

How a Sinner Became a Saint

Swami Chetanananda

"I am a sinner" -- thus Girish Ghosh, a bohemian, introduced himself to Sri Ramakrishna. The Master said: "The wretch who constantly harps on sin becomes a sinner."

Girish: "Sir, the very ground where I used to sit would become unholy."

Master: "How can you say that? Suppose a light is brought into a room that has been dark a thousand years; does it illumine the room little by little, or all in a flash?"

Repentant, Girish said: "Tell me what I should do." The Master suggested: "Give God your power of attorney. Let him do whatever he likes."

Girish surrendered and gave his power of attorney to Sri Ramakrishna. Years later he would say, "Had I known that there was such a huge pit in which to throw one's sins, I would have committed many more."

The story of Girish proves that today's sinner can be tomorrow's saint. With Girish, Ramakrishna also had a chance to manifest his redeeming power, as Buddha had with Ambapali and Jesus with Mary Magdalene.

Girish was born in Calcutta on 28 February 1844. He grew up a lively, carefree soul. At eleven he lost his mother and at fourteen his father. He was then raised by an elder sister. From his boyhood Girish was a voracious reader and a free thinker. He went to different schools, but none of their methods of teaching satisfied his thirst for knowledge. He did not care for

any kind of discipline or restriction. He was a born rebel. Girish eventually left school without having earned a degree, but he continued his studies, borrowing books from various libraries of Calcutta. His reading included the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, and Bengali literature. Gradually he became well versed in history, logic, philosophy, zoology, and English literature. He also studied science and medicine. He had a fantastic memory. And even Ramakrishna acknowledged that he had never seen such an intelligent person as Girish.

Once a friend of Girish's, who later became a judge of the Calcutta High Court, said to him, "It is impossible to translate the conversations of the witches of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into Bengali." Immediately Girish decided to translate the whole play, and he did. It was his nature to rise to any challenge or to do just what he was told not to do. If anybody would say, "Don't go there. There is a ghost," he would immediately run to that place to see the ghost. No one could influence his actions through pressure or intimidation.

However, at the threshold of youth, Girish began to drift into drunkenness, debauchery, waywardness, and obstinacy. He hated hypocrisy from the bottom of his heart. Being bold and strong in character, he did not find it necessary to hide his weakness. Girish would say, "I have drunk so many bottles of wine that if you were to place one bottle on top of another they would reach the height of Mount Everest."

A year after his father's death, his sister arranged his marriage, and soon after, his father-in-law secured for him a job as a bookkeeper in his own office. But family life could not change Girish's bohemian nature. That man is

indeed unfortunate who loses his mother in childhood, father in boyhood, and wife in early manhood. In 1874 Girish's young wife died, leaving him with a son and a daughter. Shortly thereafter he lost his job. As God created grief to subdue man, so man created wine to subdue grief. Girish was trying his utmost to forget his sorrow with the help of alcohol. But at the same time, his pent-up emotions found an outlet in a series of exquisite poetic compositions.

Girish was a genius with indomitable energy and great physical strength. His memory, power of imagination, and power of will were phenomenal. He was a superb playwright and at the same time a natural, gifted actor. Girish's writing career began when he was thirty-five and continued for thirty years. He was a prodigious writer and produced during that time seventy-nine works, including dramas, satires, and musicals. In addition he wrote many short stories, articles, poems, and songs. His dramas dealt primarily with religious, social, historical, mythological, and patriotic subjects. His innovative spirit had a lasting effect on theatre in Bengal -- in fact, he became known as the father of the Bengali theatre. He avoided the traditional flowery language of theatre because of its heaviness and artificiality, and introduced irregular blank verse in the dialogues of his dramas. This eventually became known as *Gairishi Chanda*, Girish's metre.

Girish's mind worked so fast and prodigiously that he required secretaries to take down his words; he could not write them fast enough himself. Absorbed in the flow of ideas, he would pace back and forth in his room and dictate all the dialogues of the drama in a loud voice, as if he were acting each role himself. His secretary always kept three pencils ready at

hand. He could not use a pen and inkpot because there was never enough time to dip the pen into the pot. Once the secretary could not keep up with the speed of the dictation and requested Girish to repeat what he had just said. Girish became angry and asked him not to break his mood. He told the secretary to put dots where he had missed words, and he would fill them in later.

There are many stories about his writing talent. It is said that he could write one drama in a couple of days. *Sitar Vanabash* (The Banishment of Sita) was written in one night. He also wrote twenty-six songs for *Sadhavar Ekadashi*, a drama written by Dinabandhu Mitra, in just one night. He wrote *Vilwamangal* in twenty-eight hours uninterruptedly. Swami Subodhananda said, "We have seen Girish dictating three dramas to three secretaries, one after another."

Girish was his own greatest competitor. When one of his dramas was particularly well received, he felt that he had to work harder on the next in order to surpass the previous one. He was fond of defeating himself.

In the early days of his career Girish had very little money and, because of his reputation, it was difficult for him to find financial backing for his ventures. In 1869 he founded the Baghbazar Amateur Theatre, and shortly thereafter a rich man invited Girish's theatre company to enact *Sadhavar Ekadashi*, a social drama, in his house on the occasion of Durga Puja. In this drama Girish played the role of a drunkard. His portrayal was so realistic that through this role he first made a name for himself in the theatre, and even the author of the drama praised his acting. Before the performance he said to the

manager: "I cannot portray a drunkard if I have to drink coloured water from a bottle on stage. I want genuine wine."

Girish soon moved to the Star Theatre and became its manager. His brilliant and creative mind always found ways to overcome the inevitable managerial problems. There was not sufficient money to buy expensive costumes, so he wrote *Chaitanya Lila* (a drama on the life of Chaitanya which Sri Ramakrishna saw) because it required only a few ochre robes and rosaries as costumes. Girish was himself a versatile actor, and wherever he performed, crowds would come to see him. Once he played five different roles in the same play, *Kapalkundala*, and proved by his performance the importance of each of the five characters.

As would be expected, Girish's innovations in the theatre were met with some opposition. His irregular blank verse was criticized by traditional writers. He was also vehemently attacked by puritans for engaging prostitutes to play female roles in his dramas, instead of using male actors, as was the custom. Often these women proved to be dedicated and talented actresses. They were poorly educated, but they could portray the characters with naturalness. The famous star Tinkari said: "I was an unlettered girl. It was by Girish's grace that I am now an actress."

When Tinkari began acting at sixteen, a rich man fell in love with her. He approached her mother, who was a procuress, to marry Tinkari. He offered jewellery and a huge amount of money on condition that she give up acting and be his wife. Tinkari refused. The next day when Tinkari returned from the theatre, her mother beat her with a bamboo stick so much that she

had a high fever and was in bed for three days. When she recuperated, Girish sent a car for her to audition for the role of Lady Macbeth. Girish was moved by her acting and told the owner of the Minerva Theatre to offer a one-year contract to Tinkari.

Tinkari's physical beauty, loving nature, and lively acting infatuated the owner. Now he proposed marriage Tinkari. Again she was in trouble. She hated the idea of sacrificing her acting career to a wealthy housewife. She consulted Girish, who was her guardian. Girish told Tinkari: "No, you shouldn't be bound by marriage. Money is nothing. You have talent and you will be a great star in the future."

Tinkari rejected the owner's offer. The owner smiled and said to her: "Look, your beauty is transient, and this acting job is also temporary. If you live with me your life will be safe and secure. All right, you go on acting as usual and I shall wait for you."

Rich people are often moody and think that everything can be accomplished through money and power. The owner of the theatre knew that it was Girish who was the obstacle to his having Tinkari in his life, so he plotted to murder Girish. One evening he invited some close friends including Girish and Tinkari to his garden house in Sinthi, a suburb of North Calcutta. Girish arrived and so did Tinkari with her servant, Fakir. The owner then announced that the party would end by midnight and all should leave except Girish and Tinkari, as he had some business with them. The whole house reverberated with the joy of dining, drinking, dancing, and singing.

Rajen, a friend of both Girish and the owner, came late. While entering the garden house, he saw some people doing something in a dark corner of the flower garden. Out of curiosity Rajen went there and found an acquaintance of his, Golap Singh, a notorious villain, and some other men digging a pit. Golap whispered to Rajen: "Please leave this place by midnight. Tonight we will murder Girish, bury him in this pit, and cover it with plants." Rajen understood that the owner had hired Golap Singh to kill Girish.

Rajen asked: "Where is Fakir?" "He must be somewhere," answered Golap. Rajen said to him that Fakir must also leave; otherwise he could be a witness. Golap agreed. Immediately Rajen located Fakir near the pond and instructed him to go and hire a carriage, and wait for Tinkari and Girish on the street. Rajen then rushed inside to the party. The owner was happy to see Rajen and offered him a drink. When Rajen inquired about Girish, the owner replied that Girish and Tinkari were upstairs.

Rajen went there and found Girish and Tinkari eating dinner. Rajen whispered to Girish the whole story. Tinkari began to weep. Girish decided to leave, but Rajen stopped him, saying that four villains were at the gate and none could protect him. "I have the grace of my guru," said Girish boldly. (This incident took place some years after Sri Ramakrishna's passing away.)

But Rajen had a plan. He said: "There is one way you can escape. This veranda here extends to the bathroom, and the bathroom has a glass window without a grill. There is a mango tree between the bathroom and the boundary wall. Go through the window, grab a branch of the tree, and then go over the wall and jump on the sidewalk. There you will see Fakir waiting with a carriage." Without losing a minute Girish followed the escape plan, as

did Tinkari and Rajen. Thus the murder plot was foiled.

Girish's life is full of fascinating stories. He wrote in his reminiscences how Sri Ramakrishna had transformed his bohemian nature. He gave up drinking but not acting. In the last part of his life he was absorbed in the thought of the Master. One day he said to Swami Vishuddhananda, "Look. The Master made me god -- not through discipline or scolding, but through love!" On another occasion he said, referring to Sri Ramakrishna: "I find that it is not difficult to obey him, love him, or worship him. But indeed it is difficult to forget him."

Sources:

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