

# The Greatness of Misery

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People generally love joyful stories with happy endings. But human life consists of happiness and misery, comedy and tragedy. Even when divine beings take human forms, they must obey this law of maya. Because happiness and misery are inevitable in human life, avatars accept this fact but are not affected by it. Most of the time, their minds dwell in their divine nature, which is above the pairs of opposites. They take human birth to teach ordinary people how to face problems and suffering, maintain peace and harmony, and experience divine bliss by leading a God-centred life.

In every age, when religion declines and irreligion prevails, avatars come to reestablish the eternal religion. But they do not come alone. They are attended by their spiritual companions: For example, Ramachandra came with Sita, Krishna with Radha, Buddha with Yashodhara, Chaitanya with Vishnupriya, and Ramakrishna with Sarada. As the birds cannot fly with one wing, so avatars are accompanied by their Shakti, their female counterpart. These spiritual consorts carry the avatar's spiritual message and serve as an inspiration for others. Sita suffered throughout her life; and she taught how to forbear suffering by keeping her mind in her beloved Rama. Radha tried to forget her pain of separation from Krishna by focussing on her longing and passion for him. When Buddha left, Yashodhara was grief-stricken. She raised their son and led a nun's life in the palace. She forgot her pain by practising renunciation and thinking of the impermanency of the world. Vishnupriya accepted Chaitanya's wish to

be a monk, releasing her husband to be a world teacher. She overcame her pain by repeating God's name and worshipping Krishna.

The lives of the avatars' consorts may have been sad and painful; but their love, faith, service, and self-sacrifice were praiseworthy and unparalleled. They are ideal women, made glorious by their patience and perseverance, love and purity, contentment and service, nonattachment and austerity, faith and devotion, gratitude and unselfishness, self-sacrifice and self-surrender, and other divine qualities.

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One hundred and fifty years ago Sarada was born to become the spiritual consort of Ramakrishna, the avatar of the present age. Ramakrishna married Sarada and demonstrated how one can be both an ideal sannyasin and an ideal householder. He had no physical relationship with his wife; he saw all women as the manifestations of the Divine Mother. He unveiled the real nature of Sarada, saying: "She is Sarada, the goddess Saraswati. She has come to impart knowledge to humanity. She is my Shakti, or power." When we read the life story of the Holy Mother, Sarada, some incidents bring tears to our eyes. It is a fact. But those tears connect us with the Holy Mother. We have not seen her with our physical eyes, but we have read many books on her, heard many stories from her disciples, and seen the places where she lived and the articles that she used. Walt Disney, the founder of Disneyland, once said: "There is no end to human imagination." Actually, imagination eventually becomes realization. Christians visualize the Passion Play, feel the pain of Christ's crucifixion, and thus experience his presence. In this article we shall try to

connect ourselves with the Holy Mother through the sad episodes in her life.

### **1. At the Cottage in Kamarpukur**

Poverty is painful, and Ramakrishna's family was very poor. When his mother, Chandramani, and his brother Rameswar heard that Ramakrishna had become mad in Dakshineswar, they brought him back to Kamarpukur for treatment and then arranged for him to marry. They desperately searched for a bride, but failed. In an ecstatic mood, Ramakrishna told them: "It is useless to search here and there. You must go to the family of Ramchandra Mukhopadhyay in the village of Jayrambati. Fate has marked my bride with a straw." Ramakrishna then married Sarada, Ramchandra's five-year-old daughter. Rameswar borrowed 300 rupees for a dowry and Chandramani borrowed some jewellery from the wealthy Laha family for the bride to wear during the wedding ceremony. It must have been a wonderful sight to see the little Sarada running around in her new sari and jewellery, picking up dates from the ground.

Chandramani was extremely anxious when the time came to return the jewels to their owners. She had lovingly made the new bride her own by showing her affection. Now she needed to take the jewellery away from Sarada. This thought filled the old woman's eyes with tears. Although she expressed her agony to no one, it did not take long for Ramakrishna to perceive it. He consoled his mother; then, while Sarada was sleeping, he took the jewellery away so deftly that she was unaware of it. The items were immediately sent to the Lahas. But when the intelligent girl awoke, she asked, "Where is my jewellery?" Chandramani took Sarada on her lap and tearfully

consoled her, saying, "My darling, later Gadadhar [nick name of Ramakrishna] will give you better ornaments than those." The matter did not end there. Sarada's uncle came to see her that day. When he learned of this incident, he was offended and took her home at once. Chandramani was terribly hurt. To ease her pain Gadadhar said playfully, "Whatever they say or do, they can't annul the marriage now!"

This incident is painful to us as well. Of course, Ramakrishna later had jewellery made for Sarada. But we can visualize that sad incident when we see the Holy Mother's image in the shrine, decorated with jewellery, and it melts our hearts.

## **2. In the Fields of Jayrambati**

The Banerjees' pond still exists at the entrance to Jayrambati Village, and still the same kind of grass grows on its surface. We watch through our mental eye as ten-year-old Sarada wields a scythe, cutting that grass for the cows. The village pond has always been infested with leeches. We don't know how much blood those leeches sucked from her body.

Sarada was a practical village girl. Although she had very little education, she was endowed with intelligence and strong common sense. An Indian woman's life is fulfilled through four stages: as a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mother. Sarada was ideal in each role. As a little girl, she would carry puffed rice in a cane basket to feed the farmers who were working for her father. Once pests destroyed her family's rice crop, she picked the rice stalks from the field. She would take her younger brothers to the Amodar River to bathe and help her mother with household duties.

During a famine, she served hot *khichuri* (rice and lentils) to starving people and fanned them with a palm-leaf fan.

Later in her life, Sarada collected milk and vegetables for her Calcutta devotees and cooked for them. Sometimes she would shiver from malaria and suffer without murmur, lying on the mud floor of her old cottage. But as soon as she felt a little better, and could eat milk and barley, she would initiate her devotees.

These scattered scenes of the Holy Mother in Jayrambati transport our minds to the realm of meditation.

### **3. In the Roadside Inn near Tarakeswar**

Time does not wait. Sarada gradually became a young girl of eighteen. She was extremely modest and bashful by nature, so she always tried to hide her beauty. When she would go to take her bath in the village pond, she would hear gossip about her. Some women would show her sympathy, but others would stand at a distance and point at her, commenting: "She is a wife of a madman." Some remarked: "Aha! Shyama's daughter has been married to a crazy person." Others said: "Her husband is mad. He moves around naked and shouts, 'Mother, Mother.'"

This is village gossip. An American columnist nicely put it: "My name is Gossip. I have no respect for justice. I maim without killing. I break hearts and ruin lives. I am cunning and malicious and gather strength with age. The more I am quoted, the more I am believed. I flourish at every level of society. My victims are helpless. They cannot protect themselves against me because I have no name and no face. To track me down is impossible. The harder you try, the more elusive I become. I am nobody's friend. Once

I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same. I topple governments and wreck marriages. I make innocent people cry in their pillows. My name is Gossip.”<sup>1</sup>

Sarada became a victim of gossip in her own village. There is a saying: A funeral pyre burns only once, but anxiety burns all the time. Fear and shame made her mute. Sarada stopped visiting her neighbours and sequestered herself in her small thatched hut. Finally she decided that she must see her husband to ease her mind.

Her journey began during the Dol Purnima (full moon of spring) festival in 1872. Some villagers were leaving for Calcutta to have a holy bath in the Ganges on that auspicious occasion. Sarada and her father, Ramchandra, joined a group of pilgrims. The distance between Jayrambati and Calcutta is sixty miles via Kamarpukur, Arambagh, the vast meadow of Telo-Bhelo, and Tarakeswar. She walked barefoot, wearing only a piece of cloth, her mind torn between hope and anxiety. After walking for two days her feet started to become heavy; they were covered with cuts and blisters. Then she was attacked by malaria. Ramchandra took shelter with his daughter in a roadside inn. He covered Sarada’s shivering body with a *chadar* (shawl) and left to find food and water.

Sarada herself describes what happened next: “I was lying unconscious owing to fever. Just then I saw a woman with a dark complexion sitting by my side. She stroked my aching head with her soft cool hands, and I felt the heat in my body subsiding. I asked her, ‘Where are you from?’ And she replied, ‘From Dakshineswar.’ Dumbfounded, I exclaimed: “From Dakshineswar! I too am going there to see my husband. But this fever has unfortunately detained me on the way.’ She replied: ‘Don’t worry. You will

soon be all right and see your husband at Dakshineswar. It is for your sake that I have kept him there.' I asked: 'Who are you to me?' 'I am your sister,' she replied. After this conversation I fell asleep. The next day I became free from fever."<sup>2</sup>

Still feeble, Sarada resumed her journey. She and her father reached Dakshineswar at 9:00 p.m. The Master received her warmly. He immediately arranged for her supper and made a bed for her in his room. He took care of her treatment the next day.

Sometimes auspiciousness lurks in inauspiciousness and goodness comes of evil. Gossip united Sarada with Ramakrishna and then departed forever. Ramakrishna removed all anxiety from Sarada's mind and installed a jar of bliss in her heart.

#### **4. At the Nahabat in Dakshineswar**

There are two *nahabats* (concert towers) in the temple garden of Dakshineswar — one in the south, the other in the north. Ramakrishna's mother and Sarada lived in the northern nahabat, Chandramani upstairs and Sarada downstairs. Sarada's octagonal room was tiny: its length and breadth were 7'9" and height 9'3"; its door was 2'2" wide and 4'2" high. Probably Sarada was 5'6" tall, and she had to pass through that low door.

Sarada recalled: "The room of the nahabat was so low that at first I would always bump my head against the upper frame of the door. One day I got a cut on the head. Then I became accustomed to it. The head bent of itself as soon as I approached the door. Many aristocratic women of Calcutta frequently came there. They would stand at the door, peep inside,

and remark: 'Ah, what a tiny room for our good child! She is in exile, as it were, like Sita.'"<sup>3</sup>

With our mental eyes we watch Sarada, busy with her housework and forgetting herself to run to serve her husband and mother-in-law. Her forehead bumps against the doorframe, and immediately her forehead swells like a red tomato. Tears trickle from her eyes. Covering her wound with her veil and forgetting the pain, she serves her husband and mother-in-law. We become angry with the doorframe and at the same time feel jealous. Addressing the doorframe, we say angrily: "You are responsible for knocking against and cutting our mother's head. We shall cut you into pieces with an axe!" Jealous, we continue: "Blessed you are, O door frame! You have touched our deathless mother so many times -- how unfortunate are we who could not."

One day the Master gave the Holy Mother some jute fibre and asked her to plait it into cords that could be used to hang pots in his room, to be filled with sweets for his young disciples. She made the slings, and with the rejected fibres stuffed her pillow. She slept on a hard mat under which she spread some burlap. Referring to this kind of austere bed, she later said to her devotees: "Now I use a soft pillow and mattress. How different from the hard bed I slept on at Dakshineswar! But I slept then as well as I do now. I don't feel any difference."<sup>4</sup> Does the Holy Mother come to our minds now when we sleep in a cozy bed in an air-conditioned room?

We visualize various earthen jars containing rice, lentils, farina, sugar, oil, spices, and other food items on the floor around the walls, and also some pots in slings hanging from the ceiling. Sarada and Lakshmi, the



Master's niece, slept on the floor in that tiny room, and sometimes some women devotees from Calcutta were also accommodated there.

Swami Nikhilananda wrote: "Sri Ramakrishna watched Sarada Devi's spiritual practices and saw to it that she meditated regularly. At three o'clock in the morning he would go to the door of the nahabat and say to Lakshmi: 'Get up and wake up your aunt. How long will you sleep? It is going to be dawn. Begin your meditation.' In wintertime Sarada Devi wanted Lakshmi to sleep a little longer. When she knew that the Master was outside, she would whisper in Lakshmi's ear: 'Don't answer him. He cannot sleep. It is not yet time to get up. Even the crows and cuckoos are asleep. Don't move from your bed.' Hearing no response from inside, and thinking they were still asleep, the Master would sometimes tease them by pouring water under the door. The ladies had to get up quickly for fear of the beds getting wet. Sometimes the beds actually got wet."<sup>5</sup>

Under such circumstances, we wonder what modern wives would do. Perhaps they would bring the Master down from his samadhi and take him to divorce court.

Another aspect of the Holy Mother's life in the nahabat gives us pain. There were no bathing or toilet facilities in the nahabat; and moreover the temple garden was a public place and there was no privacy for women. The Holy Mother was extremely bashful and modest. She kept herself veiled so that no one she did not know could see her face. During the dark hours of the morning she would go to the jungle on the bank of the Ganges to answer the call of nature and then would take her bath in the Ganges. Once in the early morning darkness she almost stepped on a crocodile. Later she recalled her sad plight: "I suffered terribly by suppressing the urge for the

call of nature and thus developed physical problems. Only during dark hours of night could I go out.”<sup>6</sup> What discomfort! Later, Yogin-ma (a woman devotee of the Master) realized Sarada’s predicament and arranged to build an outhouse near the nahabat.

One should not think that the Holy Mother only suffered like a caged bird in the nahabat; she experienced ecstasy and endured all inconveniences by serving her god-intoxicated husband. She reminisced: “What a unique man he was! How many minds he illuminated! What unceasing bliss he radiated! Day and night his room echoed and reechoed with laughter, stories, talk, and music. The Master sang, and I would listen hour after hour, standing behind the screen of the nahabat. What joyous days we passed through! People poured in day and night, and there was no end of spiritual talk.”<sup>7</sup>

### **5. In the Attic of the Shyampukur House**

In the middle of 1885 Ramakrishna developed throat cancer. It was difficult for his physicians to go to Dakshineswar regularly, so the devotees took the Master to Calcutta for treatment. The householder devotees provided funds; the young disciples took responsibility for his nursing; and the Holy Mother prepared his meals. Several prominent physicians of Calcutta began to treat the Master. Despite his illness, the Master continued to teach.

Swami Saradananda presents a vivid picture of the Shyampukur house where the Master stayed for nearly three months. The Master lived upstairs in a spacious room called the parlour:

To the north and south of the parlour are two verandas, the northern one larger than the southern. To the west of the parlour are two small rooms — one used by devotees who stayed overnight, and the other by the Holy Mother for sleeping. The visitors' room has a narrow veranda to the west. A staircase to the roof is at the eastern end of the corridor leading to the Master's room. At the top of those stairs, near the door to the roof, is a covered terrace of about six feet by six feet in size. The Holy Mother spent her days on that terrace, and there she cooked the special diet needed by the Master.

It is really amazing how for three months she performed her duties, forgetting all personal inconveniences, while living in that single-family house surrounded by men whom she did not know. As there was only one bathroom for all, she would get up before 3:00 a.m., finish her bathroom activities, and then silently go to the terrace on the second floor, without anyone knowing. She would spend the whole day there. When the Master's meals were ready, at regular times she would send word downstairs through Swami Advaitananda or Swami Adbhutananda. At those times the people were asked to leave so she could bring the food and feed the Master, or we [the young disciples] would carry his meals to him if that was more convenient. At noon the Holy Mother would eat and rest on the terrace. At 11:00 p.m., when everyone else was asleep, she would leave that room and sleep in her bedroom on the first floor until 2:00 a.m. Fortified by the expectation of the Master's recovery, she spent day after day in that way. She lived there so silently and invisibly that many of the regular visitors did not

know that she was living there and carrying the responsibility for the most important service to the Master.<sup>8</sup>

This description needs no further explanation. The Holy Mother's daily routine tells us how she practised the Master's teaching: "Adjust according to time; adjust according to place; adjust according to persons." This is the only way one can maintain peace and equanimity of the mind.

## **6. Back to Kamarpukur Cottage**

When Sri Ramakrishna passed away on 16 August 1886, the Holy Mother's new life began. To forget the pain of separation from the Master, she left on pilgrimage with a few of the Master's close disciples and devotees. After practising austerities in Varanasi and Vrindaban for a year, she returned to Balaram's house in Calcutta. A little later she, Golap-ma, and Swami Yogananda left for Kamarpukur by train to Burdwan. Upon reaching Burdwan, they walked sixteen miles to Uchalan. The Holy Mother was exhausted and hungry, so Golap-ma cooked khichuri for her. After having her meal, she exclaimed: "Golap, what nectar you have prepared!" When they reached Kamarpukur, Golap-ma and Swami Yogananda stayed with her for a couple of weeks, then returned to Calcutta.

The Holy Mother began her life alone in Kamarpukur. She was then thirty-four years old. While living at Cossipore, the Master advised the Holy Mother: "Look, don't extend your hand to anyone for a penny. You will never lack ordinary food and plain clothing. If you ask for money from anyone, your head will be sold to that person. It is better to have food from someone than to live with that person. Some devotees may lovingly offer their homes for you to live in, but never give up your cottage in

Kamarpukur. You stay in Kamarpukur. Grow some spinach. Eat that spinach with rice and repeat Hari's name."<sup>9</sup> But it was not easy to live alone in a village, as a young widow.

First, the Holy Mother had to fight poverty and loneliness. She had no money. Later she recalled: "Trailokya Biswas used to give me seven rupees a month. After the Master's passing away, Dinu [the cashier of the Kali temple] and others conspired and stopped that monthly allowance. My relatives at Dakshineswar considered me as an ordinary mortal and joined with them. Naren fervently requested them, 'Please don't stop that allowance to the mother.' But they did."<sup>10</sup> It took a long time for news of the Holy Mother's financial condition to reach the devotees in Calcutta. Swami Saradananda remarked: "We did not dream that Mother did not have the means to buy even salt." Moreover, most of the Master's young disciples were then living as wandering monks, so they had no idea of her difficulties.

Second, when the Master passed away at Cossipore, the Holy Mother was about to remove her bracelets and put on a white dhoti, as was customary for a Hindu widow. But the Master appeared and forbade her to follow the custom. From then on she wore her bracelets and a sari with a thin red border. Because of this, the narrow-minded and fanatical villagers of Kamarpukur criticized her. In distress, she took off her bracelets. Again the Master appeared and asked her not to discard them. He then told her that Gauri-ma would cite the Vaishnava scriptures to explain why. Gauri-ma told the Holy Mother that she could not be a widow, since her husband was none other than the Lord Himself. This vision reassured her. She put on her bracelets again and turned a deaf ear to people's criticism.

Third, the Holy Mother was harassed by a mentally ill devotee of the Master. Harish had been poisoned by his wife, and subsequently became insane. One day he arrived at Kamarpukur and began to act queerly. The Holy Mother described the situation: "One day as I entered the compound of our home from a visit with a neighbour, Harish began to chase me. He was then insane. His wife had brought about this condition. There was no one in our house. In a helpless state I began to walk fast around our granary. He pursued me. After going around it seven times I stopped. I assumed my real form [the Divine Mother Bagala], laid him on the ground, placed my knees on his chest, and slapped him hard. He began to gasp for breath. My fingers became red."<sup>11</sup> Harish became calmer, and left for Vrindaban soon after, where he eventually became normal.

Fourth, the Master's close relatives were selfish and indifferent to the Holy Mother. Ramlal, Lakshmi, and Shivaram spent most of their time in Dakshineswar, so in Kamarpukur she was practically alone and without protection. Yet she wanted to remain in Kamarpukur.

We are struck with grief when we think of the Holy Mother's ordeal in Kamarpukur, which lasted an entire year. She did not want anyone to know about her suffering. If the Master's devotees had learned of it, they would have handled the situation immediately. (Later on, of course, they took care of her for the rest of her life.) We guess that there must be a special reason behind this ordeal. Because we know that the desires of illumined souls always come true, it seems to us that the Master had fulfilled his one unfinished wish through her. Swami Saradananda wrote:

"At the threshold of his youth a kind of fancy arose in the Master's mind, prompted by the influence of his inner feminine nature. Because they

were born as women the gopis of Vrindaban attained Satchidananda Krishna through love. This led him to think that if he were born as a woman, he could worship and attain Krishna like the gopis. Thus, viewing the male body as an obstacle to attaining Krishna, he imagined that if he were to be born again he would be a beautiful young widow with long hair, born in a brahmin family, knowing none other than Krishna as husband. There would be provision for plain food and clothes and a small plot of land next to his hut, where he would grow a few kinds of vegetables. There would be an elderly woman with him who served as a guardian, a cow that he would milk himself, and a spinning wheel. His boyish imagination went further. After finishing the household work for the day, he would sing songs about Krishna while spinning the cotton. Then in the evening he would make sweets from the milk of that cow and cry piteously to feed the sweets to Krishna with his own hands. Pleased, Krishna would suddenly appear as a cowherd boy and eat them; thus he would visit daily without anyone knowing.”<sup>12</sup>

The Holy Mother spent her time in Kamarpukur in much the same manner. Wearing a torn cloth, she grew spinach, cooked rice and vegetables, offered them to Raghuvir, and partook of that prasad. She spent the remainder of her time chanting the Lord’s name.

Later the Holy Mother explained the reason why she eventually left Kamarpukur: “After the Master’s passing away when I moved to Kamarpukur, the Master’s relatives showed indifference to me and the villagers also tried to humiliate me. When my mother heard about it, she brought me to Jayrambati. Since then I have been living with my brothers

amid their happiness and misery. Now those relatives say that I don't look after them. How strange is human nature!"<sup>13</sup>

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There is no end to the difficulties that Mother Sarada endured. But regardless of what happened, she was an embodiment of forbearance like the Mother Earth. Elderly men whined to her, struck her feet with their heads, and told their sad stories; a drunkard shouted from the street and broke her sleep; once a man lay down on the floor and asked her to put her foot on his chest and give him knowledge; another time a disturbed woman twisted her ankle and hurt her so that she would remember her. Sometimes the Holy Mother had to jump between two of her brothers to keep them from fighting; sometimes she needed to seek protection from her crazy sister-in-law who wanted to attack her; moreover, she had endless suffering over her niece Radhu. Once a disciple asked her, "Mother, how do you bear all these things?" She replied: "My son, you will understand human suffering when you grow up. You are not a mother."

Although happiness and misery are inevitable in human life, they cannot perturb those who are established in the Atman. Is there any way to be completely free of misery? Krishna said in the Gita: "Feelings of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, are caused by the contact of the senses with their objects. They come and go, never lasting long. You must endure them." Sri Ramakrishna said: "Forbear, forbear, forbear. He who forbears, survives; and he who does not, perishes." The Holy Mother said: "Suffering is a gift of God. One should have patience like the Mother Earth. There is so much turmoil, and so many calamities, going on all over the



universe. But the Mother Earth forbears everything. Human beings should have that kind of patience and perseverance.”

<sup>1</sup> Ann Landers, *Wake up and Smell the Coffee!* Villard (New York, 1996), p.401.

<sup>2</sup> Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Sarada Devi*, Ramakrishna Math (Chennai, 1958), p.27-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

<sup>4</sup> Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother*, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre (New York, 1962), p. 58

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76.

<sup>6</sup> Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, Ramakrishna Math (Chennai, 1955), p.101-02.

<sup>7</sup> Nikhilananda, p.76.

<sup>8</sup> Swami Saradananda, tran. Swami Chetanananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, Vedanta Society (St. Louis, 2003), p.873, 879-80.

<sup>9</sup> Abhaya Dasgupta, comp., *Sri Sri Saradadevi: Atmakatha*, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture (Kolkata, 1988), p.68-69.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

<sup>11</sup> Nikhilananda, p.106.

<sup>12</sup> *Divine play*, p.302.

<sup>13</sup> Gambhirananda, p.212.