

The Many Lives of Sarada: Politics of Representation and Gender in Hagiography

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Abstract:

The hagiographical literature has been constructing Sarada through diverse conflicting ideologies of the ‘Universal Mother’ and the ‘Mother of the Mission, Divine Goddess and model femininity, the spiritual Guru and the ideal housewife. The representations have shifted over the years with shifting socio-political and cultural dynamics. As a result of these multiple versions, what the readers get to see is ‘many different Saradas’, yet the actual historical figure, the ‘being’ evades in all the instances.

This paper resurfaces and reexamines the voices of women of nineteenth century with special reference to Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, in order to perceive woman’s subject formulation within the intersecting parameters of gender construction, nationalist identity of difference, and hagiographical representational politics. It attempts to unravel the other side of ideological glorification of motherhood and maternal power in Hindu religion and Indian nationalism. This paper delves deep into the religio-political and cultural influences shaping Sarada’s life, scripting her identity and agency in the most constricted space and time. It tries to comprehend how Sarada made an epoch breaking rise and created a cult of her own by converging the widely disparate and heavily pregnant ideologies of motherhood, femininity, nationalism and spiritualism all into one. It will take into consideration the fact how common mass found a safe haven in Sarada for realizing their emotions and self-worth. In recent years, there is a sudden surge of interest in Sarada, leading to increasing number of texts being authored on her. This paper will consider Sarada’s enduring legacy and influence on people a century after her death.

Key words: Sarada Devi, Hagiography, Politics of Representation, Gender, Divinity, Universal Mother.

INTRODUCTION

The etymological history of the term ‘Hagiography’ can be traced to the Greek word ‘hagios’ meaning ‘holy’ and ‘graphy’ meaning writing. So, hagiography is “to write the holy” (Pechilis 1). As western literary history advanced, the term hagiography came to signify a particular literary genre of idealized biographical accounts of saints. Hagiography is differentiated and pejoratively compared to biography, for its ‘undue’ reverence or excessive adulation of the life of a saint or a preacher. Hagiographic tales blend real with fiction, and are therefore often questioned of factual authenticity and objectivity. These extravagant idealistic tales are composed with a specific didactic and political intent or target. The unprecedented surge in popularity of hagiography in the early medieval period and later on, indicates the complex psychological and socio-cultural dynamics involved in the processes of ‘imagination, representation, and appropriation’ of the texts¹. In truth, hagiography act as a vehicle for propagating the beliefs and the agendas of both the subject and the author. One may get a glimpse of the subject’s lived circumstances, folk beliefs, and folk culture amidst the prevailing global and domestic politics within the narratives.

¹ See article “Hagiography Unbound: A Theory of Making and Using Holy Media”.

Although this paper owes its title to Trishia Nicole Goulet's Ph.D. thesis entitled, *The Lives of Sarada Devi: Gender, Renunciation, and Hindu Politics in Colonial India*, it shifts the emphasis from Sarada's greatness as a renunciant to the representation of her life and lived experiences in hagiographical literature.

This paper seeks to unravel the political and religious parameters influencing her representation and reception in hagiography. The representations often subjective, are biased and shifts in emphasis following individual desire, imagination and understanding. Free flow of information about Sarada Devi and Ramakrishna was prohibited within the Ramakrishna Order for the fear of misinterpretation and slandering. This is evident from the constant warnings of Swami Saradananda to one of the followers that one needs to be economical, observant and careful while quoting Sarada Devi. He even directs that one should practice restraint while expressing and disclosing singular events of Sarada's life, so that people would understand her significance, her words and behaviour appropriately (Purnatmananda, 2003, 10). Similar sort of restraint and reticence could be noticed in the writings of Swami Vivekananda's letters where he shares his anxiety regarding writing about Sarada. Thus, the real self gets obliterated in the pursuit of presentation of an ideal, immortal being. This chapter proposes to contest the hagiographical narratives and re-interpret them to re-cognize Sarada, a nineteenth century woman trapped in strange conditions of living.

It tries to study the life of Sarada, an illiterate rural woman navigating the religious and political domains of nineteenth century Bengal, and charting a path of integrity and identity of her own. It is to be noted that Sarada could not bequeath us with any of her writing save her work, her teachings, and her disciples who stand as living testaments to her words. Although, Sarada ached to read, like many other nineteenth century women she was barred from getting education for the fear of impending widowhood or loss of her chastity. After years of dedication, will and effort, she learned to read, but was however not much adept in writing. So, this research has no choice but to rely on the very hagiographical representations which it seeks to contest, thus problematizing scholarly interpretations of her life in the process.

RESEARCH GAP

The existing handful of literature both scholarly and hagiographical read Sarada as a woman who fitted in Ramakrishna's concept of spiritual motherhood as well as in the Hindu nationalist notion of ideal mother and motherland. Sil's reading of Sarada is that of a woman doubly colonized by the dual ideals of Hindu wife of celebrated ascetic husband and that of Hindu Nation of his disciple Swami Vivekananda. She is idolized in terms of divinity or essentialized femininity, bordering primarily on nurture and sacrifice. The critical literature of the sort of Sil, Kripal, Goulet and others emphasize the victimization of Sarada and her appropriation by the elite class bent on highlighting or debating Ramakrishna's spiritual significance. But the persona of Sarada is ultimately subsumed within the 'urban moral universe' or the domestic, cultural and religious nationalism of Hindu India. The studies fail to capture the human Sarada and read her in tandem with the historical context and time.

OBJECTIVE

The hagiographical representational works eulogizing her divinity and extraordinariness, do create a distance between the readers and the subject through extravagant ornamentation, but at the same time propel them to chase for factual information. This paper would revisit and re-interpret her existing biographies through the lens of gender and contextuality, and would try to salvage human Sarada from the constructed divine images in the extant writings on her. It would also attempt a study on the cause of the sudden rise in interest in the spiritual potential of Sarada Devi post her death, and analyze the reasons behind her enduring legacy. The objective of this study is to understand the trials, the unlimited loss and pain suffered by a woman in the nineteenth century religio-political domain, often ignored or misinterpreted in the mainstream narratives and hagiography. The oral sayings, letters, the diary records

and other anecdotes are taken into consideration for the purpose of bridging the gap in history as well as in the hagiographical biographies.

DISCUSSION

Saradamani Mukhopadhyay (1853- 1920), the daughter of a poor village priest of Jayrambati, Ramachandra Mukhopadhyay, was married to Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886), the great spiritual master of nineteenth century India, at a tender age of six. She became Sarada Devi after her marriage. The image of Sarada has been constructed, rewritten and reinterpreted over a period of time depending on the necessities of the individual or a group of authors at a particular historical context and time. The anecdotes and the hagiographical accounts of the Ramakrishna Order treat Sarada's sainthood at par with the two other luminaries, Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda, together making the 'Holy Trio'. But a close reading of the texts depicts that the representational agenda is varied and the progression is not linear like in the case of the other two saints. This research analysis begins from this very duality and perspective that defies linearity.

The figure of Sarada appearing only in hagiographical literature has undergone multiple modifications over a period of time. She has been portrayed as a wife, a divine mother, and a spiritual guru in different moments of history depending on the social and political changes, and the perception and interest of a particular author. She had been a non-entity prior to the publication of the seminal text *Sri Sri Ramakrishna's Kathamrita*, which generated curiosity regarding his family life while proselytizing Ramakrishna's ideas among the confounded, sceptic, erudite Hindus. One of the most obvious reasons for the obscurity of her life, is her coyness and her subsequent confinement inside the walls of the Nahabat, protected from the curious eyes of the public, following the customs of an ideal Hindu wife. Ramakrishna too feared public scrutiny and shift in attention from spiritual aspiration to conjugal life. This is evident from his hesitation in tagging along his wife with him to the spiritual fair despite Sarada harbouring a desire to join in with the crowd. It was this very fear of the penetrative public gaze which induced Swami Saradananda too to remind the biographers of Sarada to be cautious while commenting on her. The impact of the text *Sri Sri Ramakrishna's Kathamrita* was great to the effect that the question of the Saint's relation with his wife began to dominate the minds of the curious and critical faith seekers.

The later texts appearing after the death of Ramakrishna attempted to rectify the lapse within the hagiographical accounts by recounting Sarada as a befitting spiritual compatriot of Ramakrishna. The disciples left astray at the absence of a spiritual mentor turned their attention to Sarada and tried to fill up the vacated space of the Master and simultaneously justify their position as ardent spiritual seekers². In the process they reiterated and reinforced the impression of Sarada already embedded in the minds of the monk disciples of Ramakrishna through the early readings of her by Swami Gambhirananda, Swami Nikhilananda and others as an emblem of devotion and chastity. The biographies have overlooked the mental anguish that young Sarada must have suffered while enduring social criticism and rumours of her husband's madness. She recollected with pain the sufferings and anxieties of her parents for their daughter's misfortune and ruined life (Purnatmananda, 2022, 684, 694-5). But the hagiographical texts represented her sacrifices and struggles as a part of divine play or as Ramakrishna's training of Sarada for her spiritual growth. The political motive behind it was to douse the curiosity impeding the proselytization process and to gain readers' satisfaction. So, Sarada's portrayal was exclusively preconditioned as an associate and defender of Ramakrishna's philosophical order right from the beginning. It was later on,

² After the demise of their Guru, the young disciples were pushed to a peripheral position compared to the older disciples of Ramakrishna. This became prominent during the argument among the monks and the householders regarding the possession of their Guru's ashes and the power to decide the burial ground of the religious celebrity. The society too jeered about the constancy, the mettle and the sincerity of devotion of the young disciples constantly. This created an urgency for a Guru in their life.

towards the end of the nineteenth century that Vivekananda after his grand success in the foreign lands, fortified Sarada's position as the chief head of the organization. Moments before his death in the year 1886, Ramakrishna had declared Swami Vivekananda as the leader of the group of his followers and had entrusted his wife, Sarada with the charge of ensuring the spiritual well-being of people. However, he did not chart any way for his wife (who was still recoiling from public attention at that time) for the continuation of his unfinished work of spiritual nursing. This paper delves deep into the hagiographical construction of Sarada Devi and the representational politics influencing global perception of her.

The earlier literatures before the advent of Sarada as the Sangha Janani or the Holy Mother, registered her only peripherally as the wife and spiritual consort of the ascetic Ramakrishna Paramhansa. There is barely any reference of Sarada in both the influential texts *Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* and *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*, pioneering representation and propagation of Ramakrishna's philosophy among the common people. Keshab Chandra Sen was the first to write about Ramakrishna, where Sarada is mentioned as his wife. In other writings too Sarada has appeared as an appendage highlighting Ramakrishna's non-carnal marital life and his divine worship of his wife. It was when the orientalist grew increasingly inquisitive about his married life that the hagiographical texts began to take notice of Sarada's spiritual constitution. In the earlier representations, Sarada's spiritual excellence and character were determined not by her own demeanour but by the scale of Ramakrishna's spiritual caliber. The hagiographical texts highlight her divine attributes so as to certify her as a suitable companion of a highly influential divine figure like Ramakrishna, whose exceptional path of non-carnal, ascetic marriage has often intrigued people. The Western-European readers accused him of participating in an unethical marriage with an ordinary girl of six years³. Texts like Swami Nityananda's *Sri M Darshan*, and Swami Purnatmananda's *Sri Sri Mayer Padaprante*, assert that his marriage was a part of mass education. Swami Nityananda repeatedly emphasizes that his marriage, conjugality all were part of his divine play for the upliftment of society (177-179). The German Indologist cum Philologist cum Ramakrishna's follower Friedrich Max Muller, on the other hand, countering the accusations of child marriage and wife-abuse against Ramakrishna, wrote albeit briefly about Sarada's spiritual maturity at a very tender age and her compliance to Ramakrishna's celibate living arrangement (Max Muller 64-65, Goulet 50-51). Renowned historian Shankari Prasad Basu considers Sara Bull's letter of 11th July, 1898 (Muller 64-65) to be of historic significance as it was supposedly the first document on Sarada by any foreign person (Lokeshwarananda 164). The letter did not comment on her character but only attested Sarada's decision to accept Ramakrishna's path of asceticism as voluntary and unforced. Thus, both Muller and Bull in their act of sanctifying Ramakrishna from the charge of gender abuse, indirectly conferred agency to Sarada, highlighting her spiritual greatness and compassionate nature. Eminent scholar Romand Rolland too opined that Sarada practiced renunciation since childhood. He went to the extent of claiming that the little girl was much mature compared to her age and could understand Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences. So, in case of Sarada, her motherhood was entwined with her role as a spiritual Guru.

References pertaining to her appear, though liminal in hagiography, they escalate in her mature years of spiritual intensity. She was dwarfed by her husband's eminence and stature even after his death but suddenly appeared in full bloom post Vivekananda's return from his successful trip of the USA and Europe in the year 1897. The hagiographical discourse became increasingly interested in Sarada after the publication of *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, the first widely acknowledged full-fledged biography of Sarada, by Swami Gambhirananda in 1942. Although, both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda realized very

³ One should refer to Maitre, p.77 for the mythical description of Sarada discovering her "Shiva" in Ramakrishna. Max Muller as discussed earlier too tried to quell Western readers of their doubts of abuse of Sarada by Ramakrishna in consenting to child marriage, in his book *Ramakrishna, His Life and Sayings*, pp. 64-65. He even laid stress on the fact that Sarada herself was so spiritually enlightened that she could understand his spiritual ardour and ascetic practices too early in her life.

early in their lives that there could be no salvation for Indians without the regeneration of their women, it was only after the death of Sarada that her followers truly realized the necessity for documentation of her thoughts. The hagiographical literature published (mostly by her disciples) post her death began to depict considerable interest in her spiritual life of renunciation and her identity as a Guru or a spiritual master. She had become a successful spiritual guru by the start of the twentieth century, and adhered to 'intense devotional practices and celibacy' (Goulet 3). The earlier texts represent Sarada as a meek, obedient wife cum devoted disciple in matters of spiritual training. However, post Ramakrishna's death, after the unprecedented success of Vivekananda in the West, the hagiographical literature too began to shift the lens from Sarada as an ideal householder and ideal disciple to Sarada Devi as a prominent spiritual renouncer, the Holy Mother of the Ramakrishna brotherhood. With Sarada initiating a large number of people into Ramakrishna's spiritual philosophy after succeeding to the role of a spiritual guru, texts began to be authored by her own direct followers, who represented her as a mother cum spiritual giant cum goddess in disguise. The identity of divine mother imposed on Sarada once by Ramakrishna, was represented and re-established with greater intensity in the oratory speeches and writings of Vivekananda to the fellow brothers of the Ramakrishna Order.

Although, Sarada exemplified a unique living condition as a 'married renouncer', there are also not many academic explorations on her. The Bengali periodicals of the likes of "Vedanta Kesari", played a crucial role in awakening the mass to the fact of omission of details and the need for exploration of the extraordinary life of Sarada. The biographers therefore for the purpose of documenting her life and thoughts, then started acquiring first hand experiences of disciples, relatives, neighbours and people who had the chance to see her from close quarters. The writings and dialogues of the monks of the Ramakrishna Order spread Sarada's reputation as a divine being and her motherhood as that of 'motherhood of God'. This factor might have acted as a catalyst in boosting her fame among the followers, in early twentieth century. In the verbal articulation of the monks, Sarada emerged as a quintessential divine figure, distinct from the ordinary. If the reminiscences of the disciples, devotees and followers are read closely, one can notice exhilaration among devotees who were fortunate enough to know Mother intimately. The exalted feeling in turn is passed down to the readers, visitors and even strangers, influencing an atmosphere of divine aura, mysticism and inspiring faith and submission.

The aspect of divinity is however contradicted by Sarada herself when she expressed the impossibility to fathom the cause of absence of peace in people's minds and commented, "Why do they say so? Am I then a super human being? I never knew what worry was" (Tapasyananda and Nikhilananda, 1958, 358). These statements running parallelly in hagiographical literature alongside emotive exuberances of some disciples and devotees, complicate the normative, commonplace understanding of divinity. There is also a flip side to this divine eulogization and imposition of supernatural mythical powers. In the attempt of glorification, the object of adoration instead gets further objectified, victimized and dehumanized. Therefore, the superficial notions of asexuality, fear and distance associated with divinity, create only myths of power and position of women in reality. Sarada often had to endure irrational queries, ecstatic madness, unreasonable demands and even mindless torture of the devotees in her spiritual journey.

Sarada's eulogization as a divine mother and as the Sangha Janani coincided with the national politics of the period glorifying motherhood as a part of a counter discourse and claiming of identity of difference from the colonials. The identity of women, religion and nation gained new shape and signification in the colonial period. Woman was both 'defiled and deified'⁴ as widow and goddess respectively. Marina Warner observes in her study of the impact of female allegorical form on the actual female that, "within the context of early nationalism the relationship between the Bharat Mata image and the lived experiences

⁴ A term used in book description of Tanika Sarkar's book *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*

of women is complexly layered. While this glorious motherhood with its latent heroism served to amend the assailed male image, it also signaled a specific pedagogy for women, for with the mothers-to-be rested the fate of the nation of the future” (Chowdhury, 1992, 23). Her image as ‘divinely-inspired’ shifted from customary portrayal of a divine being to the icon of Mother India during Hindu nationalism (*Divine Dowager*, 65-66). Thus, the sudden, overlapping, unusual circumstances not only conditioned her existence but also prepared her for an extraordinary exemplification of character and spirit.

The scholars perceive Sarada in different lights and represent her as femininity personified. They construct her as a model Indian woman, a befitting wife, a true disciple and a spiritual guru. She is also eulogized for her selfless, beguiling maternal love for one and all. The duality of playing the role of a devoted wife cum renouncer as well as that of a Devi, the ideal, impedes linear progression of Sarada’s life and understanding of her. Her unique life as a ‘married renouncer’ also seems to contradict her nationalist representation as a ‘symbolic mother’ and model femininity for common household woman to follow. The later hagiographies draw readers’ attention to her rebelliousness in matters of non-discriminative social interaction, promotion of communal harmony, universal compassion and nurturing. However, still neither of these constructions engaged in reading her as a ‘being’ of her own, but studied her from the angle of subjective interpretations.

CONCLUSION

Sarada’s life like many other nineteenth century women of the likes of Saradasundari Devi, Kusumkumari Devi, Rashundari Devi and others, is an illustration of the choices she never had and the choices she made despite the constraints. Ramakrishna, her Sannyasin husband, not only refrained from any kind of sexual intimacy, but ritualistically worshipped his 19-year-old wife as Goddess Tripurasundari in the seat of Goddess Kali, on an auspicious night of 1872. It is here that an otherwise mundane life of a wife of a Saint, gains an extraordinary dimension altogether. The ritualistic worship as a goddess cemented her identity as an ascetic wife, devoid of sexuality or any physical desires. So, the daughter of the village priest of Jayrambati, was required to adapt and fit into the role of nun-wife of the spiritual celebrity from a very young age. Henceforward, Sarada’s life took an unexpected turn and she was forced to embark upon a journey which would impact her life and relationship forever. The changed circumstances and religious patriarchy endowed her with a fleeting identity; from that of a mere human wife to a ‘Devi’ in actual term⁵. Later on, she came to be known as ‘Sree Maa’ (Holy Mother), the protector and nurturer of her husband’s disciples. From a peripheral character of Gurumata or Master’s wife, Sarada became the Mother of the Ramakrishna Order and evolved as the mother of the entire universe. Sarada, who was hitherto a non-entity, was thus turned into a mediator between Ramakrishna and his disciples after the death of the guru. Sarada’s life was designed in such a manner so as to impart a sense of divine purpose to the readers. The biographies are read as an extension of Ramakrishna’s own ascetic life, mystical temperament, and his work of providing spiritual salvation to the destitute masses. Distinguished biographer Akshay Kumar Sen’s devotional effervescence in poetry post Sarada’s demise becomes significant here where he laments, “Mother were you, Image you became, Mother you, hiding where; (translation mine, Purnatmananda, 2022, 856). So, the poetry highlights Sarada’s transformation from an ordinary mother living a plain life in a mud house to an iconic reflection of a deity. The actual being was forever concealed from sight and now more truly after her death. Her emergence as the spiritual head of the erudite monks was not an easy feat in a society where subjugation of females was the norm. Sarada cut a decisive figure in the establishment of the Organization through her exceptional wit and grit. Her crucial functional decisions, blessings and prayers, provided the monks support, encouragement, and inspiration. Howsoever, in spite of all the efforts, her identity had been merely that of a Gurumata or Master’s wife, a woman in the minds of the disciples for a long time. Sarada navigated the political, social and religious terrain, and rose to the

⁵ See Satyajit Ray’s film *Devi* (1960), based on Provat Kumar Mukhopadhyay’s short story, exploring the psychological upheavals in young girls who were worshipped as incarnations of Goddesses Durga or Kali.

position of power and eminence sometimes through submission to the whims of the patriarchal men, and charting a path of her own at other times. She questioned stereotyped perceptions by advocating and inculcating motherhood as the prime principle of life for both men and women. Sarada carved out her identity as a guru in a world where agency and selfhood were utterly denied to women. Ramakrishna clearly pronounced to Sarada his disinclination and apathy towards sexual union and did recast her passionate desire for natural motherhood into the abstract motherhood of spirituality. Sarada however was pragmatic enough to suppress her feelings of dejection and establish her power and position very intelligently, resolutely and patiently on the same rejected grounds of motherhood. She was also tactful enough to balance the dualities of the imaginary and real, divinity and humanity and also the roles of a nun cum wife. The texts hail her for her maternal attributes and maternal thinking. But at the same time, it is her maternal weakness, a natural attribute of earthly beings, which contradict and complicate the conventional understanding and hagiographical representation of her divine motherhood. The distance, the difference and inapproachability that ideologically defines divinity, does not apply in case of Sarada. The ideological difference between mortality and divinity gets blurred as Sarada becomes their own mother, reachable, loving and communicable. This paper critiques the narrow, linear interpretations of her subjecthood and perceptions of her as “woman of all seasons and all reasons” who was casted in different ideologies of men. Sarada in truth balanced the life of the ideal, the imaginary and the reality, the irrational and the rational, all at the same time.

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