional “retreat” into some kind of seclusion, company of holy men and doing service to others. Many people say they are tired of work. But

it is not work that tires you, but your MIND. So it is essential to control, discipline and eventually still your mind. It is easier said than done, but by practice one can do it, he said.

Sri Ramakrishna always stressed that in this field of spiritual aspirations, there are no soft options, but only constant struggle and constant practice. “This treasure is within you, not outside. Discover it,” the Swami concluded.

Keeping with the main thrust of spiritual quest, Swami Satyalokananda emphasized the role of Karma in one’s life. Based on the teachings of Bhagavad Gita and Sri Sankaracharya’s Vivekachudamani, he pointed out the importance of Nishkama Karma, or work for work’s sake without expectations of returns. It is logical that good karma will produce good results while bad karma will bring in its trail bad results. Only God can undo prarabdha karma, i.e. that portion of karma from past lives which bear fruit in the present life in which it must be exhausted. So one has to be very careful about the tasks he undertakes. Temptation plays a big part in one’s bad karmas.

The Swami stressed that one should take special care to cultivate good impressions or tendencies. The sum total of one’s impressions is known as Samskaras, which reflect one’s character.

Swami Samachittananda, in his presentation, stressed on the significance of True Worship. With the

help of power point presentation, he explained the significance of common worship as essential representation of spiritual life. He interpreted its cosmic aspect with the help of examples.

One's attitude towards worship is very important. Sri Ramakrishna points out that if one makes offerings to God with expectations of rich dividends, he may be in for disappointment. Pomp and show should be avoided in worship. What is important is one's mental attitude, devotion and surrender to God. The real idea of worship is to concentrate one's

mind on God and thus heighten one's devotion. As Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita he will accept any simple offering like water, flower or fruit offered with devotion.

Student Ayan Mukherji, all of 10 years old, thrilled the audience with a stirring rendering of the historic "Chicago Address" originally delivered by Swami Vivekananda at the Parliament of Religions in 1893.

After lunch, the devotees were treated to a slide show on "Sri Ramakrishna Tirtha Darshanam." The pictures of the places connected with Sri Ramakrishna and the temples dedicated to him constituted the main theme of the 115-slide presentation.

After the function many devotees have requested for similar retreats in the future. The devotees expressed great satisfaction for being able to spend a day in the Mission premises with constant thoughts on Sri Ramakrishna and one's own spiritual life.



Master Ayan Mukherji

"The mind cannot dwell on God if it is immersed day and night in worldliness, in worldly duties and responsibilities; it is most necessary to go into solitude now and then and think of God."

-- Sri Ramakrishna

Bharata Goes in Search of Rama

N.Narandran

(Continued from last issue)

Fourteen days after the death of King Dasaratha, the ministers convened the Assembly and once again appealed to Bharata to accept the throne and be crowned the new king as desired by the people. The land of Kosala should not be without a sovereign and they appealed to Bharata to rule the country as his father had done.

Bharata made a circumambulation round the articles of coronation and then addressed the ministers gathered at the Assembly. He reminded them that the eldest son of the deceased king should be the rightful heir to the throne and they

should not try and persuade him to do what was improper. He then told them that he had decided to go to the Dandaka forest and bring back Rama to Ayodhya to be crowned the king. Action was to be taken quickly to widen the roads for him to lead his army into the forest. Hearing this, the Assembly broke into applause and everyone rejoiced at the prospect of seeing the return of Rama.

Work soon began to prepare for Bharata's journey. An army of workers set about doing everything necessary to enable Bharata and his retinue to enter the forest to look for Rama. As preparations were being finalised,



Vasishta summoned the Assembly once again and sent Sumantra to request Bharata to be present. When Bharata came, Vasishta told him once again that the kingdom had been left to him by his father and Rama and that he should accept it. Rama had left for the forest so that his father's name would not be sullied.

Bharata listened with tears in his eyes and gently reproached Vasishta for urging him to go against what he had been taught from a young age. Vasishta had taught him all the nuances of Dharma and now he was being asked to take what was not rightfully his. The throne belonged to the eldest son and Bharata would not commit a sin the way his mother had done. He was adamant that Rama should be king. He would try and persuade Rama to return to Ayodhya, failing which, he would remain in the forest and serve Rama the way his brother Lakshmana was doing. Everyone present was moved by his devotion to his brother.

Bharata requested Sumantra to speed up preparations for his departure. Soon after, Bharata and Shatrughna in a chariot driven by Sumantra left for the forest, leading a retinue consisting of the queens Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi and a large army. After a long journey they rested at the banks of the river Ganga.

From the other side of the Ganga, Guha, the hunter king and ruler of the city of Shringiberapura,

observed Bharata and his huge army settling down for the night, with growing trepidation. He wondered if, after gaining the throne of Ayodhya, Bharata had now come to get rid of Rama. He ordered that his army be prepared to do battle to protect his friend Rama. Being a vassal king, Guha then took offerings and went to meet Bharata.

On the opposite bank, Sumantra recognised Guha and informed Bharata that Guha who knew the Dandaka forest well could assist them in locating Rama. After paying his respects to Bharata, Guha invited Bharata to spend the night there and leave in the morning. When Bharata requested Guha to guide him and his army to Rama's hermitage at Bharadwaaja, Guha expressed his nagging suspicion that Bharata might harbour some evil intentions against Rama. Hearing these painful words Bharata reassured Guha that he had no intention to harm Rama. Instead he considered Rama as the rightful heir to his deceased father and he only wanted to urge Rama to return to Ayodhya. Guha was deeply moved by Bharata's nobility.

That night Bharata slept fitfully, thinking of Rama's plight. Guha tried to console him and answered all Bharata's questions truthfully about how his exiled brothers and Sita were coping in the forest. Bharata's sorrow increased with each account that Guha gave. This increased his resolve to take Rama back to Ayodhya and make him king. If Rama

wanted to fulfil his vow, Bharata would take Rama's place in the forest.

The next morning, Guha approached Bharata and Shatrughna and told them that boats had been readied to ferry all of them across the river. Bharata, Shatrughna, Kausalya, Sumitra, Kaikeyi, Vasishtha and some rishis and the army crossed the river and soon arrived at Sangama at the confluence of the Jamuna and Ganga. Leaving his army behind, Bharata accompanied by Shatrughna, Vasishtha and some ministers went towards the ashrama of rishi Bharadvaja. When they neared the hermitage, accompanied only by Vasishtha, Bharata went forward to meet the great sage.

When Bharadvaja saw Vasishtha, he rose and went to greet his renowned visitor. Bharata fell at the feet of Bharadvaja and offered his humble salutations. Bharadvaja knew who he was but he did not mention anything about King Dasaratha. Bharadvaja with a puzzled look then inquired why the king of Ayodhya had come to the forest. Rama, Lakshmana and Sita had been banished to the forest. Did he come to the forest to ensure that there was no threat

to his throne? These words stung Bharata and with tears in his eyes he requested the sage not to blame him for his mother's deeds. He then explained the purpose of his visit. Bharadvaja replied that he had cast doubts on Bharata only to elicit from him a revelation of his genuine affection and loyalty for Rama for everyone to see. He then informed Bharata that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were residing on Mount Chitrakuta and requested Bharata to spend the night at the ashrama and proceed to Chitrakuta the next day.

Bharadvaja requested Bharata to order his army which he had left behind, to come to the ashrama too to enjoy his hospitality. Then Bharadvaja performed a miracle and produced a sumptuous feast for everyone present. The next morning, Bharadvaja guided Bharata on how to get to the river Mandakini on whose banks was a hut in which Rama, Sita and Lakshmana resided. Before leaving, the three queens were presented to the sage who advised Bharata not to condemn his mother. Bharata then collected his army and they began their journey to Rama's ashrama.

(To be continued)

References:

1. *Ramayana by C. Rajagopalachari*
2. *Ramayana by Kamala Subramaniam*

FESTIVAL CALENDER (Apr-Jun 2011)

April 2011	
12 Tuesday	Ramanavami
28 Thursday	Ekadashi
May 2011	
08 Sunday	Sri Shankara Panchami
14 Saturday	Ekadashi
17 Tuesday	Sri Buddha Purnima
28 Saturday	Ekadashi
June 2011	
12 Sunday	Ekadashi
27 Monday	Ekadashi

TEMPLE PROGRAMME

Daily

6.00am	Mangalarati
9.00am	Puja
7.00pm	Evening Arati & Bhajan

Ekadashi

6.15pm	Vishnu Sahasranamam
7.00pm	Arati followed by Rama-Nama Sankirtanam

DISCOURSES and CLASSES

Saturdays

5.00pm	Religious-Bhajan & Cultural Classes For Children (Temple hall – I level)
6.00pm	Discourse on “Talks on Vedanta” by Swami Satyalokananda (Library)
7.30pm	Vedic Chanting & Bhajan Class (Temple)

Sundays

9.30am	Yoga Class (Sarada Hall)
4.00pm	Sanskrit Language Classes (Library)
5.00pm	Discourse on “Svetasvatara Upanishad” by Swami Samachittananda (Temple hall – I level)
6.00pm	Discourse on “Vishnu Sahasranama” by Swami Muktirupananda (Sarada Hall)

*Discourses and classes are open to all
Registration required for Yoga class*