

Gauri Ma – A Monastic Disciple of Sri Ramakrishna

By Swami Shivatatvananda

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It was at the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago that we first heard about Sannyasini Mataji Gauri Ma. Swami Bhashyananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna Order and head of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society in Chicago and the Vivekananda Monastery and Retreat in Ganges, Michigan, would read and translate the story of her life to us from the original Marathi. It was a tale that captivated our hearts and minds. Years later, as our memories dimmed, we longed to hear the story of her life once again – and share it with others. That was the motivation that began this book. Swami Bhashyananda gave us all the encouragement we needed. The task was formidable and many long hours were spent on the project, but it was a source of great joy to us.

This short biography by Swami Shivatatvananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, was first published in three parts in the magazine Jivan Vikas (vol. 4, no. 1-3 [March 1960]: 2-11; [April 1960]: 98-107; [May 1960]: 150-58). Jivan Vikas was a Marathi journal on spiritual matters published by the Sri Ramakrishna Ashram, Nagpur, India. The biography was also presented in book form, entitled Aghormani and Gauri Ma, published by the ashram at Nagpur.

Swami Vyomarupananda, President of Nagpur Ashram, has very

graciously given Mothers Trust/Mothers Place permission to publish this English translation. We are grateful to him for this kindness.

Translating the book presented quite a challenge. To us, the original Marathi with its richer vocabulary seemed far better for narrating a spiritual story than English. Through the tireless efforts and sincerity of Professor Sahasrabuddhe, Indu Sahasrabuddhe, and Indra Makhija, and with the help of Swami Bhashyananda, the bulk of the translation was completed. Many long hours were spent at the Vedanta Society working on the text.

Others helped in preparing this translation for publishing. Geeta Makhija and Nagu Kant typed the manuscript on computer. Judy Lawrence edited the first draft. We wish to extend our heartfelt thanks to her for a job well done. The final editing was done by Pamela White. She did an excellent job, and suddenly the original Marathi seemed to melt into English. Our deepest gratitude goes to her for all the work she has done. A few paragraphs have been moved in the text in the interest of preserving continuity for the benefit of Western readers. Aside from this, we have remained faithful to the original.

Through the generosity of Lex Hixon and Richard Presscott, the publishing of this book was made possible. Our deepest thanks go to them for their generous support. We would also like to thank Huston Smith for his encouragement and best wishes throughout the preparation of this text.

Mothers Trust/Mothers Place, the publisher of this book, is an ashram in Ganges, Michigan. With great joy we present to you this biography of Gauri Ma.

Sri Ramakrishna, the prophet of Dakshineswar, was born in the year 1836. Through a life of intense spiritual practice, great revelation, and heartfelt compassion, he profoundly affected the people around him. Through his unfailing insistence of God realization as the be-all and end-all of life, Sri Ramakrishna inspired his disciples with a new vision of life's goal and meaning.

To him, love of God and realization of the Divine must find expression through acts of loving kindness and service to others –

as manifestations of God. Nowhere was this found manifested to a greater degree than in the life of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother. Not only was she the master's partner in his life work, but she was also the sacred place wherein he worshipped the Divine Mother. So she stands revealed today, a great Goddess ready to receive all her children alike with a mother's heart, suffused with a love and compassion that embraces with equal warmth the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the saint and the sinner, the householder and the monastic. She shows the way to live a peaceful and spiritual life amid even the most trying worldly circumstances. Each of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual children has something to offer. The Master was a mighty spring, his disciples so many powerful streams carrying his message forward.

Here is an account of the life of one monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and companion of Sri Sarada Devi. Her name was Mataji Gauri Mata Puri Devi, also known as Gauri Ma. During Gauri Ma's stay at Dakshineswar, the Master, Sri Ramakrishna, gave her the ochre cloth that Indian monks and nuns wear. He gave her a new name for the new life: Gauriananda.

Commissioned by Sri Ramakrishna to help relieve the plight of women, to attend to their miseries and afflictions, she did not rest content with her own salvation or self-realization. She understood the real position of women and the tragic gulf between what they were and what they should be. The Master opened her eyes to their problems. Sunk in ignorance, dependence, and misery, deprived of all rights, kept down by grinding superstitions and obsolete social practices, they were to be her special field of work.

Sri Ramakrishna knew his agent. He knew that for the service of women, such service as he wanted, Mataji Gauri Ma would be invaluable. Her purity of body and mind, her determination in doing what she knew needed to be done, her courage, and her deep religious faith made her singularly fitted for the Master's work. To accomplish the Master's will, Gauri Ma selected a plot of land in northern Calcutta. Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, personally visited the site and expressed her satisfaction. Here Gauri Ma started an ideal institution, named after and dedicated to Sri Sarada Devi. The Sri Saradeshwari Ashram was established in 1895 and

was based on the life and ideals of Sri Ramakrishna, having Sri Sarada Devi as the central spiritual inspiration.

The Holy Mother was glad that Sri Saradeshwari Ashram was close to her Calcutta residence. Gauri Ma would call on Mother frequently, whenever she needed advice. The Holy Mother graced the ashram on occasions and was a source of great joy and inspiration to the residents of the ashram. Their love and regard for Holy Mother, their devotional spirit, their plain and simple living and high principles pleased the Holy Mother greatly. She appreciated Gauri Ma's plan of work. The ashram was very dear to her – to the extent that she said. those who render any small service to the ashram "had already bought their seats in Vaikunta [Heaven]."

Since 1895 the ashram as a convent has made it possible for many women to lead dedicated spiritual lives. Over two hundred nuns presently live at three centers, the headquarters at 26 Gauri Mata Sarani, Calcutta, India, 70004, and branch centers at Navadwip and Giridih. Each center has a free girls' school, boarding for students, and accommodations for women, whether as guests or women in need. Classes are mostly taken by the sannyasinis and brahmacharinis. The administration of the institution is entirely in the hands of women. At the base is the Matrisangha, comprising the sannyasinis of the order, and at the apex are the trustees, appointed under the trust established by the revered Gauri Mata. The trustees are assisted by an executive committee and an advisory board, the membership of which is held by men and women.

Swami Vivekananda wrote,

There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing. Hence, in the Ramakrishna incarnation, the acceptance of woman as the Guru, hence his practicing in the women's garb and attitude, hence too his preaching the Motherhood of women as the representations of the Divine Mother. Hence it is my first endeavor to start a math (convent) for women. This math shall be the origin of Gargis and Maitreyis and women of even higher attainments than these... (Letters of Swami Vivekananda)

Please show this letter to Gauri Ma, Jogin Ma, etc., and through

them establish a women's math. Let Gaur Ma be the president there... .I shall supply all necessary expenses for that work also. (Letter from England, 1896)

After returning from his first visit to the West, Swami Vivekananda told Gauri Ma. "I have talked to the Western people about you and shall take you there." Unfortunately, this never happened during her lifetime. In a way, though, the Swami's wish to bring her to the West is now fulfilled with the establishment of Mothers Trust/Mothers Place. The nuns of Mothers Trust/Mothers Place receive their inspiration and formal vows from the mataji of Sri Saradeshwari Ashram, who was a direct disciple and companion of Gauri Ma from age four.

It was Swami Bhashyananda's wish that this book of the life and teachings of Sannyasini Gauri Ma should be published. He understood that many knew about Swami Vivekananda but not about Mataji Gauri Ma. He felt that Western devotees needed to know her life and that women especially needed her as a monastic role model, exemplifying the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. His wish was that her life would vivify – alongside Swami Vivekananda's – and bring balance to the Vedanta movement in the West.

Swami Bhashyananda inspired devotees to read and meditate on Gauri Ma's life, for Gauri Ma was to be the inspiration behind what he saw manifesting in Ganges, Michigan – an ashram for women dedicated to the worship of God in the social service of women and children in transition. Mothers Trust/Mothers Place has become such a place with support coming from men and women alike.

With love and reverence, we offer this book at the holy feet of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, and we dedicate it with love and appreciation to Swami Bhashyananda in this year, 1994, the year of the centenary celebrations commemorating the founding of Sri Saradeshwari Ashram.

UNLESS HE DRAGS ME!

IT WAS THE YEAR 1882 in the city of Calcutta, In one room of the palatial house of Balaram Bose of Bosepara Lane was a sannyasini of uncommon appearance, a woman who had renounced the world in search of God. She was absorbed in worship of her Ishta Devata, or chosen deity, Damodar Shila, in the form of a shaligram, a round stone symbol of Vishnu. She sang softly with intense devotion, her gentle face radiant and blissful as she bathed the deity that had been placed upon a copper tray. The bath was completed. Hands trembling with emotion, she lovingly dried the shaligram with a cloth. She was about to place it on the asana, or seat, when suddenly, she saw two tender, luminous human feet. Thinking her senses had deceived her, she rubbed her eyes and looked intently. But those same two feet were on the throne of Damodar. No other part of the body was visible – just the Lord's two lotus feet.

Many times she had experienced the playfulness of the Lord, who, though hidden from our sight, ever sports with His devotees. But that day's experience was peculiar. She felt astounded. A shiver went through her entire body and her hair stood on end. The shaligram slipped from her quivering hands. She became distressed: in all these years, she had never dropped the shaligram. Lifting up the image, she touched it to her head and heart, bowing to it again and again with intense devotion. Again, she bathed it. This completed, she began to chant and to offer a tulsi leaf, but lo! again, those very feet appeared! The tulsi leaf intended for her shaligram fell instead on those luminous feet. Again, she offered the leaf to her deity, and once again, it fell on those two feet. Once, twice, thrice! The sannyasini, Gauri Ma, collapsed in unconsciousness.

All the members of Balaram Bose's family were especially devoted to Gauri Ma, their honored guest. It was unusually late that day, but she had not completed her worship and come out of her room. When the family could not even hear her voice, one of the ladies peeped through the half-opened door. There to her astonishment she saw Gauri Ma lying on the floor, tears streaming down her face.

When Balaram's wife heard this, she rushed to the spot. But Gauri Ma did not respond to their repeated entreaties. They immediately sent for Balaram. As soon as he saw her, he realized this was no common illness, but a deep spiritual experience – samadhi, absorption In the Spirit.

Only after a few hours did Gauri Ma regain partial consciousness. If anybody addressed her, she looked blankly, unable to reply. Again and again she looked at her breast, seemingly trying to grasp at something. She felt as if someone had tied a string to her heart and was gently tugging it. But she could not get hold of that string. She wished only to retire to a lonely spot where she could weep undisturbed.

The rest of the day and night passed in this state. An unknown urge made her very restless. That night she heard a voice. A person of blissful appearance, feigning anger, addressed her in these loving words: "Will you not come, unless I drag you?"

Gauri Ma became distracted. "Who are you?" she asked. "Your voice seems familiar."

The person of blissful countenance replied, "Oh, yes! Yes' But only if you come closer, will you be able to recognize me. Come. Come soon."

By now she was fully conscious. She could still hear the voice ringing in her ears: "Come. Come soon." From within and without, she could hear the voice: "Come...Come... Come." It totally confused her. It was impossible to remain in her dark room for another moment. Trying to follow the voice, she rushed out. Where would it lead her? Who could tell?

It was not yet dawn. Every morning it was her habit to go for a bath in the Ganges River, and the household doorman would always open the door for her. But today, it was much earlier than usual, and, being acquainted with the previous day's events, the doorman stopped her. "Where are you going so early?" he asked repeatedly.

But she could not answer. Thus, he did not open the door.

Then Balaram came down. "Didi, where are you going?" Gauri Ma remained silent. "Would you like to see Thakur at Dakshineswar?" Gauri Ma only looked blankly at Balaram Babu, unable to reply.

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A famous zamindar of Northern Calcutta, Sri Radharaman Bose, who was a great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, had once had an occasion to meet Gauri Ma. He was spellbound by the detachment, devotion, knowledge, and luster that he observed in her. Ever since, he frequently invited her to come for extended stays at his homes in Calcutta and Brindavan, and Gauri Ma would always accept his invitations.

Balaram Bose, one of the greatest of Sri Ramakrishna's householder devotees, was the son of this very Sri Radharaman Bose. Once when Gauri Ma was at the Bose home in Brindavan, she happened to meet Balaram. Now Balaram Babu knew that Gauri Ma was well read in the scriptures, was often making pilgrimages, had performed frequent tapasya, and had met many sadhus. Therefore, he said, "Didi, at Dakshineswar, I have had the good fortune to meet a very holy man. His disposition is like that of the two great sages Sanak and Sanandan. While speaking about God, he goes into samadhi. You must go and meet him." However, at that time, nothing came of the conversation.

Some time later, Gauri Ma had just returned to Calcutta from a pilgrimage to Jagannathpuri and was residing at Balaram Babu's home in Bagh Bazaar. Once again, he tried to persuade her to visit the holy man at Dakshineswar. "Didi, in the end you will regret it if you do not go. I am sure you have never met a man like him before. Let us go just this once to Dakshineswar."

But Gauri Ma replied. "Dada, I have met many sadhus in my life. Now, I no longer have the desire to meet any new sadhus."

Balaram Babu was deeply disappointed. Having found shelter at the lotus feet of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna, Balaram Babu felt greatly blessed. The Master's divine life had made a deep impression on him. It pained him that he was unable to persuade her to share his good fortune. But he did not give up hope. Whenever he found an opportunity, he would bring up the topic. Gauri Ma would laugh and say, "If your sadhus has such power, let him drag me there. Unless he drags me, I will not go."

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Thus it was that when Balaram Babu saw Gauri Ma at the door in a semi-conscious state that morning in 1882, he said, "Didi, where are you going? Should we go to see Thakur at Dakshineswar?" But she was unable to respond. All she did was stare blankly at Balaram. Balaram could not forget the incident of the day before when Gauri Ma had collapsed during worship and fallen to the floor in a semi-conscious state with tears streaming from her eyes. Though he did not personally witness Gauri Ma's visions of the previous day, he could sense that her present state was the result of having had a deep spiritual experience.

When he observed her present condition, he realized this was a golden opportunity for him to take her to Dakshineswar. Immediately he sent for the carriage. Balaram Babu, Gauri Ma, Balaram's wife, Sri Chunilal Bose (a neighbor) and his wife, and several other ladies set off for Dakshineswar. Along the way, Balaram's wife covered Gauri Ma completely with a shawl. What profound thoughts crossed Gauri Ma's mind, nobody knows; she only sat quietly in the carriage, with a sad expression on her face. The carriage slowly moved toward Dakshineswar.

MEETING AT DAKSHINESWAR

THE SUN WAS RISING on the eastern horizon. Soft, golden rays spread everywhere. A pure and solemn atmosphere pervaded Kali Bari, the temple garden dedicated to Kali. Balaram and his party entered Sri Ramakrishna's room. He was seated on a wooden platform winding a thread around a piece of wood, all the while singing softly to himself:

Oh, Mother Shyama! When you were
in the form of Krishna, filled with
motherly love, Mother Yashoda used to play with you. Mother
Shyama,
with your terrifying appearance,
where have you hidden that sweet form?

Sri Ramakrishna finished winding the string just as the group entered the room. At the same moment, Gauri Ma felt the turbulent unrest of the day before completely disappear, just as if someone had waved a magic wand. In its place, her heart was filled with a divine joy and peace. That indescribable mystical experience of the previous day, when she had felt that someone was pulling her with a string, came to an end.

Each person in Balaram's party made pranams to Sri Ramakrishna, bending down to touch his feet in respect. As Gauri Ma bent down to make the customary pranams, suddenly she saw again those luminous feet! These were the very lotus feet she had seen on the throne of Damodar, her Ishta.

A shiver went through Gauri Ma's entire body. Surprised, joyful, but not a little perplexed, she gazed at Sri Ramakrishna. He was smiling to himself.

What is the meaning of all this? she wondered. Who is he? Where have I seen him before? Uncertain, anxious, and bewildered, Gauri Ma took her seat at the back, behind everyone else.

Pointing to her, Sri Ramakrishna asked, "Balaram, who is she?"

"My sister."

Frowning a little, Sri Ramakrishna persisted, "Is she your real sister?"

Balaram hesitated a little but said, "Yes, Maharaj."

Then Sri Ramakrishna shook his head. "You mean to say, she is a Kaistha? Oh, no! Absolutely not."

Balaram Babu laughed sheepishly. "What you say is correct. She is a Brahmin girl, the youngest sister of a close friend of mine. She regards my father as her father."

Sri Ramakrishna smiled and nodded his head. "Then say that. She belongs here. I have known her for a very long time."

There was no end to Balaram's surprise. He had never said a word about Gauri Ma to Sri Ramakrishna. Only after much effort and struggle had he been able to bring her to Dakshineswar that day. That Sri Ramakrishna knew Gauri even though he had never mentioned her, to Balaram was a matter of great astonishment. Looking at the ladies and neighbor who had accompanied him. Balaram laughingly said. "Did you see that? We all came together, but Didi was the only one who passed."

Everyone, including Sri Ramakrishna. laughed at Balaram's remark. As they took leave, Sri Ramakrishna turned to Gauri Ma. "Come again, my child."

At that time, Gauri Ma was twenty-five years old.

FIRST ENCOUNTER

SLOWLY, Gauri Ma's confusion subsided and her mind became calm as she comprehended the meaning of the events at Dakshineswar. The one who revealed his own lotus feet on the throne of Damodar; who called to her in a voice without form, saying. "Will you not come, unless I drag you"; who commanded in feigned anger. "You come. Come soon. Only if you come closer will you recognize me"; who against her wishes actually dragged her to his feet in an unimaginable way: who said, "She belongs here" as soon as he saw her – who was he, this Sri Ramakrishna? This divine mystery was then revealed to her.

She was filled with indescribable spiritual joy, an inner Joy that jogged numerous old memories and brought them to the surface. Gauri Ma began to remember.

A long-buried childhood memory came back to her from the time she was called Mridani. It was the pleasant season that follows the monsoons. A peaceful joy was to be found everywhere – in the sky, in the air, and in people all around. In Bhavanipur, a suburb of Calcutta, the ten-year-old Mridani was sitting quietly in the corner of the front yard. Other children of her age were playing and having fun in the yard. Absorbed in herself, Mridani happened to glance at the road. A person of joyful appearance was passing by. Seeing Mridani sitting all by herself, this joyful stranger came closer and spoke lovingly, "All the other children are playing. Why are you sitting all alone?"

Mridani answered pensively, "I do not like that type of playing." But for some indescribable reason she felt strangely drawn to that person. She felt as though she had known him through many, many births. Filled with emotions she could not understand, she bowed at his feet.

Placing his hand on her head in blessing, the joyful stranger replied, "May you have devotion for Krishna."

That same voice! That same face! Now, after fifteen years. Mridani – Gauri Ma – suddenly realized that the person she had met that

day was this very one, the mysterious Sri Ramakrishna!

A few days after this long-ago incident, another event occurred. Mridani and her elder brother, Avinash Chandra, went to spend a few days with their aunt in Varaharnagar, a suburb of Calcutta. Somehow Mridani had come to know that the wonderful stranger who had spoken those words of blessings to her, "May you have devotion for Krishna," lived somewhere near Varaharnagar. The real reason for her desire to visit her aunt was her hope that she might get a chance to see that unforgettable stranger once more. Without letting anyone know, she began to search all around the neighborhood. One day she came upon some farmers plowing a field in Nimteghola. "Somewhere here in a banana grove lives a holy man. Do you know the exact place?" she asked them.

In reply the farmers pointed to a small hut and said. "There!" There stood an ordinary hut. Just as they had indicated. Very slowly, Mridani opened the door and entered. She saw the joyful stranger she had met before. Eyes closed, he was seated in deep meditation. His face glowed with a divine radiance. She stood dumbfounded then made pranams and sat down nearby. A long time passed thus. Then he opened his eyes. The child bowed once again at his lotus feet. Seeing her, he said, "You have come."

In a choked voice Mridani made known her desire to have initiation. Arrangements were immediately made for her to eat and stay with a nearby Brahmin family. The next morning she took her bath in the Ganges, alongside the women of the family. Then, in accord with her expressed desire, the holy man initiated her. She performed japa according to her guru's instructions and soon became absorbed in deep meditation. Her face radiated an indescribable joy. It was the day of Raas Purnima.

Meanwhile, there was panic at her aunt's house. Everybody began to search for her anxiously. Where could Mridani have gone? After considerable effort, the fearful and worried Avinash Chandra obtained a vague clue. He headed for the banana grove in Nimteghola. There was no end to his joy and relief when he found

his younger sister I at last.

Seeing Avinash Chandra, the holy man explained, "Look here, she is a little girl. Don't be angry with her. It is difficult to keep a bird captive."

Distractedly, she looked alternately at her guru and at her brother. But Sri Ramakrishna only laughed and said, "Now go. We shall meet again on the banks of the Ganges."

Now, fifteen years later, in a most unexpected way, here was a reunion between the guru and his disciple – on the banks of the Ganges – at Dakshineswar.

CHILDHOOD TENDENCIES

IN THE INTERVENING YEARS before encountering her guru at Dakshineswar, Mridani went through a great many strange and unimaginable experiences. Over this period she blossomed into Gauri Ma.

Mridani's father was Parvaticharan Chattopadhyaya and her mother, Giribala Devi. Parvaticharan would perform morning worship daily, before he went to work. Seeing a tilak mark on his forehead, his employer frequently ridiculed him. But one day Parvaticharan firmly countered the ridicule, saying that he was prepared to leave his job rather than sacrifice his religious practices. Mridani's mother, Giribala, had many spiritual qualities, too. Of these, perhaps her greatest virtue was to be found in her dedicated service to the poor, the miserable, the afflicted, and the dependent. This mother to the poor and unhappy never let anyone go away from her door in disappointment. She was also well educated. Not only did she know her mother tongue, Bengali, and Sanskrit very well but she knew some English and Persian. She was a good poet. Two collections of her poems entitled Nama Saar and Vairagya Sangeet Mala had been published. In addition, Giribala had a very sweet voice. To such

devoted and gifted parents, Mridani was born around the year 1857. Just before Mridani's birth, her mother, Giribala, saw the goddess Mahamaya in a dream. The goddess was handing her a glowing, beautiful baby.

Even as a child, Mridani displayed extraordinary spiritual tendencies. Her favorite form of play was to offer worship to God. She could not bear to see others suffering. A certain sadness and sense of detachment were natural to her. One day while crossing the Ganges by boat, she wondered, Why do women hanker so much for gold and ornaments? Will I not be able to live without them? Will I be unhappy without jewelry? Absorbed in such thoughts, she took off her gold bracelet and cast it into the river. Not only did she not care for jewelry, but she was equally indifferent about the clothes she wore.

In Mridani's neighborhood lived a reputed astrologer and palmist, Chandimama. Once, when looking at Mridani's palm, he is said to have observed, "She will be a great yogini." Chandimama had travelled to numerous places of pilgrimage throughout India. Mridani loved to hear his descriptions of the different places he had visited. He would describe to her which deity is to be found in which holy place, or how difficult it is to climb the Himalayas, or how much natural beauty is to be found in those mountains. She would listen to his stories with rapt attention.

In those days, an Englishwoman, Miss Francis Maria Milman, had started a school for Hindu girls from higher-caste families. For some time Mridani was a student there, and Miss Milman was so impressed with Mridani's talents and qualities that she expressed a desire to take her to England, contrary to custom. Later, however, Mridani had to leave the school because of some religious differences. Mridani had no further opportunity to attend school because during those days the education of women was sorely neglected. Nevertheless, she was able to learn stotras for the different gods and goddesses: the Bhagavad Gita, the Durga Saptashati, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharat. She memorized a great deal from these books.

One notable incident occurred a few days after Mridani's initiation at Nimteghola. A sannyasini from Brindavan had been staying at Mridani's home for a few days. That sannyasini a great devotee of Sri Krishna, had a beautiful Damodar Shila that she used to worship daily. She was very pleased to see young Mridani's intense devotion. One day the sannyasini had a special vision or spiritual experience, though no one knew its exact nature. She secretly called Mridani to her room. With tears streaming down her face, she emotionally described her experience to Mridani and then said. "You are like my daughter in age, but from now on you are my sister. Child, you are very fortunate. This Shila is an awakened deity and means everything to me. The Lord is pleased by your devotion, so I am going to hand Him over to you. May His wish be fulfilled."

One day, shortly afterwards, the sannyasini slipped away from their home without telling anyone. Ever since then, with firm faith and a steady mind, Mridani regularly worshipped the shaligram with the appropriate rituals. This became an inseparable part of her life. That Damodar Shila whose worship was described earlier was this very shaligram that came to Mridani under special circumstances at such a tender age.

CAPTIVE BIRD

MRIDANI WAS NOW getting older, and her parents felt it was time for her to be married. But Mridani had already decided she would marry only someone who was immortal. She was not prepared to accept anyone but the Lord as her master.

Friends and relatives of prospective grooms who came to meet her were always impressed by her beauty and her other excellent qualities, but upon hearing about this determination of hers, none would dare accept her as their daughter-in-law. Regarding her as a devi, they would praise her but could not imagine how anyone could

marry her.

Giribala became perplexed. She was not entirely willing to see Mridani forced to marry against her wishes, but the relatives decided that she must be married. (Poor, misguided relatives!) They wondered. How could such a noble daughter disobey her parents?

Finally, after all family members conferred and discussed the matter at great length, it was decided that Mridani must marry Bholanath Mukhopadhyaya, her elder sister's husband. At that time Mridani was already thirteen, old enough to be married.

Lavish preparations for the wedding were made. Everything was done, except for obtaining Mridani's consent. The wedding day dawned. In the family home was a room used for storing all sorts of old and unwanted things. Taking her Damodar Shila, which she worshipped daily, Mridani ran to that storage room and locked herself inside. Everybody tried to persuade her to come out, but she refused, and finally they had to give up in exhaustion. Mridani had assumed the terrible aspect of the goddess Durga when she is known as Chandi, and she was ready for battle. They had tried everything from threats to sweet words of persuasion. Finally, they induced Giribala to go reason with her daughter. Hearing her mother's pathetic voice, Mridani's heart melted and she opened the door. She fell into her mother's arms and began sobbing, "Mother, I do not want to marry any man!"

Moved by Mridani's commitment, Giribala decided to support her daughter and strengthen her resolve. "My daughter, if you really have detachment. I will not be an obstacle in your path. I offer you at the feet of the Lord. Let Him protect you through life's ups and downs. But for now, it is not possible for you to remain at home. You should leave immediately and take refuge at your aunt's house. Otherwise, these people will come here to threaten you."

Holding closely her Damodar Shila and aided by her mother, Mridani therefore escaped through the window and secretly made her way to her aunt's house. Mean- while, at home panic and confusion

reigned. Where had the girl gone? Nobody knew.

Mridani considered even running away from her new abode, but her aunt's alertness prevented this. After a few days, things had settled down, and she convinced Mridani it was best to return home.

Mridani now became unceasingly absorbed in worship. Although the family allowed her greater freedom to worship, they kept a close watch on her. Soon Mridani became unhappy about continuing her spiritual practices in such a worldly atmosphere. She recalled Chandimama's accounts of many sadhus and sannyasins performing tapasya in the Himalayas. Such memories made her increasingly restless. She became convinced she could not obtain a vision of God unless she performed austerities in the Himalayas, the veritable abode of the gods.

Accordingly, early one morning Mridani stole away from the house. The sleepy doorman allowed her to go, but when he saw that she was not heading toward the Ganges but instead was setting off in a different direction, he became alert and notified her family. Once more there was a great commotion and much running about. The family caught Mridani, brought her home, and this time locked her up and kept a constant watch over her.

Finally, her parents realized it was not possible or desirable to keep her a prisoner in this manner. They decided it would be best to take her often on pilgrimages and to visit sadhus. Hence Mridani was able to visit places like Kalna and Navadwip.

Many months passed thus, but Mridani was still not at peace. She thirsted for something she could not obtain. Where could she get it? How could she get it? And from whom? The answer to all the questions welling up within her came to her intuitively: Only when you are able to give up everything for the sake of your Ishta will you be able to find the path to realization. Mridani made a firm resolve and waited for a suitable opportunity.

Soon the opportunity presented itself. Seeing Mridani's continued

restlessness. Giribala decided to take her on another pilgrimage. But unexpected illness kept her mother home, and Mridani went to Gangasagar with her aunt, uncle, and other relatives. There were almost thirty people in the group.

Everyone felt relieved when they saw how happy and joyful Mridani became once they reached Gangasagar. Then one day, Mridani suddenly disappeared. When her relatives discovered the Damodar Shila also missing, they immediately realized what had happened. Although they did everything possible to find her, they finally had to return to Calcutta in disappointment. Giribala took to her bed in shock.

While the search for her was going on, Mridani hid herself in one spot. As soon as she was sure the group had returned to Calcutta, she disguised herself as a tribal woman and joined a band of sannyasins and sannyasinis. They left Gangasagar and proceeded toward Hardwar. At this time Mridani was eighteen years old.

AUSTERITY IN THE HIMALAYAS

IN THE END, her family was no longer able to keep the bird in captivity!

Mridani, later named Gauri Ma, dressed herself as a sannyosini and began to wander with a group of sadhus and sannyasinis. Most of the time they travelled on foot, sometimes by train. Along the way they visited many shrines and holy places, and, in about three months. they reached Hardwar. From there, they proceeded to Rishikesh.

Rishikesh! The land of tapasya! Nestled at the foot of the majestic Himalayas, an incomparable, holy place of pilgrimage! Now, in this purified atmosphere, there were no longer any obstacles in Gauri Ma's path. To reach the supreme goal of human life, the highest refuge of those drowning in worldly attachments, the supreme

abode of bliss, the Lord of All, she determined to practice austerity ceaselessly, tirelessly. To obtain a vision of God, Gauri Ma cast aside attachments to home and family. She resigned herself to the Lord, for the love of whom she had given up the peaceful and loving shelter of her parents and all the comforts of the world. With devotion, she now began her tapasya at the foot of the Himalayas.

For such a devotee, whose every thought was constantly centered on the Lord and who had no other support in the world, the Lord joyfully assumed complete responsibility, just as He had promised in the Gita. The Lord helped her through many difficult and trying situations in this land of wild animals, lonely forests, strange mountains, unknown paths, dark and terrifying caves. He gave her help both in external situations and from within herself. so she proceeded rapidly along the spiritual path.

For nearly three years Gauri Ma practiced austerity and went on pilgrimages in that part of the country. She spent time at many famous places of pilgrimage: Devaprayag, Jwalamukhi, Amarnath, Jamnotri, and Gangotri. If she liked a temple or place, she would spend some time practicing her sadhana there. She did not stay with any particular group of sannyasins for an extended period of time; neither did she want to nor was it possible.

In the beginning, physical discomforts like hunger, cold, and strain of walking bothered Gauri Ma, but her body soon became accustomed to them. She would earnestly pray to the Lord that her beauty would not prove to be an obstacle in her path. Sometimes she would smear her face with mud, sometimes with ashes. At times she would cut her hair short or disguise herself as a man. Unless it was absolutely necessary, she would not speak to anyone. She would never choose to spend the night at a strange place, but if she happened to find herself in such a situation, she would pass the entire night in Japa, in meditation, and in singing hymns. She always carried the Damodar Shila around her neck. In a shoulder pack she carried the scriptures Durga Saptashati and the Bhagavatam and pictures of Kali and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. She also carried such articles as were necessary for daily use.

Many days passed thus – when Gauri Ma would be absorbed in tapasya all day, not asking for alms or eating anything. Sometimes a stranger would come and leave food by her side. In all situations she would remain unperturbed and always absorbed in tapasya.

ON PILGRIMAGE IN SEARCH OF KRISHNA

THROUGH HER INTENSE, one-pointed sadhana in the spiritual atmosphere of the Himalayas, her love for Krishna ripened! That love now led her to Brindavan, the scene where the drama of Krishna's life had been enacted. Although she wanted to stay there longer, she was unable to, because a distant relative who lived in Brindavan had seen her. He sent a message to Calcutta and made plans to send her back. As soon as she learned of this, she felt obliged to leave Brindavan rather than return to her family.

Once she left Brindavan, she wandered through Rajasthan to Saurashtra. Along the way, she visited several holy places, including Pushkar, Prabhas, Sudampuri, and finally Dwarka, on the east coast in Saurashtra. It happens that the image of Sri Krishna at the Ranchodji Temple in Dwarka is particularly beautiful. Gauri Ma entered this temple just as the priests had finished offering food to the deity. She took her seat next to the shrine and began to do japa, when suddenly she saw a beautiful, dark-skinned child, who had just eaten something, standing within the shrine. He had not washed his hands or his mouth, and he stood there laughing. Gauri Ma wondered if perhaps in this part of the country the priest's children were permitted to eat in the shrine. If so, what a strange custom! Soon she saw the priest wash the child's hands, and then the child sat on the throne in the shrine. At this, Gauri Ma realized what she had seen. Filled with emotion, she immediately stopped her japa and rushed toward the shrine. Overwhelmed by this fleeting vision, she lay at the shrine entrance and began sobbing.

Meanwhile, as the priest was completing the food offering, he noticed the strange behavior of this unknown sannyasini. "What is the matter? What is the matter?" he repeated.

But what and how could she explain anything to this orthodox, tradition-bound man?

Thus, separated from her Krishna, this devotee of His was filled with restless yearning. Day and night she was haunted by just one thought: how could she be with Krishna again? Once again she turned her steps toward Brindavan.

Brindavan! Here, Gauri Ma felt the pangs of separation from Krishna very keenly. Sometimes she would sit at one place from sunrise to sunset absorbed in deep meditation. On such days she would not even pause to eat. On other days she would wander through the different temples of Brindavan and on the banks of the Jamuna searching for her dark-complexioned Krishna with the melodious flute. At other times she would go to a lonely place and sob bitterly: "Oh, Lord, the source of all mercy! For You I have given up my home and all the comforts of this life. Please bless me with a vision that would bring peace to my soul. Oh, merciful one! Please grant that vision!"

But her pathetic pleas proved futile. Gauri Ma resolved to leave once and for all. "I don't want this Brindavan. I will go some place far away. But where shall I go? With no vision of Krishna...It is better to end this burdensome life." One dark night, having decided to end her life. Gauri Ma proceeded toward the sacred pond Lalita. The next morning, some women from Brindavan found Gauri Ma's unconscious body in a fountain near the Lalita Pond. Those good women carried her to their own home. There, with love and devotion, they nursed her back to consciousness. No one knows exactly what happened at the pond. but Gauri Ma had a deep spiritual experience that night. After regaining consciousness, she no longer saw her life as burdensome.

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Gauri Ma, feeling very peaceful now, continued to remain at Brindavan. One day, she met her uncle, Shyam Charan, who took her to his home where he showed her grief-filled letters from her mother, Giribala. After much effort, Shyam Charan finally persuaded Gauri Ma it was best to return to her mother, and he took her to Calcutta.

Unexpectedly meeting her daughter after such a long time, Giribala clasped her to her heart and wept. In a short while, many relatives and neighbors gathered around them. Their hearts overflowed with astonishment, respect, and joy. She could not stay for long in the company of friends and relatives, however, since she was a sannyasini, since she had renounced family and friends to follow a spiritual life. Promising to return quickly, she left for Jagannathpuri.

She then passed a few days in Jagannathpuri, Remuna, Sakshigopal, Bhuvaneshwar, and other holy places. The restlessness in her heart had now been replaced by peace. The loneliness of separation had now been replaced by the joy of fulfillment.

It was prior to this pilgrimage that Gauri Ma had met Balaram Babu's father, Sri Radharaman Bose, who had homes in Calcutta and Brindavan and a temple for Sri Krishna in Brindavan. Gauri Ma next went to visit this temple. She also visited the places associated with Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu – Nadia and Navadwip – and spent many days there in divine joy. She believed, nay, she knew that Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was an incarnation of Lord Krishna. Then she went to Kashi Benares. At Kashi she had the opportunity to meet a famous holy man, Trailanga Swami. Afterwards, she returned to Brindavan.

It was during this visit to Brindavan that Gauri Ma first met the great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, Balaram Babu, the son of Radharaman Bose, and it was there that he first told her about Sri Ramakrishna, urging her to visit him. but to no avail.

Without telling anyone, Gauri Ma suddenly left Brindavan and

proceeded to Rishikesh. Here, an old sadhu in whom she had great faith said to her one day, "Your mother is very ill in Calcutta and anxious to meet you. You should return to Calcutta."

It was her mother who had opened the door of spiritual life for Gauri Ma. Filled with a deep sense of obligation to Giribala, Gauri Ma therefore returned to Calcutta. Giribala's heart flooded with joy on seeing her daughter. As a result, her health soon began to improve. When Gauri Ma was certain her mother was back in good health, she left for Jagannathpuri once again.

During her travels, Gauri Ma faced many trials, sometimes because of her beauty. At Jagannathpuri a woman became greatly devoted to her, but her husband was physically attracted to Gauri Ma and repeatedly asked his wife to invite her to stay in their home. Not suspecting what was on her husband's mind, the wife, with great devotion, requested Gauri Ma to come and stay with them for a few days. Seeing the woman's intense desire, Gauri Ma went with her to her home.

By chance that evening Gauri Ma had an upset stomach. It was her practice to bolt the door from inside before sleeping, and she always kept a knife under her pillow. Since she had awakened several times that night because of her indigestion and since it was almost morning, she felt she wouldn't sleep anymore, so as she lay down, she didn't rebolt the door. Having been awake much of the night, however, she soon dozed off.

Seeing his opportunity, with his mind full of wicked thoughts, the husband softly crept into her room. In the darkness he accidentally stepped on her hair. Immediately, she awakened. At this, he ran out of the room. In a flash Gauri Ma understood everything. Wielding her knife she began running after him, intending to punish severely this animalistic man. Frightened, he bolted out of the house. Assuming the terrible aspect of Chandi, Gauri Ma pursued him, knife in hand. It was now daylight. Seeing them sprinting down the road, a crowd collected. Immediately understanding what had happened, they began to beat up the man. Even so, Gauri Ma came

running up with the knife in her hand. Finally, one woman caught hold of her and calmed her. The people gathered there were astonished and impressed by her bravery and her love for purity.

It was also at Jagannathpuri that Gauri Ma met Harikrishna Mukhopadhyaya, who, like Balaram Bose, wanted her to meet Sri Ramakrishna. When he came to know her well, he said to her. "Mother, I have seen a person at Dakshineswar, a very unusual person, overflowing with love and knowledge, always in samadhi. He is beyond description!" Again, however, Gauri Ma did not see how her steps were being directed.

MASTER AND DISCIPLE

AT THE INVITATION of Balaram Babu, Gauri Ma now left Jagannathpuri and went to Calcutta. Balaram Babu respectfully welcomed her to his home in Bagh Bazaar. In that large house, she was given a convenient room to stay in. This was the year 1882, when Gauri Ma had the vision of the Lord's two lotus feet.

Although Gauri Ma was already restless for God at the young age of ten and although she had met Sri Ramakrishna then, she had no idea who he was or why she was attracted to him. She had even been initiated by him, but she could not imagine the relationship between guru and disciple that would emerge in the future. Now, in 1882 at the age of twenty-five, she had come into contact with Sri Ramakrishna once again in a strange, unimaginable way.

She began to comprehend the deeper spiritual meaning of this relationship. She finally knew who this supreme person – this Sri Ramakrishna – was. This person, with a yearning for whom she had wandered, insane, through the different places of pilgrimage – through forests and deserted places, through valleys and over mountains – this very person, full of love, compassion, and mercy,

was living at the Kali Temple in Dakshineswar on the banks of the holy Ganges River in the form of Sri Ramakrishna. He had been waiting for her all along. "Waiting for me, you are here. You, the Lord of the worlds, the refuge of all in quest of whom devotees ever roam in this world."

To understand all these mysteries, however, Gauri Ma had to perform severe austerities continuously for fifteen years. That is why the Lord had let her go through these experiences: it was absolutely necessary for her to perform that tapasya.

The day after her first visit to Sri Ramakrishna with Balaram Babu, Gauri Ma took an early morning bath in the Ganges and once again went to Dakshineswar, this time by herself.

Standing by the front door. Sri Ramakrishna was very happy to see her. "I was just thinking about you," he said.

Falteringly, Gauri Ma described her life of the preceding fifteen years to Sri Ramakrishna. She recounted her mysterious experience when she had seen his holy feet on the throne of Damodar. She then asked him, "That you are hiding here, at Dakshineswar, so close to Calcutta – could I not have known this earlier, Father?"

But Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna only gave a little knowing smile and replied, "Then how would you have done so much sadhana?"

If we want to have something, we must pay the full price for it. After practicing severe austerity not generally done by women, Gauri Ma met Sri Ramakrishna, who, unknown to her, had been in Dakshineswar all those years. As soon as she saw him again, she realized who he was. Taking shelter at his lotus feet and surrendering everything at those feet, she felt blessed and fulfilled.

Thus, in 1882 at age twenty-five, her divine and mysterious meeting with Sri Ramakrishna brought to an end the first phase of Gauri Ma's life – a phase of extraordinary austerity. As a natural outcome of this sadhana, she began the second phase, which

proved to be equally uncommon. The rest of her life she spent serving women, whom she ever regarded as the veritable manifestations of the Divine Mother.

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S BEHEST

GAURI MA'S CALL to service began at Dakshineswar a few days after her unforeseeable but predestined meeting with Sri Ramakrishna. It was the early hours of morning, at dawn. The whole atmosphere was aglow with the golden rays of the rising sun. Gauri Ma was near the nahabat plucking flowers for worship. As if from nowhere, Sri Ramakrishna appeared. In his left hand was a flowering branch; in his right was a mug filled with water. Suddenly, he began to pour the water. "Look, Gauri," he said, "I am pouring water. You knead the clay."

Her reverie broken, Gauri Ma stared at Sri Ramakrishna in astonishment. "Where is the clay to knead here? It's all full of gravel."

Thakur laughed and replied, "I have meant one thing, but you have understood another! Look at the plight of the women in this country. Their miseries have no end. Enough of tapasya. You must now be ready to serve them and work for their regeneration."

Her reverie was now completely shattered. Was it not so? Scenes she had witnessed in various homes during her wanderings when practicing austerity flashed through her mind on that calm, quiet morning. Sri Ramakrishna's words surprised her and shed new light on her experiences. She had seen ignorance, foolish ideas, irrational beliefs, and the speechless hearts of women crushed under awesome burdens. The pain-filled cries of these women came back to her now through the words of the Master and pierced her motherly heart. It is true, she thought. If a woman cannot understand the plight of women, if a woman will not alleviate the burdens of women, then who will? Half-forgotten memories of what

she had seen came back to Gauri Ma that day, and she received insight into everything. She now saw her experiences from a completely different point of view.

Not letting herself be swept away by emotion, the sannyasini pondered deeply on the problem of how to help women in all its different aspects. Finally, she arrived at a decision. She thought, The work is very good, very lifegiving, and very necessary, but I cannot handle such a responsibility. She approached Sri Ramakrishna and explained to him her inability: "I will not be able to get along with people, I cannot adjust to the hectic activity of such a life. Give me some selected young girls, and I will take them to the Himalayas. There, I will mold their character."

Sri Ramakrishna only shook his hand back and forth and insisted. "No, child. No! You must stay in this town, in this city, and work here. You have done enough sadhana and tapasya. Now, this life, which has been purified by much austerity, must be sacrificed to the service of women, whose lives are full of suffering."

Through his extreme compassion for individual souls, Sri Thakur repeatedly urged Gauri Ma to take up the mission of service to individual souls as manifestations of the Supreme, for she, through rigorous penance, had the realization of "many in one and one in many." Frequently he would tell Gauri Ma, "Now and then, go to Bagh Bazaar to Balaram Bose's house. There, you will come into contact with the women of Calcutta. If you tell them about God, devotion will definitely be awakened in them."

Gauri Ma therefore would often go to Balaram Babu's house and spend a day or two there, where she would try to awaken spiritual thoughts in women.

One day, when Sri Ramakrishna returned from the house of Jadu Mallick, he said to Gauri Ma. "The women of Jadu Mallick's house are eager to see you. You should visit them."

Gauri Ma complained, "You are always like this! Why do you praise

me to people?"

It is true that Sri Ramakrishna would often say in everyone's presence, "Gauri Ma is the greatest tapasvini. She is very fortunate and full of holiness." In a serious tone he would add, "Gauri is that gopi who has received the grace of the Lord through many births. She is a gopi from Brindavan."

On hearing Gauri Ma's complaint that day, Sri Ramakrishna only smiled and said, "So you are not going to Jadu Mallick's house?"

In this way, through the skillful efforts of a wondrous guru, without her even realizing it, there awakened in Gauri Ma a desire to serve humanity. Although the divine inspiration was there, however, some time was to pass before her organizing work would take definite shape.

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While Gauri Ma was living at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna gave her the other robes of a sannyasini and made arrangements for the accompanying rituals. Sri Ramakrishna himself offered a bilva leaf into the homa fire. Prior to this, Gauri Ma had worn a sannyasini's robes as an external sign of renunciation, but she had not taken any formal vows. After this ritual, he gave her a new name – Gauriananda. Sri Ramakrishna usually called her Gauri or Gaurdasi, and some people called her Gaurma. But Gauri Ma was the name by which she was generally known.

Sri Thakur one day asked his favorite disciple, "Gauri, tell me, do you know who I am?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Gauri Ma replied, "You are none other! You are He!" Then she quoted a line from the Bhagavatam: "These other incarnations are partial manifestations of the Supreme Purusha, whereas Krishna is the Lord Himself."

THE MAHASAMADHI OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

GAURI MA THUS PASSED her days in the blessed company of Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. She was filled with divine joy and a sense of fulfillment. Her mood for intense tapasya had subsided, although she always felt great joy in it. Tapasya was a part of her nature. Even in old age, she would perform a lot of japa daily. If she happened to be distracted by other activities during the day, she would do japa in the middle of the night.

During one of her earlier stays in Brindavan, a little boy had seen her intense tapasya and had said to her, "Oh. Mother, why do you practice sadhana all day long? Just wake up in the morning and say once 'Radheshyam.' That is enough." With reference to this she used to say, "It is true. If you say it once with all your mind and heart, then it is enough. But to be able to do that, we need to prepare the mind with the practice of austerity."

Gauri Ma now began to feel a strong desire to return to Brindavan and practice austerity, but at the same time she did not want to leave the company of Sri Ramakrishna. She thought, Sri Ramakrishna is everything. What can I gain by going far away?

Seeing her dilemma. Sri Ramakrishna himself suggested that she go to Brindavan, so Gauri Ma went there and became absorbed in tapasya.

Meanwhile in Calcutta, unknown to Gauri Ma, Sri Ramakrishna was getting ready to leave the body. On August 16, 1886, he brought his drama to an end. His wife, Holy Mother Sarada Devi, was about to remove the bangles from her arms, as was the custom those days. When Sri Ramakrishna appeared before her and stopped her, saying, "Am I dead, that you are taking on the symbols of a widow? I have just gone from one room to another. Ask Gauri: she knows the scriptures."

At Brindavan, Gauri Ma came to know about the mahasamadhi of Sri Ramakrishna only after a long time. Her grief and sorrow were

intense. What is the use of living any longer? she thought. With the intention of ending her life, she went to the Bhrigu Pond. Just then Sri Ramakrishna appeared before her and sternly reproached her: "What? Are you going to die?" Gauri Ma stopped in astonishment. Realizing that her life's mission was still unfinished, she returned home from the pond.

After the passing of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, along with a number of devotees, went on a year's pilgrimage. Reaching Brindavan, she met with Gauri Ma and told her about her vision of Sri Ramakrishna and about how he had asked her not to follow the customary rituals for widows.

When Gauri Ma, who was well versed in the Vaishnava scriptures, heard this account, she quoted the scriptures and said, "Sri Ramakrishna is eternal, and you are Lakshmi herself. If you renounce the auspicious signs of a woman whose husband is still living, it will be very inauspicious for the world."

Holy Mother told Gauri Ma that toward the end, Sri Ramakrishna had wanted to see her. He had even sent her a message, which did not reach her. Holy Mother added, "Thakur has said that your life must be spent in the service of women, who are, in truth, the living images of the Divine Mother."

PILGRIMAGE AND SOLACE

KNOWING THAT SHE would not see Sri Ramakrishna in the body anymore or hear his nectar-filled voice, Gauri Ma was grief stricken. Drawn to the Himalayas, she left Brindavan and once more went on pilgrimage, visiting Jamnotri, Uttar Kashi, Gangotri, Gomukhi, and Badrikedar. At Uttar Kashi there is an ancient temple dedicated to Vishveshwara. Sri Jaladhar Sen saw her at that temple. Describing the event, Sri Sen said, "The road to Uttar Kashi is formidable, treacherous, and full of dangers. At some places there is no visible path. One has to make one's way over rocks and through ravines. If

perchance a person's foot should slip, then he will fall through dark, deep valleys to certain death. There was no end to my astonishment when I saw a woman alone in this dangerous and lonely place. At that time Gauri Ma was singing hymns with intense concentration. She looked the embodiment of intense sadhana, glowing with purity – a statue of incomparable inner beauty."

After completing this pilgrimage to the Himalayas, Gauri Ma returned to Calcutta, still grieving over the physical absence of her Master. To console her mind, Gauri Ma went to Kalighat, the long-renowned Kali Temple of Calcutta. Seeing the image of the Divine Mother, she began to cry. Suddenly, she saw Sri Ramakrishna appear in the image of the Divine Mother. He raised his right hand and gently touched her head, thus consoling his spiritual daughter.

During this visit to Calcutta, in which she was staying at Balaram Bose's home, Gauri Ma fell seriously ill. When she was partly recovered, her mother brought her home, where she stayed until she was completely well. Being a true sannyasini, however, Gauri Ma could not be happy remaining with family and relatives. Driven by her desire for the Lord, as soon as she was able to move around, she left the house without telling anyone and proceeded toward the holy town of Rameshwar.

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This time she went south – south of the Narmada River – to that part of the country made fertile by the Godavari, Krishna, and Kaveri rivers. It was truly a land of temples distinctive in style! There were many different places of pilgrimage and many different temples – but everywhere the same truth: Satchidananda was worshipped through different names and forms. Experiencing this all-encompassing, noble truth, Gauri Ma travelled at will throughout South India. On the way she visited Vidyanagar, Madura, Sri Rangakshetra, Pakshitirtha, Shivakanchi, Vishnukanchi, and other places. Finally, she reached Rameshwar. She felt great joy at worshipping Lord Rameshwar with the Ganges water that, despite many difficulties, she had brought all the way from Gangotri, the

origin of the Ganges.

Except for the temple priests, nobody was allowed to enter the inner sanctum sanctorum of the temple at Rameshwar. Attracted by her unusual personality, however, the Brahmin priest at the temple, with respect and joy, permitted her to enter the inner shrine and personally offer worship to Shiva.

After seeing Rameshwar, Gauri Ma went to Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of India – to a temple where the holy feet of Parvati are constantly washed by the waves of the ocean. This was the temple of that very Parvati who is always immersed in meditation on Shiva! Attracted by the solitude of the place and devoted to the worship of Parvati, Gauri Ma spent several days there. During that time she read the Durga Saptashati, and her mind remained ever absorbed in thoughts of the Divine Mother.

Gauri Ma visited several other holy places, as well. At the time, Sri Ramakrishna's disciple Swami Vivekananda, now a monk, was also travelling through India. (This was before his first visit to the West.) At some places they met unexpectedly. Or Gauri Ma would hear that a sannyasin of royal appearance, very regal and eloquent, had visited there just a few days before. Other times Swami Vivekananda would hear that a sannyosini, glowing with devotion, had been there a few days earlier. Each realized who the person being praised was.

Gauri Ma travelled through the many holy places of Central India, after having been on her first long pilgrimage to South India. Several years later, after she had begun her work serving women in accordance with the teachings and instructions of Sri Ramakrishna, Gauri Ma went on a second tour of the South. On this second visit, she went to Sholapur as a guest of Sri Haripada and Srimati Indumati Mitra, disciples of Swami Vivekananda. From there she went to Pandharpur, Poona, Belgaum, and Bombay. At Poona she visited a girls' high school and a home for widows that had been founded by Professor Karve, where she had discussions with Professor Karve about the lives of widows in India. During the same

trip Gauri Ma met and had several discussions with the renowned and highly respected Lady Ramabai Ranade. It should come as no surprise that she also met the famous political leader Lokmanya Tilak and discussed the ancient political heritage of the Hindus with him.

HOW TO EASE THE SUFFERING OF WOMEN

FOLLOWING HER FIRST pilgrimage to South India, which was almost ten years after Sri Ramakrishna had left the body, Gauri Ma returned to Calcutta. She recognized that Sri Ramakrishna's instructions to her needed to take more definite shape.

With his divine vision, Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna had seen that the prime cause of the decadence in Hindu society at that time was the lamentable situation of women – crushed by ignorance, full of foolish ideas and irrational beliefs, deprived of their rightful status and position, with no faith and confidence in themselves. Furthermore, without education based on spiritual foundations, the advancement of women was impossible, and without such an uplift, the steady and long-term progress of India was impossible.

Thus it was that for the reformation of his age, Sri Ramakrishna brought with him to this imperfect world the Divine Power in the form of Sri Sarada Devi. He also brought Gauri Ma and other women among his closest disciples. And that is why he was eager to direct Gauri Ma to use her knowledge, strength, and abilities in the service of women. Seeing that restless urge in Gauri Ma so many years earlier had made him sow the seeds of service to the veritable living forms of the Divine Mother in the heart of his dearest disciple. For Gauri Ma, those seeds were now beginning to sprout.

A new chapter was now beginning in Gauri Ma's life – she who had been perfected by the practice of tremendous austerity. Her many travels had brought her into direct contact with the lives of countless women of her day. She had realized that without proper

education, women could not be ideal housewives, they could not train or discipline their children well, and, above all. they could not have peace and happiness in their lives. It was not just a matter of physical strength, for without mental and spiritual strength they would have to face a lot of misery for the most minor of reasons. Their lives were meaningless and without use.

Being a woman herself, she could fully understand the Intense pain in the lives of women. While earlier she had observed many pitiable incidents with a detached mind, now those same incidents filled her with pain and compassion. She felt an intense desire to sacrifice her life to the service of women, living images of the Divine Mother.

But how could she start this great work without workers, money, or support from anybody? This thought at first made her restless, but finally, she left everything in the hands of the Lord and waited for Him to show her the way. Gauri Ma knew that if there was a task Sri Ramakrishna wanted her to do, it would not remain long unfulfilled.

SRI SARADESHWARI ASHRAM

ONE DAY DURING her wanderings Gauri Ma stopped at Hrishahar on the banks of the Ganges River. At this beautiful place, the birthplace of the renowned poet Ramprasad, she became absorbed in deep meditation. In a meditative mood she began chanting the Durga Saptashati.

Hearing her melodious and devotional chant, many people gathered around her. As the chant ended, a prominent boatman named Suchiram came forward to salute her, and he politely asked who she was. When he learned that she liked Hrishahar, he said to her, "Mother, if you like the Ganges here, then you should go to Kapaleshwar near Barrackpur. I have no doubt you will like that place even more."

Pleased by the simple, guileless nature of the boatman, Gauri Ma

went to Kapaleshwar. Because she liked it very much, Suchiram and his friends urged her to stay there. She couldn't resist their sincere, heartfelt request, so she decided to stay.

For a nun, however, there should be a convent. In accordance with the wonderful will of the Lord, slowly things began to take shape. First, two bighas of land were purchased. Then, with the permission and blessings of Holy Mother and with the help of Suchiram and others, Gauri Ma established the Sri Saradeshwari Ashram in 1895 on the banks of the Ganges River at Barrackpur.

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In the beginning Saradeshwari Ashram was very small. But gradually, with the help and encouragement of the local people and devotees from Calcutta, it began to expand in every possible way. Slowly, new sisters began to arrive, one after another. Soon there was a total of about twenty-five women – some unmarried, some separated, and some widowed – who began to dwell in the village atmosphere of that holy cottage. All the ashram residents would arise early for meditation. Then, after a period of reading scriptures, they would begin the daily housework. In the afternoon, classes were held under verandahs and nearby trees. At that time, girls would come from the village to be taught by Gauri Ma herself. To the older women she gave scriptural discourses, and she played with the little ones.

In the early years the sisters naturally had to face difficult times and privations. Even so, they found joy, peace, and satisfaction in living a convent life. Hardships did not seem like hardships to any of the ashram's residents. With Gauri Ma's unstinting efforts, the ideals of ancient India began to take shape in that pure and peaceful atmosphere. Seeing this, many people began to come forward and lend a helping hand in this great task.

A special feature of this institution designed mainly to serve women was the fact that from the beginning most of the sympathy, help, and financial support came from women. In fact, because of their

sympathy and support, this institution became renowned.

Several of Sri Ramakrishna's dearest disciples – Vivekananda, Brahmananda, and Shivananda – came to visit the ashram. When Swami Vivekananda saw the convent, he felt inspired and had long discussions with Gauri Ma about its future functions. Hearing of Gauri Ma's plans and ideas for women's education, he was filled with joy. He said, 'The education should be such that, once more, we will see women like Gargis, Maitreyis, and Arundhati in this land. I have great hope that women greater than these will come forth from this place.'

In 1900 in Calcutta – five years after Saradeshwari Ashram had been founded – there was a large gathering for a conference on women, Matrisabha Adhibeshan, which many women attended. Gauri Ma spoke to the audience about the ideals of Hindu women, the goals of her ashram, and the way women could help work toward these goals. The sannyasini's glowing words, vast knowledge of the scriptures, high goals and ideals, and natural presentation deeply impressed the women at the conference. She called for self-sacrifice in the service of women and thus tried to awaken enthusiasm in the women present. Her speech established Gauri Ma as a great orator.

Ever engaged in spreading her ideas, managing the ashram, and performing other such duties, Gauri Ma put her whole heart and soul into molding the lives of the women with whom she came in contact, for she truly saw them as living emblems of the Divine Mother.

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At the Panchavati in the Barrackpur ashram one evening at the peaceful hour of dusk, Gauri Ma caught hold of the branch of a nearby tree and softly began singing a song she had composed:

Your lotus feet – Oh, Goddess! –

are the eternal source of bliss,

devoid of fear. Filled with joy,

I roam happily in the world

and relax in your soothing embrace.

My lips sip the divine milk at your bosom.

I stare at your face in rapture.

As she sang, tears rolled incessantly from her eyes. Twilight gradually faded, and the darkness became dense as night advanced. The stars twinkled in the night. There was the gentle swishing of the Ganges brushing the nearby shore....In that heavenly calm in the Panchavati ashram, Sri Ramakrishna's beloved Gauri stood still in profoundly deep samadhi.

The ashram residents had never before seen Gauri Ma in this state. They did not dare speak to her or touch her. The long night passed thus.

Gradually, the pure light of dawn spread over the landscape – and Gauri Ma was still in that high state. Early in the morning, as the villagers returned from their bath in the Ganges and came to worship Shiva at the Panchavati, they were amazed to see Gauri Ma standing like a goddess, completely unaware of the outer world: speechless, motionless, a divine glow on her face! The news spread and many people came to see her....Only gradually did she return to outer consciousness.

From the many such glorious incidents impelled by and indicative of Gauri Ma's divine inner life, it is clear that her disinterested zeal and incessant activity – undertaken at the request of and inspired by Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna – were infused with spiritual conviction. Her work truly was service offered at the feet of the Divine Mother, not springing from the secular motivations that so often prompt the

social, political, and humanitarian deeds of men and women, known or unknown.

EARLY DAYS IN CALCUTTA

THE ASHRAM at Barrackpur was thriving, but Gauri Ma soon realized that without close contact with the people of Calcutta, the work there would not spread. Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna had once counseled her, "No, child. No! This work must be done in the city." Gauri Ma, whose natural inclinations were to practice austerity in lonely places, had tried to do the work away from the commotion of the city, but how could the words of the Lord prove erroneous?

Finally, in 1911, a house was rented at Goyabagan Lane, and the whole Saradeshwari Ashram moved to Calcutta. At a public meeting in Calcutta. Gauri Ma described the goals and the work of the ashram. She called upon those worshippers of the Mother gathered there who felt for the sufferings of women to come forward and help, declaring that their lives would be fulfilled by self-sacrifice in the service of women. Many sympathetic men and women who heard Gauri Ma's sincere call came forward to help in the work she had begun.

The work of the ashram and school continued to make steady progress. Gauri Ma organized an executive committee composed of a few householder devotee men and women, so that the progress and expansion of the work could proceed smoothly.

At this time, there were about twelve single or widowed women living at the ashram; they taught about sixty students, who attended classes regularly. In time, they purchased a carriage for the school. Gauri Ma personally worked to collect money, food, and clothes for the ashram. Many of her former students taught at the school.

One gentleman who had seen Gauri Ma's work at that time and who

himself had worked with her described her unstinting devotion: 'The story of those days is very moving and stands out as a lesson to us. Finding students for the school, interviewing women who came to join the ashram and selecting the capable ones from among them, running the ashram smoothly amid the flurry of the many visitors who came, and, above all, worrying about the finances of the ashram – all these tasks could be successfully handled only by someone like Gauri Ma, who never lost hope and always remained calm. There were many obstacles and difficulties, scarcities and hardships. Gauri Ma went through them all with her head held high. Not for a moment did she deviate from her goal, nor was she ever afraid. So often we are overpowered by disappointment, but we never heard Gauri Ma speak ill of anybody or ever glance backward. One could always see manifest in her the glow of a great goal, and even more so, a great inner strength.'

The financial position of the ashram in the early years in Calcutta was not sound. Some days there was no food for the women at the ashram, so Gauri Ma would have to go out and ask for alms. Trials and tribulations, sufferings and hardships are borne by people who choose to do noble work for a great cause in all times and all places. All such difficulties this sannyasini and disciple of Sri Ramakrishna had to bear. The very blood from the hearts of great people must be shed so that noble work may blossom and flourish. Such is the universal law.

The bittersweet experiences during those difficult days were often softened by touching experiences. One day, Gauri Ma presented herself at the home of a rich gentleman whom she did not know. The lady of the house had heard about Gauri Ma but had never met her. She inquired about the reason for her visit. "I am a sannyasini, Mother. Please give me some alms," Gauri Ma replied. "There are many girls whom I have to feed. and today there is no food in the house. That is why I am asking for alms."

The wife was touched, so she gave her some legumes and vegetables. Gauri Ma tied the ingredients in a cloth and left. But the housewife found the whole incident strange. This woman did not

appear to be an ordinary beggar. (It is true – can we ever cover fire with a cloth?) Her curiosity aroused, the wife sent a young boy to follow the sannyasini to find out who she was.

Gauri Ma took the bundle of food and started off on foot for the ashram. Serendipitously, the principal of the Sanskrit College and a great scholar, Dr. Satish Chandra Vidyabhushan. happened to pass that way in his carriage. Seeing Gauri Ma, he stopped immediately, stepped down, saluted her by touching her feet, signifying respect, and took her to the ashram in his carriage.

Meanwhile, the young boy had secretly climbed onto the rear of the carriage, and thus he arrived at the ashram. He observed everything carefully then returned to his mistress, giving her a detailed account of all he had seen. On learning Gauri Ma's identity, the housewife felt deeply ashamed for having treated her as an ordinary beggar. Not long afterwards, she went to see Gauri Ma. She saluted her, saying, "Mother, that day I did not recognize you. I have come to ask your forgiveness. Please forgive this ignorant and foolish woman." After that, the good lady and her family frequently helped the ashram.

Gradually, the number of residents of Saradeshwari Ashram increased to twenty-five, the number of students to seventy. In addition to receiving the usual education. students were taught both Sanskrit and English. Besides this, during the early days at Barrackpur, Gauri Ma had introduced spinning and weaving. In Calcutta she made arrangements for the teaching of other types of handicrafts as well.

ESTABLISHING A PERMANENT FOUNDATION

AS THE ASHRAM EXPANDED, it frequently moved to new locations, but it was not possible to extend the work in rented quarters as much as Gauri Ma would have liked. The foundations of the institution were not stable, and each month there was the problem

of rent. Well-wishers became keenly aware of the necessity for Saradeshwari Ashram to have its own premises. Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi encouraged Gauri Ma to consider purchasing land. Gauri Ma used to say, "If Mother is worrying about the ashram, then what need is there for me to worry?"

Gradually, efforts were made to acquire land, but the ashram had no arrangements for money. Depending entirely on Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna. Gauri Ma prepared herself to shoulder this task. After visiting many prospective locations, she finally selected a spot on Maharani Hemanta Kumari Street in Shyambazaar. Partly on her own responsibility and partly with the help of many kind people, she purchased this land for a total of 12,000 rupees. At Gauri Ma's entreaties, Holy Mother visited the ashram and was very pleased. "There will be a good ashram in this place, and the women will be very happy here," she said. Possessing the treasure of Mother's blessings, Gauri Ma's enthusiasm multiplied a hundredfold.

Once the land was purchased, Gauri Ma had to erect a building that was useful and suitable for her plans. But an enormous sum of money was required. Where would it come from? Gauri Ma decided to beg from house to house to raise money, but how could the work be completed in this way? Until a large sum of money materialized, it was not possible even to start the actual construction of the building.

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While the convent was still at the rented house, one evening a gentle and unassuming woman came to visit the place. Her dress was simple – no glamour or ostentation of any kind – and she attracted all the residents by her simple and loving behavior. Entering the ashram, she said, "Holy Mother has sent me here. She said that a talk with Gauri Ma would give me peace of mind." Nobody knows exactly what transpired between her and Gauri Ma on that first visit, but given the events that subsequently transpired, one might assume she found what she was looking for.

At the time of leave-taking, one of the ashram women said to the visitor, "We are very happy to meet you. Please write a letter now and then."

"That would be my good fortune," she replied, agreeing to write.

"But what is your address?" asked the resident.

The devotee humbly replied, "Sarojbala Devi, Gauripur. Assam. If you write just that, I will receive the letter."

The resident was puzzled. "Who are you?" she asked in confusion.

This unassuming and kindly devotee was none other than the Maharani of Gauripur, a princely state in Assam.

While Gauri Ma was going from door to door to raise money for the construction of the ashram building, there arrived one day a check for 10,000 rupees addressed to her and signed by Sarojbala Devi, the Maharani of Gauripur. Seeing this play of the Lord, everybody's hearts overflowed with unbounded enthusiasm. Thus, in 1924 on an auspicious day, the foundation stone of the ashram was laid. It is on this same site that Sri Saradeshwari Ashram is still situated.

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Despite her advancing age, Gauri Ma had to work extremely hard to raise funds for the ashram's construction. There were many days when she would leave the ashram soon after morning worship to seek funds by begging and return late in the evening, having had nothing to eat or drink all day. Some people would give financial help, some would offer only sympathy, while still others would not even do that. Whether she received nectar or poison, Gauri Ma accepted everything cheerfully, gladly wandering from door to door for days without end in the service of women.

Parivrajikacharya Srimat Swami Bholananda Giri had seen Gauri Ma practice intense austerity in the Himalayas and had also seen her

hard life during those days. One day he exclaimed to one of her devotees. The intense and difficult spiritual austerities that she has practiced – you cannot understand them while sitting in this house in Calcutta. Don't ever think that she is an ordinary person."

Once, when the famed scientist Profulla Chandra Ray visited Saradeshwari Ashram, one of the residents presented him with a hand-spun and handwoven coat that had been made there. Professor Ray was surprised to see and hear that Gauri Ma had encouraged handloom fabrics long before the Swadeshi Movement had begun. (This was a political movement initiated by Mahatma Gandhi to boycott foreign goods.)

One day a well-known solicitor and a respected high court judge were discussing Gauri Ma's ashram. "For a woman," said the solicitor, "the work done by Gauri Ma is truly amazing. When she first told me about the land she had purchased. I would never have believed that one day there would be such an ashram on that land."

At this the judge remarked, "Why do you say 'for a woman'? How many men are there who could do this work by themselves?"

The sannyasini's ideals and principles were often severely tested. She proved a hundred percent true to her ideals each time, and because of this, her work continued to flourish.

As a way to raise funds for the building construction, a very large public meeting was held at an institute at Calcutta University. At the gathering one gentleman announced he intended to ask for 50,000 rupees from a rich gentleman he knew. When Gauri Ma was told about it, she did not immediately agree to accept this offer of money; she wanted to know more about the donor. When she learned more about him, she only said, "That kind of money! Why 50,000? Even if it were 500,000, I would not touch it."

Later, it again happened that a wealthy person expressed a desire to donate several thousand rupees in memory of his father. For some unknown reason, Gauri Ma again felt doubtful about the

donation, so she asked that inquiries be made about the donor. It turned out that he had cheated his widowed sister-in-law and acquired all her wealth. On hearing this, Gauri Ma said, "I will not accept money from a swindler. You can give him this message from me: Whatever money he was planning to donate to the ashram, he should return to his widowed sister-in-law, for only in such an act will there be service to the ashram, and he too will be benefited."

Sri Sharat Chandra Bose, the older brother of the renowned patriot Subhas Chandra Bose, once expressed a desire to see Gauri Ma. When a well-wisher learned of his desire, he came to Gauri Ma and said, "Sharat Babu is very generous: each month he donates a substantial sum of money to the needy. If you ask him to help the ashram, he will definitely do so. When you meet him, don't forget to mention it."

At an appointed time, Sharat Babu came to Saradeshwari Ashram with his wife and his mother. As soon as Gauri Ma heard they had arrived, she went out to meet them and immediately said, "Baba, this old mother of yours" (referring to herself) "has to look after many orphaned women. You will have to accept the responsibility for two such women."

Without a moment's hesitation, Sharat Babu agreed to the request of this sannyasini who had vowed to serve others. He merely asked a devotee of the ashram, "What would be the cost of maintaining two women at the ashram?"

"Thirty rupees a month." was the reply.

After that Sharat Babu had a long conversation about Sri Ramakrishna with Gauri Ma. When Sharat Babu had departed, one of the devotees came to Gauri Ma and asked. "Mother, right away you asked him about money! What must he have thought?"

Gauri Ma replied in her straightforward way, "What must he have thought? He must have thought that this lady does not know how to talk diplomatically." For many years to come, not only did Sharat

Babu regularly send thirty rupees a month to the ashram, but he also tried to get others to help as much as possible.

To raise funds, Gauri Ma had to visit many people. At such times, if she were asked to talk about spiritual things, she would get so carried away by the joy of such conversation that she would completely forget about the ashram and its problems. On one such occasion, a discussion began about God, and Gauri Ma told the group about the pure life of Sri Ramakrishna. Somebody from the audience asked, "What is the essence of the Gita?"

In reply she quoted a verse from the Gita and followed it up by an appropriate explanation. "'Abandon everything else and surrender yourself to me.' That is the essence and the ultimate message of the Gita." While she was talking of complete surrender and self-sacrifice, streams of tears flowed from the eyes of this scholar.

All those present were deeply moved by her devotion and knowledge. One man could not control himself. Overcome with emotion, his voice trembled as he declared, "How blessed is this day' We have had the good fortune to hear about such great things. We are truly blessed."

On another occasion, when a judge was having a discussion with Gauri Ma, the topic soon turned to devotion and spiritual experiences. The judge asked her, "Can we truly see the Lord?"

Gauri Ma replied, "Yes, Sir, we can truly see the Lord. But to see him we need to practice sadhana, austerity. A person may try to send a letter without postage, but how can it reach its destination? If you love Him with all your heart, you will be able to see Him face to face."

Those who were fortunate enough actually to see Gauri Ma working could not help but notice her deep interest in the management and financial affairs of the ashram. At the very next moment, however, she would talk about spiritual matters and God. At such times, the great, well-founded, rapidly growing work would be forgotten. Her

mind, which was always on a higher plane – in the realm of the Lord – was completely detached from the flurry of worldly activity, just as a drop of water on the lotus leaf remains unattached to the lotus. To those who had served her closely, this fact was daily manifest.

PERFORMING THE WORK OF THE LORD

ABOUT A YEAR after the laying of the foundation stone, the four-story ashram building was completed. The temple was also finished and occupied the fourth floor. The ashram was formally opened in December 1925, when, with the performance of some auspicious rituals, the shrine was dedicated.

Once Saradeshwari Ashram was formally established in its own building, the work began to grow rapidly. Quickly the number of residents grew to fifty and the number of students to three hundred. Around this time a motor bus was also purchased for their transportation.

To obtain peace of mind, many spiritually inclined persons would come to hear the nectar-like words of Gauri Ma. Both spiritual seekers and people bowed down by sorrow and suffering would listen to her inspiring words and find new life, joy, and strength. Nobody ever left without receiving her teachings and her blessings. Gauri Ma unstintingly gave spiritual advice to men and women, young and old – all according to their capacity.

There was one thing she told everyone; "Whether you are a householder or a sannyasin, the important thing is the mind. If your mind is pure, everything else is pure. Only if the mind is pure can we receive the grace of the Lord. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'With a pure body and mind, if you pray sincerely, your prayers are answered.' If you do not pray and do not receive His grace, human life becomes a harsh and sorrowful burden. In all your work, always remember Him. Pray to Him sincerely – that you may have pure devotion for His lotus feet."

With Sri Ramakrishna's blessings and in accordance with his wishes, Gauri Ma became a glorious channel through which the great work of the ashram took shape. Though she was busy with a variety of duties, since the ultimate responsibility for the ashram was hers, she never failed to pay attention to the smaller, less important details. Not only that, if she had time, she would do these tasks herself. She looked upon the ashram from a completely spiritual point of view, seeing every task as work for Sri Ramakrishna. It was all the Lord's work. In her eyes there was no distinction between the little jobs and the important jobs.

She not only took care of the people at the ashram, for example, but she also took care of the animals there – the cows and the horses. She personally made sure they were fed at the proper time and never gave them leftover food from people's plates. Once, when some of the cows were no longer able to give milk, somebody suggested they get rid of them. To that, Gauri Ma replied, "Next you will suggest that a person should get rid of his disabled mother! For so many years these cows have served the Lord by giving milk. You have had a lot of their milk, too. Now, as long as they live, they will get their 'pension.'" Needless to say, those cows were looked after very well.

No matter how bothersome or difficult the ashram work was, Gauri Ma was never worried or afraid. Instead, if other people got upset, she would calm them down by saying, "If ten people have to do something together, it is never without problems. There are always many obstacles in doing good works. That is how the Lord tests his people. Good and bad experiences, often unwanted and disliked, are there in a man's life to teach him a lesson and make him wise."

In addition to running the convent, Gauri Ma often had other irksome things to take care of. Perhaps a student who failed an exam was upset at not being promoted; perhaps somebody who wanted to join the ashram could not be admitted; or perhaps it was not possible to bend some of the school rules just to oblige someone. Many times she had to endure a great deal from people for trivial reasons. Sometimes sincere people who were unable to

participate in the working of the convent would be disappointed. Other times people who wished to interfere in the work of the ashram but were unable to do so would get upset. With regard to such thoughtless people. Gauri Ma always had one thing to say: "When the self-interest of people is hurt, they make unhappy faces. One has to do one's work with discrimination and care, then let others say what they will."

Her pure-mindedness gave her a firm faith in her ideals, about which she was sometimes outspoken, which annoyed certain people. Still, she never condoned anything unjustifiable from anybody. All through her life, she never agreed to anything that compromised her ideals. Not allowing herself to be victimized by unjust requests or well-meaning advice, she stayed firmly on her chosen path, relying on her sense of discrimination. People always felt reassured by her farsightedness when they saw her acting firmly and with conviction on whatever she felt was right. This steadfastness remained with her, a secure gift throughout her life. Her sense of justice, her self-confidence, and her total surrender at the feet of the Lord – these qualities enabled her to overcome all types of obstacles and made her successful in the work of the Lord that she had accepted. Many times people heard her say, "He who has assigned this work to me will take care of it. If there are obstacles along the way, they do not bother me, and if there is praise, it is not because of any skill on the doer's part."

SELFLESSNESS AND COMPASSION

GAURI MA'S MIND was without a trace of ego. She always disliked honor and fame and was completely satisfied when people praised Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. A few days before the sisters moved into the new convent, Gauri Ma had gone to check on the work. As she alighted from the carriage and turned toward the building, she saw near the door a white marble stone with the following words carved on it; "Established by the sannyasini Gauri Ma." As soon as she saw the inscription, she stepped back and

shouted in annoyance, "Why is my name there?"

"What is it, Mother? What is wrong here?"

"Is this ashram mine? It is Mother's, so why should my name be here?" roared Gauri Ma. She was so upset she didn't enter the building but instead turned back to the carriage.

One man, greatly concerned, rushed to hold the door of the carriage, saying, "Holy Mother's name is already engraved here in large letters. Since you established the ashram, your name is carved in small letters."

"There was no need to put my name even in small letters. Holy Mother's name is there. That is enough." replied Gauri Ma.

If she was honored with name, fame, or prestige, she reacted negatively. She would be dissatisfied. She once said, "Name and fame are like the excreta of pigs. Do your work with a detached attitude. You must treat name and fame like garbage. When you go to serve others, if you find lurking in the corner of your heart any desire for praise or prestige, it is like committing suicide in your spiritual life." The incidents in Gauri Ma's life demonstrate that she deeply believed all her work and all her success were just reflections of the Lord's glory. She herself was nothing; the Lord was everything. She was only an instrument in His Hands.

The events of Gauri Ma's life also demonstrate her compassion. Even as a child, she could not bear to see others suffering or in pain. Endangering her own life, she would rush to help them. One day she took some of her girls from the ashram to bathe in the Ganges. As they reached the banks of the river, they heard shouts from a crowd of people. Glancing at the river, she spied a woman caught by the current. The woman surfaced and then sank again under the water. Gauri Ma immediately saw the danger. She scornfully addressed the men, "There is a person drowning, yet all of you men are standing here and watching the show." Without a moment's hesitation, she shouted, "Jai Mother Kali," and threw

herself into the river – only she had forgotten that she didn't know how to swim!

Seeing this, the girls from the ashram began to call out, "Grandma! Grandma! Don't go any further! You will drown!"

Realizing that Gauri Ma could not swim out far enough to save the drowning woman, a few people from the crowd finally jumped in and saved her. When the woman regained consciousness, they learned that while bathing in the river she had had a fit and had accidentally fallen into the deeper water. Gauri Ma returned the woman to her home in the ashram carriage. She advised the woman's family that it was unwise and unsafe to allow someone prone to seizures to go to the river unaccompanied, warning them to be more careful in the future.

Late one night around ten o'clock, Gauri Ma was recounting stories from the Puranas to the ashram women. Just then they heard a woman crying from a house nearby. With the thought that somebody was in trouble and needed help, Gauri Ma immediately got up. Fearing it was unsafe, the residents tried to convince her not to go to a stranger's house at this hour of the night and get involved in domestic problems. But Gauri Ma replied, "When women outside the ashram are in difficulty, I have to help them, too." So saying, she took a stick in her hand and set off. The residents could only sit and await her return.

Three hours later, they saw Gauri Ma emerge from the neighboring house holding the hand of a woman who was keeping her face covered with her sari. Gauri Ma was incessantly admonishing a man who was following them. Whatever was the matter, the residents were relieved to see her. Instead of returning to the convent, however, she went off with the two people in another direction.

Gauri Ma discovered that it was a case of a family harassing their daughter-in-law. At that late hour, taking the help of the police, Gauri Ma returned the girl to the home of her parents. Later, the in-laws negotiated through Gauri Ma, begged forgiveness, and brought

the girl back home. Gauri Ma sternly admonished them, "You have brought another's daughter to be Lakshmi in your home. You must treat her like your own daughter."

Afterward, she often visited the house and inquired about the welfare of the daughter-in-law. That night when she returned to the ashram after taking care of these matters, it was three in the morning.

Her heart went out not just to human beings but also to animals, so that if she saw an animal in pain she would be distressed. One day, some monkeys managed to catch hold of a little puppy and carry it to the roof of the house. where they began to scratch and bite him. Seeing that agonizing scene. Gauri Ma's heart melted. There was no stairway to the roof, so first, from where she stood below. she tried to frighten the monkeys away, but her strategy didn't work.

Finally, she tucked her clothes securely, tied a stick to her back, and, stepping onto a broken wall. slowly began to climb up to the roof. Meanwhile, the monkeys ran to the roofs edge where they bared their teeth, trying to frighten her. They were poised to jump at her. At this, Gauri Ma grabbed the stick from her back and began waving it at the monkeys. That proved successful in frightening them, and they finally ran off. Gauri Ma climbed up onto the roof, tied the puppy securely in her sari, then slowly and carefully climbed down, to everyone's great relief. One of the women remarked, "You saved a puppy at the risk of your own life! It was fortunate you did not slip and fall. Anything could have happened!"

Gauri Ma replied, "If a helpless creature that has been created by God dies before our eyes in this way – would that have been good?"

Such incidents demonstrate that Gauri Ma's sweet and ideal life – completely free of pride, always devoted to her ideals, full of compassion and dedication to the Lord's work – has become unforgettable.

THE SPIRITUAL EDUCATION OF WOMEN

WITH THE WORK of the ashram increasing rapidly, Gauri Ma felt it was not feasible or proper that the entire responsibility be on her shoulders. She created an advisory board, whose membership consisted of several highly respected gentlemen, and a women's council, whose membership consisted of a group of well-educated women. She also established an executive committee of women. In this way, through her inner vision and farsightedness, Gauri Ma established the Lord's work on a sound footing so that when she was no longer there, the work of the convent would continue to run smoothly for a long time. Thus, because of everyone's sympathy, cooperation, and help, the work prospered.

Deep within herself, Gauri Ma knew that if any permanent change in the lives of women was to be achieved, it would be necessary to have nuns of ideal character who were willing to dedicate their lives to the service of women. These brahmacharinis, or novices, would first have to elevate their own lives by renunciation and the practice of austerity. They would also have to be well-educated; only then would they be ready to accept the responsibilities for imparting good education to other women. She knew that unless she had a well-organized group of such women, her work would not be complete. That is why, despite all her other responsibilities, right from the beginning she gave special attention to capable women who had detachment and were willing to become brahmacharinis and devotedly practice austerity. These brahmacharinis would later become sannyasinis who would dedicate their lives and work to their own realization and to the welfare of other women.

Having this goal firmly in mind, Gauri Ma organized the brahmacharinis into a group called Matrisangha, Mother's Group. This organization became the basis and life of the ashram, and the nuns today follow in the tradition and path set out by Gauri Ma.

Today, we can see the awakening of women all over India. Many institutions have been established for their welfare and all-around development. But near the turn of the century in 1895 when Gauri

Ma first established her ashram at Barrackpur, the status and educational accomplishments of women were quite different. Women had forgotten that they had duties in life other than household duties, that in this vast world they had another field of work, and, above all, that it was necessary to have spiritual awakening.

In those days it was unimaginable for a Hindu girl to renounce everything, remain unmarried, and take vows of renunciation and service, sacrificing her life for the welfare of society. Sri Ramakrishna gave Gauri Ma the inspiration she needed to follow her spiritual calling. Sri Saradeshwari Ashram was the visible manifestation of that precious, pure, and auspicious inspiration. Struggling to overcome many difficulties, obstacles, and unfavorable situations, Gauri Ma sacrificed her life to help others.

Gandhiji felt great joy listening to Gauri Ma's words. Chittaranjan Das was so filled with amazement and devotion that when Gauri Ma was leaving, he bowed low before her and, with tears in his eyes, asked for her blessings. Gauri Ma blessed him in the name of Sri Ramakrishna.

MASTER AND DISCIPLE MEET AGAIN

THE NUNS who had been trained by Gauri Ma gradually took upon themselves the responsibility of running the ashram in order to relieve her from day-to-day worries and problems. But her work of teaching went on to the end of her life, uninterruptedly and without a slackening of pace. In fact, this work increased from day to day. In 1936, additional land adjoining the ashram was purchased to accommodate the expanding work of the ashram.

After the establishment of Saradeshwari Ashram, Gauri Ma used to go on pilgrimages from time to time, just as she did in earlier days. It was customary for her to go each year to Jagannathpuri and Navadwip and pass a few days there. On one such visit in 1932 as

she went to the Jagannathpuri Temple, she addressed the Lord in the shrine thus: "Oh Lord, I have visited you regularly here. but this may be the last time."

All the years of austerity and hard work had now taken their toll, and her health began to decline. She was getting weaker with advancing years. Following the doctor's advice, the devotees took her to Vaidyanath and then to Navadwip for a change of air.

In 1936 the birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna was celebrated on a grand scale worldwide. Gauri Ma herself celebrated this great festival for twenty-five days. On this occasion she gave a beautiful and appropriate message, which was broadcast over All India Radio.

In December 1936 she fell ill again and became bedridden. Her room was upstairs, but men were not permitted to enter the ashram's inner quarters. Gauri Ma would come down to the visitor's room, despite the pain, so that she might give a discourse to the men devotees.

On one such occasion she said to the devotees, "In Durga Saptashati the Divine Mother is described as 'the most beneficent among the beneficent,' 'the fulfiller of wishes.' The Divine Mother fulfills all the wishes of Her devotees. Everything is in Her hands. Like a stubborn child, we hold on to Her sari and pester Her continuously. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'If you cannot do anything else, then be a child who pesters Mother. Have you not seen how a child clings to his mother's sari and insists on candy? The mother goes from one room to another room and the child follows her, still holding on to her sari, grumbling and demanding all the time. She cannot free herself from his grasp. Finally, she relents. It is her own child and she cannot watch him cry for long, so she opens her cupboard, picks him up on her lap, pats him, and calms him.'"

Another time when she was speaking with some women devotees, Gauri Ma reminded them, "Are you as women less than anybody else? Through the ages, countless sadhus and sannyasins have

been born for the welfare of the universe – they were all born to women. Women are the preservers of society and religion. They have more faith and devotion. If they try, they can realize God more quickly."

During her illness in 1936, on a new moon night. Gauri Ma had a mysterious dream about a yajna. The essence of the dream was that it was now time for the last offering of the yajna! Gauri Ma started preparing for giving up the body. Increasingly, she spent more time with her mind on a higher plane. Her contact with worldly things began to diminish, and her personality mellowed. The sannyasini's fiery qualities – bravery and severity – disappeared, and in their place was sweetness and love – love and love alone. During those days, if a householder asked her about some problem, she would reply. "Stop talking about these things. Talk about Thakur, Sri Ramakrishna, only. I will feel joy, and you too will be benefited."

She was now coming to the last phase of the vow that Sri Ramakrishna had given her, to serve women, the living images of the Divine Mother. So beloved was the ashram. What had she not done for it? Dear to her like her own children were the numerous men and women devotees. In her love for them, there was not an iota of affectation. But now this sannyasini was beyond even these worldly attachments. Mentally, she was completely prepared to leave the body. Filled with detachment and supreme joy, she had no attachment to life, no fear of death. She was now realizing that goal for which she had worked hard for the previous forty years – to meet her Lord face to face. It is at the end of life that either the brass or the gold in our goals becomes visible. In Gauri Ma's case, the gold in her goals was now visible to all.

On Shivaratri day in 1938 Gauri Ma repeatedly said, "The Master is once again pulling that thread." Fifty-six years earlier, in 1882, Sri Ramakrishna had said. "Unless I pull you, you won't come." And he had pulled that stubborn but dear disciple Gauri Ma and brought her to his lotus feet, the refuge of all. Now, the Lord was again pulling that thread. Then, it was through a vision of him in the body; now,

it was a call for her to leave the body and merge in Him! Shivaratri day went by without any difficulties, and the next day dawned. That day too passed in peace and great joy, spent in talking about Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi.

The day came to an end as darkness descended. Arati, the evening worship, was over. After arati, the women were accustomed to gather in Gauri Ma's room. On that day, too, they all came and made pranams to her. As one woman was about to ask her something, Gauri Ma said, Today, we are not going to talk about anything else – only about Thakur."

There began a conversation about God. While talking about Sri Ramakrishna, Gauri Ma repeated three times. "Guru Sri Ramakrishna, Guru Sri Ramakrishna. Guru Sri Ramakrishna." After that she started japa. While doing japa, her mind suddenly rose to a higher emotional plane. In a low voice she said. "My children, nobody should disturb me now."

The japa continued. Suddenly, one woman exclaimed, "Look! Look! Look at Mother's eyes! Her beautiful smile! And the glow on her face!" Everybody gazed in amazement at Gauri Ma. It was 8:15 in the evening. Gauri Ma – that dear disciple of Sri Ramakrishna who had filled her life with austerity and service – now slowly entered into samadhi This samadhi then turned into mahasamadhi, giving up the body.

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi once said. "A great soul is always a rarity, having hardly any parallel. Gaurdasi is one such soul."

The revered Swami Vivekananda had just returned from his victorious tour of the West where he had successfully expounded the glory of Vedanta when he met Gauri Ma. He said to her, "I have told the Americans about you. One day I will take you there to show them what great women are born in India."

In 1894 Swami Vivekananda wrote in a letter, "Where is Gaur Ma? We want a thousand such Mothers, with that noble, stirring spirit,

the power to inspire." That this soul-stirring call of Swami Vivekananda should reach those for whom it is destined – that is my prayer at the feet of the Lord.

Jananim Saradam Devim
Ramakrishnam Jagad-Gurum
Pada-Padme Tayoh Sritva
Pranamami Muhur-Muhuh

O Mother Sarada Devi
And Ramakrishna, the Universal Teacher,
Taking shelter at your feet,
I salute you both again and again.

GLOSSARY

ARATI. Worship of the deity accompanied by the offering of lights.
ASANA. Seat.

ASHRAM. A hermitage or monastery for religious-minded people.
Also, a place for practicing or studying religion.

AVIDYA. Ignorance, cosmic or individual, which is responsible for the non-perception of Reality.

BABA. Father.

BABU. A title like Mr., used at the end of the name of a gentleman.

BHAGAVAN. God.

BIGHA. A measure of land.

BILVA. Sacred leaves offered in worship.

BRAHMACHARINI. A novice nun or student who is serving her teacher or preceptor and observing the vow of continence and austerity.

CHAITANYA MAHAPRABHU. A saint and scholar of great fame, born in 1485 A.D. at Navadwip in Bengal and worshipped by many Vaishnavas (worshippers of Vishnu) as an incarnation of Krishna and Radha together.

DADA. Elder brother.

DAKSHINESWAR. A sacred place on the Ganges, nearly six miles north of Calcutta, where, in the famous temple garden of the goddess Kali, Sri Ramakrishna lived for many years.

DAMODAR SHILA. A round stone that represents Krishna. (Damodar is another name for Krishna.)

DIDI. Elder sister.

DURGA SAPTASHATI (also known as the Chandi), A sacred book of the Hindus in which the Divine Mother is described as the Ultimate Reality.

GOPIs. The milkmaid companions of Sri Krishna, symbols of one-pointed devotion.

GURU. Spiritual master or teacher.

HOMA. A Vedic sacrifice in which oblations are offered into a fire.

ISHTA DEVATA. The form of God or spiritual ideal that the devotee chooses to follow.

JAPA. Repetition in prayer of the name of one's chosen deity or some holy name.

KAISTHA. A caste in the Indian system, below the highest.

KALI. The Divine Mother.

KALI BARI. A temple garden where the chief deity in the temple is the goddess Kali.

KRISHNA. An incarnation of Vishnu, one of the three gods – Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh – who represent the powers of the creator, preserver, and destroyer.

LAKSHMI. The consort of Vishnu and the goddess of fortune.

MA. Mother.

MAHABHARATA. One of the two great epics of India, narrating the story of the five Pandava brothers and their hundred cousins; part of which is the Bhagavad Gita, which consists of a dialogue between Krishna, who expounds spiritual truths, and Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers.

MAHASAMADHI. Literally, "the great samadhi," the final merging of a saint's consciousness into the Absolute at the time of his or her passing.

NAHABAT. A place where an orchestra is played; also, a small building at Dakshineswar attached to the temple there and formerly

used for that purpose, but now the place where Sri Sarada Devi lived when she stayed at Dakshineswar.

PRANAMS. Salutations offered to a holy person, where the devotee bends down to touch the feet of the holy person.

PURANAS. Books of Hindu mythology.

RAAS PURNIMA. A full-moon day in October or November when Lord Krishna sported and danced with His playmates and devotees on the bank of the Jamuna River in Brindavan.

RADHESHYAM. Another name for Krishna.

RAMAKRISHNA. A nineteenth-century sage who spent most of his life at a temple garden at Dakshineswar near Calcutta, practicing many spiritual disciplines and sharing the fruits of his practices with all who came to him. (Ramakrishna Math is a monastic order founded in the name of Sri Ramakrishna, with many branches in India and across the world.)

RAMAYANA. One of the two great epics of India, telling the story of Rama and his wife Sita, who are believed to be incarnations of Vishnu and his consort, Lakshmi, and who came to earth to reestablish ethical conduct in a society that had become decadent.

RANCHODJI TEMPLE. A famous temple in Dwarka on the west coast of India. (Ranchodji is another name for Krishna.)

SADHANA. The practice of a particular spiritual discipline for the attainment of enlightenment.

SADHU. A monk.

SAMADHI. Absorption in the Spirit, a trance-like state.

SANNYASIN. A man who renounces the world in order to realize God.

SANNYASINI. A woman who renounces the world in order to realize God.

SARADA DEVI. Sri Ramakrishna's wife, also known to devotees as Holy Mother.

SATCHIDANANDA. Literally, "Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute." A name of Brahman, the Absolute Reality.

SHAKTI. The energy of the Divine as it manifests in the material world. Shakti is regarded as feminine.

SHALIGRAM. A round stone symbol of Vishnu.

SHYAMA. Literally, "the dark one." A name of Kali, the Divine Mother.

STOTRAS. Hymns in verse describing the glories of the various gods and goddesses.

SUPREME PURUSHA. Supreme Person, God.

SWAMI. A title of the monks belonging to the Vedanta school.

TAPASVINI. A woman who has undertaken intense tapasya. (Masculine form is tapasvin or tapasvi.)

TAPASYA. Religious austerity.

THAKUR. A term of respect, meaning Master.

TILAK. A red or white mark on the forehead, usually having religious significance.

TULSI. The basil plant, which is sacred to the Hindus. Its leaves are used for worship.

VIDYA. Knowledge leading to liberation, i.e., to the Ultimate Reality.

VIVEKANANDA, SWAMI. Sri Ramakrishna's most famous disciple, who participated in the first Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago in 1893.

YAJNA. A ritualistic ceremony in which oblations are offered into a fire.

YASHODA. The foster mother of Krishna.

YOGI, YOGINI. One who practices yoga or spiritual disciplines.

ZAMINDAR. Landlord.