

The Suppressed Voice: Study of Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, navigating Nineteenth Century Patriarchy and Religion

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Abstract: Revisiting women's lives of nineteenth century Bengal, and listening to the stifled voices and eloquent silences within the writings of 'dominant literary discourses', reveal women often choosing the path of negotiation between 'complicity and critique' of social structures, in order to ensure their survival in the patriarchal world. The dual nature of nineteenth century reforms in Bengal, balancing tradition and modernity often failed to touch the actual lives of women but created a myth about their 'strength and power'. The social and religious reform movements too proved to be short sighted and particularly a class-caste affair. A close scrutiny of the available women's writings and recorded literature unmasks the struggles, the challenges and the emotional turmoil that women suffered in order to embark on the denied grounds of power and agency.

This study interrogates the historical gaps, the aberrations, the politics of representation vis-a-vis woman's own understanding of self and struggles of empowerment in the male-dominated domain of religion in nineteenth century. It also highlights the erasure of real women's immeasurable loss and distress from nineteenth century nationalist and religious textual and oral representation. This paper tries to comprehend how Sarada Devi though repressed by the twin forces of religion and paternalistic nationalism, made an epoch breaking rise and created a cult of her own by converging the widely disparate and heavily pregnant ideologies of motherhood, femininity, nationalism and spiritualism all into one. It will explore and examine the suppressed and submerged women's voices within hagiographical literature. It will also try to investigate how Sarada Devi, despite submitting herself to the ideologies of the two powerful men in her life, did carve out a separate existence for herself and others.

Key words- hagiographical literature, representational politics, women's voices, agency, nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

Saradamani Mukhopadhyaya, the daughter of a poor village priest Ramachandra Mukhopadhyay was born on 22nd December, 1853. She became Sarada Devi post her marriage with Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886), the great religious figure and spiritual influencer of nineteenth century India. She appears in the annals of history and hagiographical literature only as a helpmeet, wife-disciple or a spiritual consort of Ramakrishna.

The entire corpus of literature highlighting the contribution, significance and impact of the religious trio on the political, social and religious milieu of nineteenth century India, is eerily silent about Sarada. The hagiographical literature on the other hand has been constructing Sarada through the conflicting ideas of 'Universal Mother' and the 'Mother of the Mission, Divine Goddess and model femininity, the spiritual Guru and the ideal housewife. Keeping in terms with the tenets of hagiography, she is understood in relation to others; her negotiations and behaviour with her husband, her followers, the organization and the world. However, neither of the constructions attempt to engage in a reading of her as a being of her own. Five-year-old Sarada was married into a relatively poorer family in exchange of a bride price¹, to a twenty-three old man, Gadadhar alias Ramakrishna. Sarada thus represents the fate of millions of girls in nineteenth century colonial rural India, who were forced into child marriages much before they became mature enough to give consent. This makes the study of life of Sarada, an archetype of 19th century rural Indian woman, all the more relevant for comprehending Indian women's thoughts, agency and legacy.

RESEARCH GAP

There is a dearth of scholarly resources available on her and on women in spirituality as a whole. The scholarly articles perceiving Sarada in different lights, construct her as a model femininity, befitting wife, true disciple or spiritual guru. She is also eulogized summoning her selfless, beguiling maternal love for one and all. There is a question of authenticity because the representations have changed with the socio-political demands of time. The later hagiographies draw readers' attention to her rebelliousness in matters of non-discriminative social interaction, promotion of communal harmony, universal compassion and nurturing. However, Sarada is still denied agency and is regarded merely as a wife-disciple and spiritual consort of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, since no writings are left by her. The secondary writings which are available on her, are motivated by the concerned writer's perception, beliefs and intentions. In none of the earlier writings, she emerges as a human being. It was Nivedita, who for the first time sketches her as a woman with extraordinary acumen and intelligence.

OBJECTIVE

This paper revisits history, for the purpose of "minding the gap" and bridging the historical silences. It critically examines mainstream narratives and hagiographical literature to identify the omission, distortion and marginalization of the voice of a nineteenth century woman like Sarada Devi. This paper will try to unearth the challenges and the struggles that Sarada faced within the male-dominated religious domain of nineteenth century, but still emerged as a global inspiration for many. Sarada's life is not only a portrayal of the pitiable condition, repressed life and lack of choices in a woman's life in India, but is also an illustration of choices made by women in spite of the limitations.

DISCUSSION

Sarada, though married when she was barely five, went to live with her husband at Dakshineswar only at the age of eighteen. In these intervening years, she remained in her parental household, meeting her husband only twice when he chose to meet her. By the time Sarada became adolescent, Ramakrishna, had already adopted

the monastic life. When rumours of her husband's insanity spread like wildfire, nineteen-year-old Sarada, worried about her fate, became desperate to meet her husband, who at that time lived and worked as a priest in Dakhineswar. This meeting is historically significant because it metamorphoses a common village wife, docile and domestic into a devi. Ramakrishna, a Sannyasin, not only refrained from any kind of sexual intimacy, but ritualistically worshipped his 19-year-old wife as Goddess Tripurasundari in the seat of Goddess Kali, on an auspicious night of 1872. It is here that an otherwise mundane documentation of a life of a wife of a Saint, gains an extraordinary dimension altogether. Thus, in a blink of an eye, Sarada's life took an unexpected turn and she was forced to embark upon a journey which will impact her life and relationships forever. With the sudden leap of fate, she needed to act accordingly and fit into her new transformative role as a Goddess incarnation, the Divine Mother, and a fitting counterpart of a husband who was a self-proclaimed incarnation of God. Conferring divine identity upon Sarada, automatically sealed a relationship of detachment and devotion between her and Ramakrishna, and nipped off the slightest prospect of carnal passion in the very bud. Ramakrishna's ritualistic worship of Sarada dehumanized her and sealed her identity as a divine being and marked her motherhood as 'motherhood of God'. The divine status was conferred to Sarada in order to abate her maternal yearning and pining, and also to silence the cynicism of the enlightened Brahmos and other critical minds for his supposed injustice towards his innocent wife. Sarada's witty repartees against Ramakrishna's attempt at placating her unfaltering desire for motherhood, made him uncomfortable. Ramakrishna did not just rest at transforming her suddenly into a Goddess but put in all effort to imprint her divine image in the minds of his followers and inside Sarada as well. Sarada, denied of her natural right to motherhood and sexuality and autonomy, came to be known as 'Sree Maa' (Holy Mother), the protector and nurturer of her husband's disciples. Her wishes and desire for biological motherhood were therefore traded for spiritual motherhood.

Sarada's mute acceptance of all the trials and tribulations, is scholastically interpreted as evidence of her meekness and gullibility, lacking any agency of her own. The hagiographical literatures on the other hand, repeatedly pointed out the fact that since Sarada did not object to her husband's celibate life, she was spiritually much mature to be an ideal partner of her husband. She was also compared to the ideal Hindu woman and is represented as an archetype of Indian tradition. The earlier hagiographical texts represent Sarada as a meek, obedient wife cum devoted disciple. However, post Ramakrishna's death, as Sarada initiated a growing number of people into Ramakrishna's spiritual philosophy, texts began to be authored by her own direct followers, who represented her as a mother cum spiritual giant cum Goddess in disguise. It was only after 1890, Sarada's role as a spiritual guide and her divinity began to be recognized by her husband's disciples.

Sarada was left a destitute, lone and vulnerable after the death of her husband Ramakrishna. She gradually paved her way from nought and established herself in a male dominated world of religion. Sarada, therefore was not at all passive being, as interpreted in the earlier hagiographies, rather, she went on to become a giant spiritual leader on her own accord. Vivekananda's letters attest the fact that Sarada's future position as the invisible administrator of the organization and her permanent placement in the hearts of the masses is a remarkable feat achieved singularly by herself and was not paved by her famous husband in advance as argued in the hagiographical literature. Vivekananda, following his master's directions, conferred the status of the

Sangha Janani (the Mother of the Order) and 'the Holy Mother' on Sarada Devi. Thereby he fortified her position as the centre of the Organization by officiating her as the head of the Ramakrishna Order. Vivekananda repeatedly implored and advised his brother disciples of the Ramakrishna Order to accept submission to Mother, in his letters from America. Howsoever, despite everything, her identity remained merely that of a Gurumata or a Master's wife, a woman in the minds of the disciples. This is apparent from Vivekananda's repeated pleas and his statement in his letter to Swami Brahmananda of October 4, 1898 that, "He who has no faith in him and no reverence for the Holy Mother will be a downright loser, I tell you plainly". His constant reminders of her benevolence and importance in the foundation of the organization and his appeals to other monks for extending the reverence that she well deserved, are strong proofs of the want of female equality and affirmation in the field of spirituality.

Sarada defined femininity and feminine strength in a novel way. She became one of the few early women preachers of India. Although, women preachers were common in Hindu religious tradition especially within Tantric and Bhakti cults, they were absent in the mainstream popular forums. Even, the Brahmo Samaj which sported a rebellious and gender sensitive image, was deadly against honouring women in the post of a preacher. Assuming the position of a preacher decried women's promotion to power and authority. This was not at all accepted in the nineteenth century society even by the so called liberal and advanced men. In this regard, Sarada's achievement within mainstream religious movement in the wake of Indian Nationalism and Hindu Revivalism, was unconventional, phenomenal, path-breaking and exemplary. It was during 1898-1908 that Sarada's popularity as a spiritual guru reached the pinnacle. It was also during this time that nationalism grew rampant in the country. Motherhood occupied a key role in Indian nationalist movement. With the rise of Indian Nationalism, motherhood proved to be a double-edged sword and Sarada was pushed further to a compromised position. The Mother within the nationalist paradigm was also the de-sexualized female. Motherhood was conceived as a medium for divesting women of her sexuality and de-eroticizing of femininity in order to overcome the pervasive spiritual degeneration of society. One could note similar vein of conceptualization in Vivekananda's elder cousin brother Ram Datta's adoration for the Holy Mother. As Ram wrote in his biography of Sri Ramakrishna:

After all she was no ordinary wife. Could the wife of someone who was the master of thousands of [spiritual] orphans, the deliverer of unlimited number of reprobates, the jewel of the heart of the Lord of the Universe, deign to acquire the habits of beasts given to sexual appetites? The scriptures approve of [the union of] man and woman for begetting a son. O Ma, you are mother to thousands of sons and daughters. Do you have to lower yourself to the status of dogs and jackals in order to become mother? (Datta 151; Shatarupe Sarada 143)

One should note the inherent dehumanization of women and gendered apathy at the propensity of procreation in the above accusation. There is also a hint of chastisement directed towards Sarada, the consort of Ramakrishna, for voicing her desire for motherhood. The new ideological formulations around motherhood gave rise to a new form of patriarchy, and led to hidden subordination of women. Indian nationalist discourse refashioned the Indian state into the symbolic figure of 'Bharat Mata'. The image of mythical goddess was further imported and imposed on women. It is a paradox of Indian Nationalism that though India is conceived

as Bharat Mata, the perceived emblem of Indian motherhood, the image advocates for asexuality and sacrifice. Chatterjee asserts, 'This patriarchy combined coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion. This was expressed most generally in the inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes: the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother' (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 130). The critical observation made by eminent scholar, Jasodhara Bagchi in her article, "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal", indicates the paradox latent in Indian 'nationalist aspiration'. She says, "the ideological aspect of motherhood- it has served the purpose of taking away real power from women and creating a myth about her strength and power. The glorification of motherhood in colonial Bengal was merely in the domain of ideology. Such an ideology was based on a philosophy of deprivation for women in the world of practice" (65). Other aspects erased, women were merely viewed and glorified as mothers or simply as deliverers of heroic sons. Sarada's motherhood too was acknowledged and eulogized both in hagiographic and nationalist representation on the premise of asexuality and asceticism. She was presented as a micro-version of Bharat Mata through the hagiographic portrayal of epitomised motherhood and spiritual nurturing of sons. Sarada however transgressed this nationalist appropriation of motherhood in Vivekananda's discourse and outlined a new dimension of motherhood. She transgressed the boundaries chalked out for her by the nationalists and took motherhood to excess. By excess, I mean taking the ideology beyond the limits of bourgeois patriarchal norms.

Sarada advocated a different sort of "heroic mothering", where motherhood fought against all odds to eliminate discrimination and differences, and accepted everyone in its loving embrace. Sarada emphasized the empowering role of motherhood to her followers, where both the giver and the receiver feel emancipated. According to Sarada, the virtue of tolerance was to be exercised by every individual, man/woman, mother/no mother, for the sake of own self, and not for the conception or deliverance of heroic sons only. Sarada not only constructed an autonomous entity and an identity of her own but also affected a change in the life of others. Her preaching not only enabled spiritual upliftment, mental solace but also provided practical solutions to her distressed followers. She through her Universal motherhood, successfully pulled up the debased and the neglected to a life of dignity and integrity. Thus, though her space and limits of function were defined, she did carve out her identity as a guru in a male dominating world where agency and selfhood were utterly denied to women. She was entrusted with the responsibilities of proselytizing and providing spiritual nurture. Sarada though conformed to the ideologies of both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, but diverged, defied and maintained her discretion and belief as well. Sarada cut a decisive figure in the establishment of the Organization. Her crucial functional decisions, blessings and prayers, provided the monks support, encouragement, and inspiration. Eminent feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak remarks that Sarada after being officiated as the advisory head of the organization, 'performed her role with tact and wisdom, always remaining in the background'. This nascent organization went on to become a monastic order committed to social work and philanthropic practices under her supervision. She initiated several prominent monks into the Ramakrishna Order.

She is unique because she made mainstream religion and spirituality accessible and approachable for the marginalized groups and the neglected female class. Sarada re-defined the endearment term 'mother' as more

than just a respectful utterance but as an innate quality which is not gender defined. She believed in inclusion, and did not follow either Ramakrishna's differentiation between body and mind or Vivekananda's differentiation between the east and the west. The social and biological entrapment of Motherhood emerges as an empowering instrument through Sarada. She introduces the world to the twin ideas of inclusive motherhood and universal motherhood. Sarada participated in the propagandist constructions as well as differed from the two masculinist representatives of spirituality. Sarada's practical application of inclusivity of human and animals, blending of the material philosophy of the West with the Spirituality of the East, her advices on stress management, and her skillful management of accounts of the Ramakrishna Mission and knowledge of tax redemption were well ahead of her time.

CONCLUSION

The religious pedagogy remained indifferent to Sarada as a saint because she was not a renouncer per se according to the scriptural terms but like her husband, she defied the norm and emerged as a highly evolved spiritual master by finding divine fulfilment in household duties, social work and in all embracing maternal love. Sarada defined motherhood as universal, limitless and boundless as she nurtured and cared for the marginalized, the abhorred, and the downtrodden, equally invoking her nonjudgmental maternal love. Her life is a unique balance of renunciation with indulgence. A sannyasin chooses to follow the path of self-abnegation; he seeks release from all sorts of bondage and materialistic desires and dedicates his life to spiritual pursuits. But, the bond of love and human relationship which defined Sarada could not however confine her. She showed the world the way to practice detachment amidst all worldly attachment by serving all living creatures as God. Sarada's identity moved through constant shift and accommodation within varied ideologies with the demand of time and politics. The changed circumstances and religious patriarchy endowed her with a fleeting identity; from a mere human being and wife to a 'Devi' in actual terms². Her image as 'divinely-inspired' shifted from customary portrayal of a divine being to the icon of Mother India during Hindu nationalism (*Divine Dowager*, 65-66). But, Sarada managed to go beyond all ideological appropriations of womanhood and motherhood, and depict an extraordinary exemplification of character and spirit. The absence of Sarada Devi in the earlier versions is a pointer to the utter neglect suffered by female renunciators howsoever prominent might she be. Borrowing Himani Bannerji, the renowned scholar's words, this article would like to conclude by adding, that "Women and Spirituality in Bengal has not yet captured as much scholarly and feminist attention as it should" (p214). This paper thus, draws attention to the greater need of tracing the forgotten and neglected narratives of women and voicing their thoughts and perceptions in order to gain a wholistic historical overview of women's role in the realm of spirituality.

NOTES

1 See Swami Gambhirananda's biography on Sarada

2 One is reminded of Satyajit Ray's film *Devi* (1960), based on Provatkumar Mukhopadhyay's short story, exploring the psychological upheavals in young girls worshipped as incarnations of Goddesses Durga or Kali. Ray deals with the inability of young girls voicing their own feelings and opinions and the absence of free will in religious orthodoxy.

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