

Reminiscences of Swami Saradanandaji

SWAMI BHUTESHANANANDA

Translation* of the Bengali talk of revered Maharaj originally published in his book Sri Ramakrishna Bhavadarsha (Udbodhan Karyalaya, Kolkata). Translation is by Swami Sumantrananda.

*Published in Vedanta Kesari magazine.

We are not at all familiar with the childhood of Swami Saradananda. Whatever I have seen of him, was towards the end part of his life. Mostly unknown to all are incidents of the days when he came in contact with Sri Ramakrishna in his youth with intense thirst for spiritual life and the spiritual practices that he performed sitting at his feet. This is because Swami Saradananda did not write any autobiography. Those who have written about him have presented a picture after hearing from others. They did not have the privilege of coming in direct contact with his personality. But this much we can understand that he had intense attraction for religious life that guided his life right from his childhood.

His Selfless Personality

Sharat Maharaj's physique was strong, robust and a bit bulky. I have heard directly from Swami Akhandananda Maharaj that he (Saradanandaji) was the strongest among the disciples of the Master. He had enormous physical strength, but it was never manifested outwardly because his nature was very soft. But one manifestation of his strength was found when Baranagore Math was established. Then he would always come forward to do jobs that required physical strength—such as scouring out cooking utensils. There were no servants, so the monks themselves did everything. Saradanandaji used his muscular strength for laborious tasks. Moreover, he was totally free from conceit. He could not even think of indulging in brawls and scuffles with others—actions through which a man's physical strength is manifested. Moreover, I have heard from Akhandananda Maharaj that he had great eagerness to serve others.

If any of his brother monks fell ill, he would nurse him carefully, remaining always by his side. None else had such perfection as he had in this work and he would bear all personal inconveniences in this act of service. Later on also this propensity to serve was very much noticeable when he started his life of spiritual sâdhanâ sitting at the feet of the Master. A divine mood was manifested in the Master on that extraordinary day when the Master became `Kalpataru'—the wish-fulfilling tree. Seeing this divine mood the devotees became overwhelmed and started calling one another to receive the coveted boons from the Master. When all were excited over it, the two sevakas (attendants) of the Master, Sharat and Latu, who later became Swamis Saradananda and Adbhutananda, were busy cleaning and sunning the beddings of the Master, dusting the room, etc., for the Master was then bed-ridden. Feeling a little better that day he went out for a short walk. The two sevaks took the opportunity to tidy his room. The devotees went on calling them, but the sevaks did not pay any heed to that. They thought, `Let those who seek the Master's blessings go, we should rather take this chance to do more of his service.' This shows how strong was their spirit of service. Before them came a rare opportunity—perhaps for only a moment—for spiritual progress in their lives, still they remained engaged in the same work of service and did not go to the Master leaving aside the work. This was a great test for the spirit of service and sincerity. A selfless devotee does not seek anything other than service to God, not even liberation. A sloka of the Bhagavata (3.29.13) comes to the mind:

Salokya sarsti sarupyaikatvamapyuta

diyamanam na grihnanti vina matsevanam janah

Devotees do not accept, even if given to them, the different kinds of liberation mentioned in the Bhakti-scriptures such as living in the same sphere with God, being as glorious as He is, having similar form as He has, being a part of God's form—unless these conduce to His service. They are ready to do anything for serving God; they do not hanker after mere liberation. Even the highest spiritual bliss is not

their goal. The above-mentioned incident gives an example of such selfless service.

Service and Spirituality

At the Baranagore Math all lived in abject poverty; some days they had food, some days they had none. In those days when all remained immersed in meditation or singing, Sharat Maharaj would always be at the bedside of any brother-monk who fell sick. Even later on, when the children of the Master were moving about in tirthas (places of pilgrimage) and important places of sâdhanâ being inspired by intense renunciation, this spirit of service remained intact in him. In those days, if any child of the Master fell ill at Hrishikesh or elsewhere, Sharat Maharaj ignored his own spiritual practices and engaged himself in service. Sometimes he himself narrated to us incidents of his wandering life. Once he said, 'I have travelled all over India with only one cloth.' Even when he was thus moving about in extremely cold places with only one cloth and was performing intense tapasyâ—without food, without clothing—there was no change in his spirit of service.

Sharat Maharaj obediently went to the West—first to England and then to America—when Swamiji sent him there for the work of the Sangha (Ramakrishna Order). Again Swamiji called him back to India to shoulder the responsibility of the Indian work. Immediately he accepted Swamiji's behest and came back to work in this country. Swamiji placed on his shoulders the heavy responsibility of the General Secretaryship of the Ramakrishna Sangha. Thus the words of the Master were fulfilled to the letter. Jesus Christ had told Saint Peter, 'I shall build my church on this rock (on Peter).' The responsibility indicated by the Master was placed on Sharat Maharaj.

When we saw him as the General Secretary of the Sangha, we have observed how he worked as the leader of the Order without any attachment. We have heard many instances of this at various places from many sâdhus. In some centre there was trouble, there was conflict between two groups. One person would come to him and complain against another. Maharaj would quietly hear everything but give no reply. The complainer perhaps thought whatever he said was all in vain. He said, 'Maharaj, I have told you everything but you are totally silent.' Sharat Maharaj replied, 'Your statement I have heard my boy, now I have got to hear what the other party has to say.'

What can I tell you before that?' When we saw him it was not that he was just shouldering the responsibility of the Sangha. He was also bearing the burden of the devotees—especially those who were helpless old people, who had none to depend upon, who were neglected in the world.

With Holy Mother

Swami Yogananda was capable of carrying the burden of Holy Mother. He was her first sevak. After his demise that burden rested on Sharat Maharaj. Once Mother remarked, 'It is not easy to bear my burden. Yogin could do it, Sharat also can.' Some one asked, 'Mother, can't Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) do it?' She replied, 'No, he can't. His nature is different.' Now, Mother's burden was not an ordinary one; it meant the entire load of her huge family. Sharat Maharaj served Mother meticulously. Always he bore the burden of Mother calmly whether she was in Jayrambati or in Kolkata. The dedication and farsightedness with which he rendered this service was remarkable. Those who used to come to Mother were not all devotees. Perhaps someone was her relative while someone else had taken shelter with her having none to depend on. The burden of all such persons Sharat Maharaj had accepted on his own shoulders. He himself has made the statement: 'Even a dog or a fox of Kamarpukur or Jayrambati is venerable to us.' And those who were closely related to the Mother—what to speak of them! What has he not done for them? Serving them did not mean merely to look after them or collect money for them, it meant accepting responsibility of every kind. One of the brothers of the Mother might have done some mischief somewhere or there might be some problem with the landed property, everything he had to manage keeping an eye everywhere; whatever personal inconvenience he might have had, he never felt embarrassed. Even after Mother left her physical body the responsibility of carrying the load of the huge family of Mother remained on his shoulders. The situation remained unchanged even later. Those who did not have any refuge in the world were always objects of compassion to him. Not only compassion, what great love he had for them!

Construction of Mother's House (Udbodhan)

He constructed the Mother's house with borrowed money. In those days money was lacking, there was no rich devotee who could give

thousands of rupees for Mother. But it was absolutely necessary to construct a house for her and it had to be situated near the Ganga because Mother did not like to stay away from the Ganga. At first the Mother lived in rented houses. But there was not enough money to pay high rent or to take a house permanently on rent. Moreover, she did not live in Kolkata always. When she came, it would be difficult to find a suitable house each time. The Mother had to live in many places like Baghbazar, Ghosuri, Belur. Sharat Maharaj thought, this should not go on; a house must be erected for Mother. But where to get money? With great difficulty some money was collected and the major part was borrowed. Thus the construction work started. In those days even borrowing money was not easy; it could be had only from the devotees. And the responsibility of borrowing money was a great one for the monks. They themselves did not have any provision for food and shelter—how could they dare to borrow money? Who would repay? And who would care to lend them money? Sharat Maharaj had personality, he had sincerity and he had influence upon the devotees. So by borrowing money he constructed the Mother's house, and what hard labour he had to do to repay the loan! The situation then was not as it is now. Devotees were there, but most of them belonged to the lower middle class. Very few were in the upper middle class. Hence their capacity was very limited. In those days perhaps the cost of construction of a house was no more than ten to twelve thousand rupees, but even that was a staggering amount. Those who have visited Udbodhan have surely seen a small room to the left of the entrance. That was his sitting room. It was there that he met the devotees and wrote articles for the Udbodhan magazine. Swami Premananda has compared him with Ganesha, stout, calm and reticent.

Sri Sri Ramakrishna-lilaprasanga is his invaluable contribution. He said that he wrote it with the object of repaying the loan incurred in constructing the Mother's house. Such an intensely thoughtful book was written in that small room sitting in a marketplace, as it were! There was a small desk. On it were done all works like writing letters, articles, books, etc. There was no solitary place at all where literary work could be done peacefully. So many old men and women, so many crazy persons would gather there and he gave his attention to all. No afflicted person returned from him without getting compassionate treatment, be he a monk or a householder. His compassion and consolation filled everybody's mind with peace. With

such calm, silent sympathy he listened to their tales of woe that it itself lightened their load of sorrow. He had infinite compassion for one and all. Day after day this scene used to be repeated there. We youngsters did not like those talks. We used to go there to hear about Thakur, but instead of that the talks related to worldly sufferings would go on and on.

His Love and Concern

But he was not indifferent to the aspirations of youngsters who went to him. That is why sometimes he would call an aged monk named Swami Purnananda. He was a doctor in his pre-monastic life. So Maharaj addressed him as doctor. He would say, 'Doctor, like to come?' If he was in good mood he would reply, 'Yes Maharaj, coming.' Otherwise he would say, 'Maharaj, today I am not feeling well.' If he came the conversation would take a turn. While worldly troubles were being discussed, Doctor Swami would come and start religious topics. Later on we realised that Sharat Maharaj's sympathy was not for those alone who were spiritually thirsty, but his heart wept also for those who were burning in the fire of worldly sufferings. So he gave enough time for them. This we realised much later. But at that particular time we failed to understand this. Moreover he gave shelter to a band of crackpots and for each of them what great sympathy and pity did he have! One day he said, 'Look, that old woman's insanity seems to have increased. She is not eating at all; bring some medicine for her.' Thus a number of strange persons used to come to Udbodhan, have their meal there and behave crazily. Even among them he was concerned about that old woman who was not eating! There was a Brahmachari who went off his head later. He would keep standing near Maharaj with a huge turban on his head and a stick in his hand. He thought he was the gatekeeper there. Various such abnormal persons used to be there.

In the matter of service he had equal concern for everybody. Some old women had some old ornaments and some cash as their sole property. Where to keep these? Having none in the family to rely on, they deposited these with Sharat Maharaj. He kept these in an iron safe in separate bundles with their names written on them. The day before he had a stroke he called a monk and said, 'Take care of the things that are in this almirah. See to it that everyone gets back one's own items without any mistake.' Next day he lost his power of

speech as a result of the stroke. But to the last day he was conscious of this matter.

He gave shelter to one and all without judging their fitness. This made some monks of Belur Math to complain, 'Maharaj, you have given shelter to these wicked persons.' Sharat Maharaj replied, 'Yes my children, I too know that they are unfit for sympathy, but where will they go if I don't give them shelter? They have no other place.' So their shelter there remained permanent. Thus, those who had nowhere to go had their place with him. It is not that these persons always behaved respectfully even with him. Care they received without any measure, but still they could not become fit recipients of his love. He came only to give, never expecting anything in return from anybody.

His Detachment and Humility

Another specially memorable incident revealed his detachment. After the demise of Swami Brahmananda a new abbot was to be selected. Some said, 'Sharat Maharaj should take up this responsibility. In fact for all practical purposes it is on him alone that this responsibility has been resting so long.' He replied, 'Swamiji has made me Secretary, I shall act as Secretary only. I don't want to be the President.'

Swami Shivananda was elected President. Shivananda Maharaj had such an unlimited confidence in Sharat Maharaj that it was he who could guide the Sangha properly. We have seen many instances of this confidence. One incident may be cited here. Shortly after the founding of the Saradeswari Ashrama, the foundress Gaurima came to the Math one day and told Mahapurush Maharaj, 'Maharaj, we are going to circulate an appeal for helping Saradeswari Ashrama. Prominent citizens of Kolkata will sign the appeal, and we would like to have your name also in it.' He said, 'You see, I have no objection if my name is put there, but you should ask Sharat Maharaj. If he agrees, then do it.' That is to say, even the decision regarding inclusion of his name in an appeal was left to Sharat Maharaj. The Sangha gradually expanded. It was felt by some that those who had become old could not be depended on any more. Now they all had become physically incapable. So some younger ones should be given the responsibility of running the Sangha. To discuss this issue the first convention of the Math and the Mission was held in 1926. Many

had strongly objected at that time saying that they did not want new administrators. They would rather work under those who had directed the Sangha so far. When such discussion was going on, Sharat Maharaj called a meeting of the monks and said, 'The reason for which we want to make this change is that even in our absence the Sangha may run smoothly. So we intend to form a group of new administrators who will be capable of shouldering the responsibility of directing the Sangha in future'. Realising his intentions, the Sangha accepted the proposal. Thus, a working committee was formed and it was entrusted with the responsibility of management. From the day he handed over the work to that working committee, he became totally indifferent. Thenceforth Swami Saradananda, that indefatigable worker, immersed himself completely in japa and meditation as if he never had any responsibility on his head. That mood continued till the last day of his life. If his advice was sought in any matter, he gave it briefly. But directly he did not intervene in the work of the Sangha. It was as if he had returned to his life of sādhanā at Dakshineswar. Such was his absorption in japa and meditation that everyone hesitated to disturb him except on very important occasions. His daily routine at that time was like this—in the morning after taking bath in the Ganga he did japa or meditation which lasted up to two to two-thirty p.m. Then he took his food, rested and talked with the devotees. There was no more any thought of work.

His Extraordinary Calmness

One day the following incident took place. Sharat Maharaj was going to Belur Math from Baghbazar by boat. In those days one had to go to Belur or Dakshineswar from Kolkata by boat. At that time a storm broke out. The boat was about to sink. But Maharaj remained unperturbed and went on smoking his chillum, sitting in the boat. Dr. Kanjilal was his companion. In great rage he threw away the chillum into the water and exclaimed, 'The boat is sinking, and you are sitting here smoking!' Presently the storm stopped and the boat reached the bank. Then he said, 'I was smoking, no doubt, but you people were merely fussing, could you save the boat that way?' Just as that storm could not agitate him, so also the storms that raged over the Sangha in those days could not disturb him.

He was the calm, steady leader of the Sangha. He carried the burden of the Sangha all along, yet one could never feel that he was finding

it difficult. In honour or in dishonour, in happy or unhappy situations, he never lost his equipoise. This was the extraordinary speciality of his character. That was why later on Swami Premeshananda, comparing him with Ganesha, said in a song, 'Sharat is steady and calm, as if Gananatha.' He remained steadily at one place, there was no vacillation, and no wave could disturb him. Yet this calm and quiet man was the controller of such a big Sangha! Seeing him who could think that he was engaged in such a huge task! The fact is that, those who are very great are not aware of their own greatness. Those who observe from a distance say, 'What a great personality!' Before I finish I shall narrate another incident.

His Foresightedness

It was the birthday of Sharat Maharaj. All of us greatly desired to worship him with flowers. But he was sitting with such a grave countenance that none dared to go first and break his grave mood. We were all eagerly waiting at a distance for someone to start and bear the brunt. At that moment a small girl from the house of a devotee arrived there. The monks tutored her, 'Go and make pranam to Maharaj after offering this flower at his feet.' The girl readily went forward and did as she was told. It was noticed that his graveness had lessened. Then all of us had the courage to go forward. He understood our trick. Surprisingly, behind that crust of graveness what great softness, affection and sympathy remained hidden! Only those who had reached near him by penetrating through that crust had realised this. This feeling of affection is found only in a mother to some extent, not in anybody else, but even there 'to some extent' only, I should say. One incident happened in my own life. Once I went to him to ask a question. As soon as I asked it, he remarked, 'Do you have to ask me everything? Shall we live forever?' A little later he explained, 'My son, try to get answers of all questions from your own inside. Remember, if you always depend on others, you won't receive answers from within yourself. And we shall not be here forever.' As if he prepared us by advising us not to look towards him all the time. It was natural for us to look upon him as our refuge. But he wanted us to be self-confident. I realised he urgently desired this because they (Direct Disciples) were soon to leave this world.

That is why I say, as soon as the Guru who is outside establishes the link with the Guru inside, his responsibility is fulfilled. On this holy day in the course of this blessed reminiscence we earnestly pray,

` May their lives act as the beacon light always on our path. May we not stray from our goal. Keeping our eyes fixed on the goal and relying on their words of assurance may we move forward'. Their blessings are always showering on us.