religions

MDPI

Article

Goddess, Guru, and Sanghajanani: The Authority and Ongoing Appeal of the Holy Mother Sarada Devi

Jeffery D. Long

Religious Studies Faculty, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA 17022, USA; longjd@etown.edu

Abstract: Saradamani Mukhopadhyay (1853–1920), more widely known as Sarada Devi and, to her devotees, the Holy Mother, presents an illuminating case study of the various means by which, in many respects, a highly traditional and typical rural Hindu woman of her time, operating from within the categories of Bengali Hindu society, was able to navigate these categories in ways that did not undermine, but rather enhanced, her agency, enabling her to shape her social reality in creative and transformative ways. Inhabiting the traditional role of mother and nurturer while carrying it out in a highly non-traditional manner, Sarada Devi played a central, often behind-the-scenes, role as a major influencer of an important modern Hindu spiritual movement—indeed, the first such movement to be able to boast an international following. Having no biological children of her own, Sarada Devi became the mother to this movement and to the monastic order dedicated to carrying forward the vision of her husband, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886), as interpreted both by herself and his disciples, the most prominent of whom was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who is well known for having brought Ramakrishna's teachings to the Western world through his lectures in America, including at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 and his founding of the first Vedanta Societies, starting in New York in 1894.

Keywords: Sarada Devi (1853–1920); Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886); Vedānta; modern

Citation: Long, Jeffery D. 2024. Goddess, Guru, and Sanghajanani: The Authority and Ongoing Appeal of the Holy Mother Sarada Devi. *Religions* 15: 16. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010016

Academic Editors: Antoinette DeNapoli and June McDaniel

Received: 22 May 2023
Revised: 13 December 2023
Accepted: 16 December 2023
Published: 21 December 2023

1. Goddess, Guru, and Sanghajanani: Who Is Sarada Devi?

Sarada Devi, who is more widely known, at least among her devotees, as the Holy Mother, or as Holy Mother Sarada Devi, was born on 22 December 1853 in a small village called Jayrambati, which is in what is now the Indian state of West Bengal. She passed away—or, as said in her tradition, she left her body—on 21 July 1920.[1] Intriguingly, for a figure who is now globally known (and who had a modest international following even during her lifetime), Sarada Devi spent much of her life in the village of her birth. She rarely ever left her native Bengal, and never once left India. She is now most widely known as both the wife and the spiritual companion of the Bengali saint and Hindu spiritual leader, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. She became, though, a spiritual leader and an influencer in her own right after the passing of her husband in 1886. Indeed, it is likely that she actually had more direct disciples during her lifetime than her husband had during his. According to historian Amiya P. Sen:

> In 1953, on the occasion of the centenary celebrations of Sarada Devi, her first biographer, Brahmachari Akshaychaitanya published a list of 1176 men and women who had been granted *mantra diksha* [initiation into the spiritual life which includes the imparting of a *mantra*, or sacred phrase that is repeated in daily sessions of silent meditation] by the Holy Mother. (Sen 2022)

This number by far exceeds, at least based on the available extant sources, the number of known disciples of Sri Ramakrishna during his lifetime. Of course, being a disciple of one of these figures does not preclude also being a disciple of the other. Indeed, more often than not, persons who are part of this religious movement are devotees of Sri Ramakrishna

and the Holy Mother, as well as Swami Vivekananda. These three figures are together frequently referred to as "the Holy Trio". The point is that, in terms of the numbers of direct disciples that each of these figures had during their respective lifetimes, the Holy Mother's is, by far, the lion's share. No history of the Ramakrishna movement, therefore, would be complete if it did not give due credit to the quiet but considerable work of Sarada Devi in cultivating a massive following, both for her husband and for herself.

Why did so many people feel so drawn to Sarada Devi? According to Sen, "In the biographical literature concerning her, it is commonly reported that most people were attracted to Sarada Devi since she somehow reminded them of their own mother." (Sen 2022, p. 18). It is also the case that she typically displayed great humility, seeing her disciples chiefly as the disciples of her husband, encouraging them to take refuge in him and to meditate upon him. At the same time, she did not shy away from allowing others to see her as a divine being in her own right, taking to heart the claim made initially by her husband that she was indeed a living manifestation of Kali, the Mother Goddess. Many of her devotees have claimed "to have had visions of her as the goddess Kali." (Sen 2022, p. 159).

As the Holy Mother, Sarada Devi continues today to be a deeply revered and much-beloved figure in the religious community established by Ramakrishna and his disciples. Her role in the emergence of this community in its formative years was considerable. But it was also a quiet role, carried out mostly behind the scenes and outside of public view. In fact, one of her strongest and most consequential influences upon the Ramakrishna Order lay in her endorsement of the idea that the monks should involve themselves in concrete acts of service to suffering beings. This view was revolutionary in her time. She often encouraged the monks "to extend the idea of *seva* or selfless service to the people in need." (Sen 2022, p. 189).

Sarada Devi presents an illuminating case study of the various means by which, in many ways, a highly traditional and typical rural Hindu woman of her era, operating from within the categories of Bengali Hindu society, was able to navigate these categories in ways that did not undermine, but rather enhanced, her agency, enabling her to shape her social reality in creative and transformative ways. Inhabiting the traditional role of mother and nurturer while carrying it out in a highly non-traditional manner, Sarada Devi played a central, often behind-the-scenes, role as a major influencer of an important modern Hindu spiritual movement—the first such movement to command an international following. With no biological children of her own, Sarada Devi became the mother to this movement, and to the monastic order dedicated to carrying forward the vision of her late husband, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886), as interpreted both by herself and his disciples, the most prominent of whom was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who is well known for having brought Ramakrishna's teachings to the Western world through his lectures in America, including at the first World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 and his founding of the first Vedanta Societies, starting in New York in 1894.

To understand how a modest, deeply traditional Indian village woman came to play a momentous role in the emergence of modern global Hinduism, we need to examine her early life, as well as her relationship with her husband, Sri Ramakrishna, with whose life story her own is so closely interwoven. As we shall see, she rose to the occasion of filling the roles ascribed to her by others while at the same time using these very roles to assert her own agency, putting a distinctive stamp on the worldview and practice of the tradition she helped to establish.

2. Sarada Devi and Sri Ramakrishna

Saradamani Mukhopadhyay was born to a highly traditional rural Brahmin family in the small village of Jayrambati. Today, Jayrambati is an important pilgrimage site for devotees who wish to experience the place where the Holy Mother was born and where she spent most of her life.[2] The meaning of her birth name, Saradamani, is "a jewel given as a gift by the Goddess Saraswati." Saraswati is, of course, the Hindu Goddess of wisdom.[3]

Shortened to Sarada, her name means, "Gift granted by Saraswati." *Devi*—or "Goddess"—is a title that was bestowed by her husband and her later followers. Like her husband, Sarada was born to a very poor family.[4] She was the eldest child of her parents, Shyamasundari Devi and Ramchandra Mukhopadhyay (Sen 2022, p. 45).

In May 1859, at the age of five, Saradamani entered into an arranged marriage with Gadadhar Chattopadhyay, a Brahmin priest of the Goddess Kali who served at a temple to Kali in Dakshineswar. This priest, later known as Sri Ramakrishna was 23 years old at the time. The ceremony was more of a betrothal than a marriage, in the sense that the bride did not actually leave her family to live with her husband until 1872, when she was 18 years of age. She did, however, pay four visits to his family in their nearby village of Kamarpukur after her marriage, which also occurred in Kamarpukur, and before going to live with Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. During two of these visits, Ramakrishna was not, in fact, present at Kamarpukur, but was at Dakshineswar, which is just north of Calcutta (present day Kolkata).[5]

Before residing with her husband at Dakshineswar, during her early years, young Saradamani is said to have displayed considerable compassion for the poor. Indeed, she actively engaged in famine relief at the early age of 10, during the Jayrambati famine of 1864 (Sil 2003, p. 15). Her compassionate concern for human suffering would remain a central theme of her life. This was a characteristic that she would later cultivate in her husband's followers as well, endorsing Swami Vivekananda's view that concrete service to suffering living beings is an important component in the spiritual path: that selfless service, or *seva*, is far from a distraction from spirituality, but contains its core essence, which is self-abnegation.

Arranged marriages between young girls and older men were not at all uncommon in rural India in the nineteenth century. The abolition of child marriage was championed by a variety of Hindu social reformers during this period, prominently in Bengal, home of the Brahmo Samaj, a reform organization established by Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) that was headed during the lifetimes of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi by Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), father of the renowned Bengali composer, author, and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).

The world of Calcutta-based urban Hindu reformers and their upper middle class *bhadralok* (or "gentlemanly") vision of society may as well have been on a different planet from the traditional rural world of Jayrambati and Kamarpukur, where ancient customs like child marriage continued to be practiced just as they had been for generations. These worlds would soon collide, though, when young, English-educated men of Bengal, many of whom were affiliated with the Brahmo Samaj, began to flock to Sri Ramakrishna and become his disciples, thus giving rise to a spiritual movement that today spans the globe.

At the time of Sarada Devi's marriage to Ramakrishna, the young priest had already developed a reputation in rural Bengal as an eccentric mystic in a well-established tradition of "mad" holy men intoxicated with the love of the divine and longing for ever more intense visions and experiences of divinity. After the passing of his elder brother, Ramkumar, who had helped him become established as a priest at Dakshineswar, the young Ramakrishna began to feel a great longing to see the Goddess Kali directly, to experience her vision. He experienced symptoms during this period which included ecstatic moods, weeping, burning sensations, sleeplessness, and indifference toward his physical body (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 18). In the end, his deep longing would culminate in an ecstatic vision. As narrated by Sri Ramakrishna himself:

> It was as if the houses, doors, temples, and all other things vanished altogether; as if there was nothing anywhere! And what I saw was a boundless infinite Conscious Sea of Light! However far and in whatever direction I looked, I found a continuous succession of Effulgent Waves coming forward . . . (Saradananda 1952, p. 163)

Following this ecstatic vision, Ramakrishna began to see the Goddess everywhere and in everything. He even scandalized devotees at the Dakshineswar Kali temple when he gave the daily food offerings to the image of the Goddess, or *prasad*, to a cat, saying that he saw the Goddess in all beings, even in the cat (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 15). He would sit before the image of the Goddess and, rather than performing the traditional ritualistic worship expected of a priest, he would go into an ecstatic trance or *samadhi*. He would chat with the Goddess as a living being, sometimes laughing or crying, or in other ways, reacting to things that other people could not see or hear.

Alarmed by his behavior and fearing for his sanity, Sri Ramakrishna's family hoped that his marriage to Sarada Devi would ground him in the world of conventional life and responsibility, curbing his divine madness. According to his contemporary and biographer, Swami Saradananda, "They reasoned that if he were in love with a beautiful, good-natured girl from a noble family, his mind would not be absorbed in spiritual matters; rather, it would become engaged in improving his family's financial condition." (Saradananda 2003, p. 244). As Sen explains, "Marriage and the challenges of raising a family, they hoped, would prove to be a useful and effective distraction." (Sen 2022, p. 64).

Due to Ramakrishna's eccentricity, though, it was difficult to find a family willing to have their daughter marry him. It is said that Sri Ramakrishna himself told his relatives, while he was in one of his ecstatic states, whom he would marry. He said: "You must go to the family of Ramchandra Mukhopadhyay in the village of Jayrambati. Fate has marked my bride with a straw." The phrase "marked with a straw" refers to a Bengali rural custom in which a farmer who has an especially high-quality fruit or vegetable that he wants to give as an offering in worship when it is fully ripe twists a straw around it to mark it for that purpose so it will not be inadvertently plucked and sold (Saradananda 2003, p. 245). Sarada Devi's family was, it turned out, agreeable to the arrangement, and the marriage took place in May 1859, in Ramakrishna's ancestral village of Kamarpukur (Tapasyananda 1986, p. 329).

Sri Ramakrishna's family's plans, however, proved unsuccessful, doing nothing to curb his longing for direct experiences of divine realities. Indeed, some of his most intense *sadhanas*, or spiritual practices, occurred during the period between his marriage to Sarada Devi in 1859 and her coming to live with him on the temple grounds at Dakshineswar in 1872. During this period, Ramakrishna engaged in the practices of many different Hindu traditions, as well as Christianity and Islam. While carrying out the practices associated with any one school of thought, he would set aside all other types of practice (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 35). When word reached Sarada Devi in Jayrambati about her husband's unconventional behavior, she was deeply concerned, deciding finally to go and be with him in person and care for him as a loving wife. "She heard the idle gossip of the villagers: Some men would say. . .Sarada's husband was mad and that he would discard his clothes and roam about, chanting 'Hari, Hari'. The women her age considered her to be the wife of a madman and showed either pity or indifference to her. She would think anxiously: '. . . I should not stay here. I must go there and take care of him'" (Saradananda 2003, p. 344). Finally, she paid a visit to Dakshineshwar in March of 1872, shortly after his 36th birthday (Sen 2022, p. 208). She was 18 at the time.

From this point, Sarada Devi divided her time between staying with Ramakrishna in Dakshineswar and with her family in Jayrambati until September 1885 (Sen 2022, pp. 208–9). During this time, Sri Ramakrishna began to suffer from ill health which would eventually prove to be cancer of the throat. The couple moved at this point to the home of a devotee in Cossipore, in northern Calcutta, a location that gave Ramakrishna better access to health care (Tapasyananda 1986, p. 329; Saradananda 2003, pp. 864–72).

Sarada Devi was married for 27 years—from May 1859 until the passing of her husband in August 1886. Fourteen of these years were spent residing with him, first in Dakshineswar and then in Calcutta, albeit interspersed with frequent visits to her home village of Jayrambati. For the remaining 34 years of her life, she resided mainly in Jayrambati as a widow, though, as we shall see, a highly unusual one; for she did not follow all of the strictures

traditionally associated with widowhood in Hinduism at her time, and indeed, she saw her husband as being, in many important respects, still alive—as having "only passed from one room to another"—and as working through her and the disciples who joined their movement (Nikhilananda 1984, p. xxiii).

Even once she was settled in Dakshineswar, Sarada Devi's life with Ramakrishna was not conventional. Perceiving his wife to be an incarnation of the Goddess Kali, the Divine Mother—to whose service he had devoted himself—Ramakrishna literally worshipped her, performing a ritual called the *Sodashi puja*. By one account, this worship took place on the *Amavasya*, or new moon night, of 25 May 1873, though according to another account, it took place on the new moon night of 5 June 1872 (Tapasyananda 1986, p. 329).[6] The night of the new moon is dedicated to the worship of Kali in the Bengali Shakta tradition of Hinduism. This is the Hindu tradition that is devoted to Shakti as the Supreme Being. Shakti is also known as Kali, wife of Shiva and Divine Mother of the universe.

It is said that after the Sodashi puja—which was, by all accounts, a most profound and emotionally intense experience for both Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi—the two of them gradually lost consciousness and felt as though they had merged and had become as one (Gambhirananda 1977, p. 50). As has been narrated in the account of Sarada Devi's first biographer, Brahmachari Akshaychaitanya:

> Many hours passed in that state. It was past midnight when the Master [Sri Ramakrishna], in a semi-conscious state, offered himself to the deity. He first offered a *bel* leaf (on which was written his name), the rosary [that is, the mala, or string of prayer beads], the different articles of clothing and ornaments he had used at the time of his spiritual practices, and also the fruit of his spiritual disciplines; then he offered even himself at the feet of the goddess. (Akshaychaitanya 2009, p. 50)

Narasingha P. Sil characterizes the Sodashi puja far less reverentially as "a strange consummation of a strange relationship." (Sil 2003, p. 56). According to all the accounts of their lives, Sri Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi never had sexual relations. In one biographical account, it is said that "One day while Sarada was massaging the Master's [Ramakrishna's] feet, she asked him, 'How do you look upon me?' The Master replied: 'The same Mother who is in the temple [the goddess Kali], the same Mother who gave birth to this body [his biological mother] . . .that same Mother is now rubbing my feet. Truly, I always see you as a form of the blissful Divine Mother." (Saradananda 2003, p. 349).

Critical observers have pointed to the patriarchy—some would even say misogyny—in this relationship; for its terms appear to have been defined entirely by Sri Ramakrishna, rather than being agreed upon jointly between the two partners (though it should of course be noted that only Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi truly know all that passed between them during their time together, and how they felt about it). The first commentator to make the accusation of misogyny was the Brahmo Samaj leader, Pratap Chandra Majumdar, who once referred to Ramakrishna's treatment of his wife as "barbarous". On the other hand, German Indologist Max Müller, one of the first biographers of Ramakrishna, "refrained from commenting on Sarada's conjugal life with the caveat that no one had any right to complain against it, because 'she was satisfied with her life.'" (Sil 2003, pp. 23–24). And to all appearances, this seems to be true, though such an appearance, in a highly patriarchal society, is also compatible with a deep inward discontentment. In the end, both critics and interpreters who might wish to deflect such criticism are dependent upon the same evidence: Sarada Devi's own words and the accounts of those who knew her.

By Sarada Devi's own accounts, she was not only satisfied, but positively delighted in the company of her unusual husband during their years together. This was despite the fact that her living conditions in Dakshineswar were quite uncomfortable and cramped (Sen 2022, pp. 90–93). "When Sarada spoke of this period later in her life, she would describe it as one of continuous ecstasy; a state of married bliss which was nevertheless absolutely sexless." (Isherwood 1965, p. 145).

The perspective on this topic generally voiced within the tradition based on their lives and teachings is that, in place of the conventional, sexual relationship of husband and wife, Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi instead enjoyed a spiritual companionship. Through this relationship, Ramakrishna is retrospectively interpreted as having been preparing his young wife for her future role as *sanghajanani*, or mother of the order of monks that carried his message around the world. He took upon himself the role of her teacher, both in spiritual matters and in worldly affairs (Sil 2003, pp. 82–83; Saradananda 2003, p. 348).

From the perspective of the tradition, one of the most important things Ramakrishna did regarding his education of Sarada Devi was to draw out her innate ability to evoke direct experiences of divine realities in her disciples, an ability he was himself said to possess in abundance. In the words of his Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna transformed Sarada Devi. He "made of her a powerful dynamo capable of transmitting spirituality to others." (Saradananda 2003, p. 719). According to traditional accounts of her life, this power became manifest after the passing of her husband when, during the 34-year period between the death of her husband and her own passing in 1920, she "transmitted spirituality" through the process initiating numerous male and female followers into the Ramakrishna tradition through the imparting of a *mantra* (Sen 2022, pp. 192–93).

Ramakrishna's following consisted of a close-knit group of male disciples, many of whom would later form the core of the monastic order that would bear his name, and a following of female disciples, many of whom continued to be close associates of Sarada Devi after Ramakrishna's passing. These followers began to congregate at Dakshineswar in the period following Ramakrishna's intensive spiritual exercises and his performance of the Sodashi puja—that is, from March of 1875 until his death from throat cancer in August of 1886. The emergence of Sri Ramakrishna's large-scale following was precipitated in part by his meeting with Keshab Chunder Sen (1838–1884), a prominent and controversial figure in the Brahmo Samaj, and a major Hindu reformer of the nineteenth century.

As briefly alluded to earlier, reformist Hindu thought was largely confined to the English-educated upper and middle classes of Indian society, particularly Bengali society, given that Bengal was the first part of India to experience close contact with European thought, which was the catalyst for much of the Hindu reform movement. Poor villagers, on the other hand, such as Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi, had little or no exposure to such social currents. The period of Ramakrishna's intense search for experiences of the divine involved, for the most part, traditional Hindu paths such as Vaishnavism and Tantra, as well as some exposure to Islam and Christianity (Saradananda 2003, pp. 224–364).

Ramakrishna's intense spiritual experiences and unique charisma began to attract a following first from among traditional Hindu devotees in the vicinity of Dakshineswar, which was a popular way station on the pilgrimage route to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. He then began receiving invitations to participate in religious events in the homes of prominent persons in Calcutta–including the home of Brahmo Samaj leader Debendranath Tagore. It was in Tagore's home that Ramakrishna met Keshab Chunder Sen in 1875 (Isherwood 1965, p. 159).

As a traditional Hindu priest, Ramakrishna disagreed with some of the views of the Brahmo Samaj. It is arguably due to Ramakrishna's influence that Keshab Sen gradually softened his stance regarding *murti puja* (the use of images in worship), which the Brahmo Samaj had heretofore strongly rejected (Richards 1996, pp. 37–38). The influence was, to some extent mutual; for the Brahmo Samaj also exerted a strong influence on the movement that emerged based on Ramakrishna's teaching. This can be explained by the fact that many of Ramakrishna's disciples had previously been members of the Brahmo Samaj. Some indeed first made his acquaintance during gatherings in Sen's home. Disciples of Ramakrishna drawn from the Brahmo Samaj included, among others, his biographer, Mahendranath Gupta (1854–1932), and his most famous disciple, Narendranath Datta (Swami Vivekananda). And it is because Ramakrishna attracted the attention of Sen's followers that he—and in turn, Sarada Devi—would become major figures in the history of modern global Hinduism; for these followers (Swami Vivekananda in particular) put

enormous effort and energy into their promotion of the movement based upon their master's teachings.

The relationship of Sarada Devi to the young men who began flocking to study at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineshwar is consistently described as highly maternal. She often cooked food for the disciples, as well as developed close friendships with many of the female disciples who also began to gather at this time, some of whom would remain her close companions for the remainder of her life (Akshaychaitanya 2009, p. 88). Indeed, in her later life as well, after Ramakrishna's passing, food was a central medium through which Sarada Devi expressed her compassion and affection toward her own and her husband's disciples. This can be interpreted as an extension of the traditional Hindu role of motherhood (Sil 2003, pp. 84–87; Herman 2011, pp. 79–95).

In traditional Indian society, though, there is little social contact between men and women. During the visits of Ramakrishna's male disciples to Dakshineswar—visits that, as his following grew, became increasingly frequent and lengthy—Sarada Devi spent most of her time in one of the two *Nahabats*, or music towers, near the room where Ramakrishna stayed on the premises of the Dakshineswar temple. The Nahabat was not a comfortable living space. "The room in which Sarada Devi lived in the Nahabat was very small. It was so small that in the beginning many times she used to strike her head against the doorframe while entering it." She also sometimes had to share even this tiny space with visiting female devotees, as well as with Ramakrishna's mother. According to one account, her periods of confinement in this small space contributed to her chronic rheumatism (Akshaychaitanya 2009, pp. 84–85, 87). Amiya Sen paints a vivid picture of this space:

> The ground floor of the *nahabat* measured about 50 square feet with octagonal walls, each measuring about 3 feet each and with a ceiling that measured less than 9 feet high. It was surrounded on all sides by a bamboo screen ensuring privacy, but allowing little air to pass through. The room was stocked with all kinds of groceries with even live fish in earthen pots hanging from the ceiling. (Sen 2022, p. 91)

A poignant and bittersweet image from this period which vividly illustrates Sarada Devi's simultaneous devotion to her husband, juxtaposed with the gender separation imposed by the traditional norms of Indian society, is that of her listening to her husband's talks with his disciples from the Nahabat: "Sarada Devi used to remain standing in the veranda of the Nahabat and watch through the screen of plaited bamboo chips this wonderful scene overflowing with love and devotion. She used to then become delighted and, at such moments, would long to be one among those devotees and remain near the Master." (Akshaychaitanya 2009, p. 89).

3. Sri Ramakrishna's Passing and the Emergence of the Holy Mother

In the summer of 1885, Ramakrishna began to display symptoms of throat cancer, which would lead to his death on 16 August 1886. In September of 1885, he was moved to the home of a devotee in Cossipore, Calcutta, which was closer to his physician, Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar. Sarada Devi moved with him and ministered to his needs, as well as continued to serve as a tirelessly nurturing maternal figure for the family of disciples constantly at hand. According to Sen, "Biographical literature on Saradamani reports that Ramakrishna trusted his wife to continue his spiritual mission. 'The people of Calcutta were sunk in worldliness, only wriggling around like worms,' he had told Sarada a few days before passing away, 'See to it that they are rescued.'" (Sen 2022, p. 101). She took this as an injunction to carry on his work.

After the death of her husband, Sarada Devi was prepared to live the lifestyle of a traditional Hindu widow. She removed the gold bracelets, or bangles, traditionally worn by married Bengali Hindu women, and began removing the red border from the white cloth that she normally wore (because Hindu widows typically wear only white).

At this point, however, she is said to have had a vision of Ramakrishna in which he said to her, "What are you doing? I have not gone away. I have only passed from one room

to another." As a result of this vision, for the rest of her life, "she wore her bracelets and a thin-bordered cloth in acceptance of the assurance of her experience that her Lord and Master is the Eternal Being, who never dies." (Nikhilananda 1984, p. xxiii).

This choice was controversial. It elicited criticism from mainstream Hindus for the rest of her life. It also illustrates how Sarada Devi creatively deployed the categories of traditional Hindu society to establish her own agency. For a widow to keep wearing jewelry and a red-bordered white cloth, as if her husband were still alive, would normally be seen as scandalous and deeply disrespectful. But if she was obeying her husband's command, and thereby reaffirming his teaching of the immortality of the soul (a teaching that of course has considerable warrant in the sacred Hindu textual sources), who could dare question her behavior?[7] It has been argued that such moves on the part of Sarada Devi constitute, or at least point to, an alternative model of feminism, rooted not in defiance or rejection of tradition, but in its creative reinterpretation and re-appropriation (Sil 2003, pp. 97–113).

Sri Ramakrishna's disciples continued, after his death, to regard Sarada Devi with deep reverence and affection, as well as no small measure of protectiveness and a sense of responsibility for her comfort and well-being. Taught by their departed master to see her as an incarnation of the Mother Goddess, they did just that. This is a belief that Sarada Devi herself endorsed and encouraged (Sil 2003, p. 71). Among the many events that enhanced her charisma and solidified the belief of many in her divinity was her performance of the excruciatingly difficult *Panchatapa*, an ascetic exercise involving meditation surrounded by five fires: four lit fires and the hot, blazing sun overhead (Tapasyananda 1986, p. 330).

Sarada Devi refused to complain of physical discomfort, and after Ramakrishna's passing, she often endured living conditions that sometimes alarmed her followers, one of whom, Swami Saradananda, was so concerned that he went so far as to provide a residence for her on the upper floor of the office of *Udbodhan*. *Udbodhan* was a Bengali publication of the Ramakrishna Order that Saradananda edited at the time (and which is still published to this day). Sarada Devi moved to this residence on 23 May 1909. She moved back to Jayrambati in 1916 (Sen 2022, p. 211).

Except for the three major religious pilgrimages that she undertook—in 1886–1887, to Vrindavan; in 1911, to Rameswaram; and in 1912, to Banaras—Sarada Devi divided most of her time from the passing of Ramakrishna in 1886 until her own in 1920 between Calcutta and Jayrambati, her home village, with occasional visits to Calcutta for events related to the Ramakrishna Order and the women's college founded in her name by Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble) (Tapasyananda 1986, p. 330). During this 34-year period, she emerged as the Holy Mother: the driving force behind the Ramakrishna movement.

Though holding no formal role in the Ramakrishna Order—the order of monks into which Ramakrishna's disciples organized themselves after his passing—Sarada Devi was, by all accounts, regarded as the final authority in all matters relating to the Ramakrishna Order and the Ramakrishna Mission—the broader organization dedicated to social service, education, and the promotion of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings established in 1897 by Swami Vivekananda. The Ramakrishna Mission and Order were first administered not by Swami Vivekananda, but by another close disciple of Ramakrishna, Swami Brahmananda (1863–1922), who was the first President of both organizations. Sarada Devi was held in such profound reverence by Ramakrishna's disciples that, "Any wish or opinion expressed by her was regarded by Brahmananda and his brothers as a command to be obeyed without question." (Isherwood 1965, p. 331).

Sarada Devi played a major role in making selfless humanitarian service, or *seva*, central to the work of the Ramakrishna Order and Mission. This was controversial at the time, because the traditional role of Hindu monks had always been defined in terms of the solitary pursuit of spiritual aims, and so as consisting of study, prayer, and meditation. Monks had therefore interacted with the broader society of lay householders in, at most, a teaching role, rather than in the role of service (a role traditionally relegated to what were regarded as the "lower" castes). Sarada Devi was especially concerned about the kinds of suffering which women experienced. According to Sen, Sarada Devi:

> revealed an acute empathy and understanding of the social injustices and insensitivity that women in particular were continually subjected to. She was positively angry when told that a pregnant woman had been made to march barefoot to the local police station for interrogation and wailed uncontrollably upon hearing of mothers labouring hard at work sites to supplement their meagre family incomes, being forced to leave their newborn babies unattended for several hours at a stretch. Such reactions emanated not in Sarada Devi's playing out some apocryphal or supra-natural roles, but in spontaneous feelings exhibited by someone deeply sensitized to the vagaries of human existence. (Sen 2022, p. 171)

In her emphasis on serving the material as well as the spiritual needs of suffering people, Sarada Devi was of one mind with Swami Vivekananda. The fact that Vivekananda actively sought her permission to establish the Ramakrishna Mission as an organization devoted primarily to education and poverty relief—to serving humanity—is an indicator of the high esteem in which her husband's disciples held her.

Indeed, as an incarnation of the Divine Mother, those who had been followers of Sri Ramakrishna saw Sarada Devi as the highest authority on earth. Swami Vivekananda sought and received her blessings before setting out on a lengthy mendicant pilgrimage across India shortly after the passing of Ramakrishna and before undertaking his first trip to the United States in 1893, where he spoke at the Parliament of the World's Religions, in Chicago (Lokeswarananda and Prabhananda 2006, pp. 45–46). According to Sen, she was the "nucleus" of the Ramakrishna movement during its early years (Sen 2022, p. 126).

Sarada Devi's pursuit of service—and her injunctions to her husband's disciples to do the same—is another example of her creative transformation of traditional categories and roles. While the ideal of an order of monks dedicated to service could be seen as a break with tradition, it was, for Sarada Devi, a natural extension of her role as the mother to her husband's followers, and, as an incarnation of the Divine Mother, to all of humanity. Like her husband, she was, paradoxically, both a renouncer and a parent, and was seen as such by her followers. According to Swami Lokeswarananda, a chronicler of the history of the Ramakrishna Mission:

> The unique combination of mother and nun in Holy Mother's life enabled her to play a vital part in the growth of the Ramakrishna Order. Although she had no children of the flesh, she had many of the spirit. These children looked to her for nourishment and protection; and she guided them through her motherly heart and her insight into the purpose of Sri Ramakrishna's mission. (Lokeswarananda and Prabhananda 2006, p. 51)

This purpose was nothing less than the worship of the divine in human form—not of any particular divine incarnation, such as herself or her husband, though she did affirm and promote the belief in her own and her husband's status as divine incarnations—but in all suffering beings, in the form of compassionate service to minister to both their material and their spiritual needs. In the words of Sil,

> A true Hindu woman, Sarada's life reflects the triumph of essential feminine altruism as well as materialistic concerns. Though the Holy Mother of an ascetic order, she remained very much of this world and in this world. Her life demonstrates a wonderful harmony of materiality and spirituality–of *bhuma* (the sublime) and *bhumi* (the mundane). (Sil 2003, p. 104)

In addition to mentoring her husband's disciples, Sarada Devi had many disciples of her own. She initiated many followers into the Ramakrishna movement through granting *diksha*, or initiation. This is a process that involves conferring a blessing and a mantra to the initiate. The mantra is a secret mantra, known only to the initiate and the initiate's guru, or spiritual teacher. The initiate is then to utilize this mantra in daily silent meditation, usually with the aid of a *mala*, or string of prayer beads that is designed for this purpose. The practice of repeating a mantra using prayer beads is known as *japa*, and Sarada Devi emphasized its efficacy and importance heavily. She is said to have taught that, "One

who makes a habit of prayer and meditation [japa] will easily overcome all difficulties and remain calm and unruffled in the midst of the trials of life," and that, "Japa and spiritual thought counteract past sins." (Raghaveshananda 2003, pp. 42, 44).

Though the process of diksha is simple, it can be a deeply emotional experience for the initiate. This was particularly true for Sarada Devi's initiates. According to the account of one devotee, "At the time of initiation my whole body began to tremble. I began to weep, for which I could not divine any cause." (Nikhilananda 1984, p. 5) As word of Sarada Devi's spiritual power spread, devotees began to flock to her, just as they had flocked to Ramakrishna. Sarada Devi herself "also fully believed in the power and potentiality of her spiritual initiation. Those who had been so initiated would not be subjected to rebirth, she is known to have prophesized." (Sen 2022, p. 186).

Although her following was quite large, Sarada Devi, in keeping with the modesty appropriate to a traditional Hindu wife and mother, did not seek out a large public role for herself. Rather than going to them, her followers approached her, gathering wherever she was staying at any given time to pay their respects and receive her blessing.

That the relationship between Sarada Devi and her disciples was deeply emotional and devotional is illustrated by an account of a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Jagadananda, who was a direct disciple of Sarada Devi. Jagadananda is said to have exclaimed when asked what Sarada Devi was like in person:

> 'It is not possible to understand Holy Mother: how great she was, how deep she was! Who indeed was this Holy Mother? –it is not possible for us to know. All that we know is, she is the Mother.' While speaking thus about the Holy Mother, the venerable monk was overwhelmed with emotion, and tears started rolling down his cheeks. (Lokeswarananda and Prabhananda 2006, p. 39)

There are many other, similar accounts of Sarada Devi's emotional impact on her disciples. "Sushilkumar Sarkar became crazy with ecstatic delight when he worshiped the Holy Mother's feet with flowers and left her 'as if intoxicated.' When she spoke to him for the first time, he was stunned in a kind of hypnotic spell . . . and wept. Seeing his condition, Sarada passed her hand over his head. He placed his head at her feet, and thereupon his mind 'took a trip to the realm of ecstasy.' . . . Even a senior monk like the highly respected Brahmananda used to tremble in emotion whenever he met her." (Sil 2003, p. 74) Whenever Swami Vivekananda intended to visit Sarada Devi, "he would prepare himself beforehand. Once, he woke up in the wee hours and went to the Ganges for a bath. He was repeatedly dipping himself in the water, as if he was unable to make himself feel sufficiently pure. At last, though he came out of the water, he asked his attendant to sprinkle a few drops of Ganges water on his body. Somehow, he made his way up to the door of the Mother's room, but could not go further, overwhelmed as he was with *bhava* [emotion]. Seeing this, the Mother rushed to him and held him, which was a wonderful sight indeed!" (Akshaychaitanya 2009, pp. 367–68).

In addition to her husband's disciples and her own, Sarada Devi also developed close relationships with the Western female disciples who accompanied Vivekananda to India–particularly Sister Nivedita, with whom she maintained contact until Nivedita's death in 1911. Nivedita thought very highly of Sarada Devi, admiring, in her words, "the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind," which was "almost as wonderful as her sainthood." (Sil 2003, p. 111) Meeting Westerners, and even sharing food with them, as she did, was a major departure from the strict Hindu norms of her time (Sen 2022, pp. 120–21). Acutely aware of her caste-conscious neighbors back in her home village of Jayrambati, Sarada Devi only met with Nivedita and the other Western devotees, such as Sarah Bull and Josephine MacLeod, in Calcutta, requesting them not to come to Jayrambati (Sil 2003, p. 111). Sarada Devi herself, though, did not agree with these strictures, saying, "I feel like feeding everyone from the same plate. But this wretched country of ours harbors caste discrimination." (Ishanananda 1396–1989, p. 35; Sil 2003, p. 119).

Sarada Devi was a direct inspiration for the idea of a school for girls developed by Sister Nivedita—the Nivedita Girls' School—and was present at its opening in 1898 (Akshaychaitanya 2009, pp. 129–30). She similarly inspired the establishment of the Sarada Math—the monastic order for women, which was named for her—although this order was not established formally until 1954. One year previously, on Sarada Devi's hundredth birth anniversary, "some dedicated women workers had been given the vows of brahmacharya [the preliminary monastic vows] by the President of Ramakrishna Math." (Lokeswarananda and Prabhananda 2006, p. 303).

4. Her Later Years: Family Anxieties

In Jayrambati, Sarada Devi had to deal with worldly as well as spiritual affairs. In addition to her role as a spiritual mother to numerous devotees, she remained a member of a traditional family and community—the biological family to which she was born. Her role as Holy Mother to the Ramakrishna Order and Mission was not respected by all her family members and appears to have been resented by some. Yet ever the dutiful Hindu woman, Sarada Devi had a strong sense of responsibility toward her family. She had a particularly powerful bond with her niece, Radhu.

Sarada Devi's youngest brother, Abhay Charan, died suddenly, leaving behind a pregnant widow who suffered from some mental illness. The situation was sufficiently serious that Sarada Devi took on the task of raising Radhu. The girl's mother resented this deeply, as well as the close relationship that subsequently developed between Radhu and Sarada Devi. By one account, Radhu's mother, "became jealous of the Holy Mother when she found her daughter loving the Mother more than herself, and her insane imagination began to find various evil motives in the Mother's love for Radhu, as a result of which she began to behave to the Mother with a rudeness verging on persecution." (Nikhilananda 1984, p. xxxi).

Sarada Devi's steadfast belief in her own divinity was a source of great comfort to her during this period. According to one account, Radhu's mother once cursed Sarada Devi, "crying 'Let her die!' The Mother commented quietly, 'She does not know that I am deathless.'" (Isherwood 1965, p. 131). Her niece, Radhu, unfortunately suffered from a mental illness just as her mother did, and concern for her was a source of anxiety for Sarada Devi throughout her life. It is even said that a physical change could be noted in Sarada Devi's appearance once she took on responsibility for Radhu. In her younger days, she appeared quite beautiful. "But this was in her 'pre-Radhu' days, when she used to be in highly exalted spiritual states and spent all her time in meditation and devotional practices. After the coming of Radhu, when, to quote the Mother's own words, 'Maya laid her hands' on her, such external expressions of her inner beauty ceased altogether." (Tapasyananda 1986, pp. 197–98).

Sarada Devi's closest associates throughout most of her life were female disciples of Sri Ramakrishna known by their monastic names, such as Yogin Ma (Yogindramohini Biswas), Golap Ma, Gauri Ma, and Gopaler Ma. These devoted women saw to her day-to-day necessities and cared for her in times of illness. She endured serious gastrointestinal ailments throughout most of her life, as well as chronic rheumatism (Sen 2022, pp. 129–30).

These women also sought to shield Sarada Devi from some of the more enthusiastic (and less considerate) disciples who constantly sought her attention. During the summer of 1920, she began to suffer from a recurring fever. Her body became weakened, and she passed away shortly after midnight on July 21st of that year (Isherwood 1965, p. 332; Isherwood 1965, p. 332).

5. Charisma, Wit, and Wisdom of the Holy Mother

Narratives abound regarding Sarada Devi's personal charisma and charm. Some of these narratives are utilized in a hagiographic or even theological fashion to support claims to her divinity. But even skeptical accounts of her life support the view that this was a truly

remarkable woman, with a pronounced talent for evoking the best in those with whom she came into contact.[8]

The most dramatic story that has been passed down in this regard is that of the *dakat-baba*, or "robber father". During one of Sarada Devi's travels between her home and Dakshineshwar (during the period when Sri Ramakrishna was still alive), she was caught at nightfall in a lonely field by a highwayman, "a huge. . . fierce-looking man, with a long staff on his shoulder. He was wearing silver bracelets on his wrists and had thick long hair. He was fast approaching her. By then her companions had gone far ahead of her and were out of her sight." (Akshaychaitanya 2009, p. 65). Offering the man her anklet, she addressed him as *baba* ("father"), saying, "Father, my companions have left me behind, and I have lost my way. Your son-in-law lives in the Kali temple of Rani Rasmani [the owner and builder of the temple where Sri Ramakrishna was employed as a priest] at Dakshineshwar. I am on my way to him." (Akshaychaitanya 2009, p. 66).

The highwayman's wife arrived on the scene at that moment as well. Sarada Devi addressed her as well, saying, "Mother, I am your daughter Sarada. I would have been in deep trouble had you and father not appeared." Although they were robbers by profession, the man and woman were both deeply moved by the young girl's combination of innocence and courage and took pity on her, giving her food and a place to spend the night. They continued to maintain their relationship with Sarada Devi for years, and even paid multiple visits to her at Dakshineshwar. Asked by her during one of these visits why they had first responded to her as they did, they are said to have replied, "You are not, in fact, an ordinary mortal, for we saw you as Kali!" (Akshaychaitanya 2009, p. 67).[9]

Sarada Devi continues to be a source of inspiration to her disciples and devotees to the present. In the 21st century, websites—including *Facebook* pages—have emerged to cultivate and express this devotion, with features such as daily Holy Mother Sarada Devi quotes, and inspirational messages (Facebook n.d.).

Received accounts of her teachings include many heartwarming and humorous anecdotes and present a portrait of a Hindu holy woman characterized not so much by deep learning or intellectual achievement in a conventional sense, as by pragmatic, homespun wisdom, and a seemingly bottomless capacity for patience and compassion. According to Sen, Sarada Devi's charisma rests to a very large extent with her truly exemplary personal qualities: an "unassuming simplicity coupled with an endearing tenderness of feeling that largely explains the popularity she enjoyed . . . there is something unobtrusively commonplace about her which catches the eye every time one views her." (Sen 2022, pp. 42, 43).

When Sister Nivedita is said to have once addressed her as the Mother Goddess Kali—who is depicted with her tongue sticking out—Sarada Devi is said to have replied humorously, "Ah! I can't be Kali before you. I shall then have to put out my tongue!" (Tapasyananda 1986, p. 235). In the compilation of the reminiscences of her devotees published in English under the title *Gospel of the Holy Mother*, she frequently responds to those amongst her disciples with grandiose ideas about obtaining paranormal powers through her mantra diksha by asking them, "What will happen when a man gets diksha? Will he grow two horns?" (Nikhilananda 1984, passim).

Yet this modest and simple woman is viewed, theologically, as an incarnation of the Divine Mother, and as one, ultimately, with her husband, Sri Ramakrishna, also seen as divine. "The Mother is non-different from the Master. It is not possible to think of her as separated from him." (Akshaychaitanya 2009, p. 356). For many devotees, Sarada Devi still remains an ongoing, living presence, appearing to many in their dreams. "Today even she is in the subtle form, residing in the hearts of the devotees. . .[H]er devotees and disciples are becoming blessed by beholding her in visions and dreams at critical junctures of their lives when their minds are seized with anxiety" (Ibid.).

Sarada Devi—somewhat paradoxically, given her, in many ways, deeply traditional personality and disposition—seems to hold an especially strong appeal for Westerners who have become drawn to the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda (Sil 2003, p. 108).

Why might this be the case? According to one American devotee:

> In the West we are conditioned to admire that which is big, spectacular, and instantaneous. This kind of conditioning can also influence our attitude to spiritual life if we are not careful. In spiritual life it is the apparently little things that count, and the Holy Mother emphasized this point very much. Outwardly the Holy Mother's influence in the West has been exercised through her role as the support and complement to the life of Sri Ramakrishna. But at a deeper spiritual level she has exercised a direct, personal influence on the mind of many westerners through her self-giving, all-accepting, easily approachable, and accessible motherhood on the one hand and her immense practicality and robust common sense on the other. (Ganeshananda 1984, pp. 495–96)

The devotion of some followers to Sarada Devi sometimes seems to rival or even eclipse their devotion to Ramakrishna. This is not a new phenomenon, but was a sentiment expressed even by Swami Vivekananda, who wrote in a letter to a fellow monk, "Brother, that is where my fanaticism lies, I tell you. Of Ramakrishna, you may aver, my brother, that he was an Incarnation or whatever else you may like, but fie on him who has no devotion for the Mother." (Vivekananda 1979, vol. 7, p. 485).

6. Critical Reflections: An Unrealized Potential

Given the great popularity of Sarada Devi during her lifetime—having a following larger than both her illustrious husband, Sri Ramakrishna, and his famous disciple, Swami Vivekananda—and the tremendous role she played in shaping the Ramakrishna Order and Mission in the formative early years of these organizations, one might expect women to play a prominent part in leading them.

On the contrary, however, one finds that these organizations are overwhelmingly male dominated. While it is true that a number of women monastics have developed large followings within this movement and are looked upon with great respect universally within it—prominent speakers and authors such as, for example, Pravrajika Vrajaprana, Pravrajika Brahmaprana, and Pravrajika Divyanandaprana—only male monastics have the authority to grant mantra diksha to disciples. Adding to the irony of this situation is the fact that many of these male monastics can trace their own initiatory lineages back to Sarada Devi (which is unsurprising, given the large number of people to whom she granted initiation).

Why does male dominance persist in this tradition at the institutional level? As I have written elsewhere, this is at least in part due to the wider patriarchal culture in which this tradition emerged and to constraints inherited from the earlier traditions from which it draws. The monastic members of the Ramakrishna Order are all, themselves, part of the Daśanāmi Order founded by the 8th–9th century CE teacher of Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara. The reason most often given, at least to this author, for the giving of diksha mantra being restricted to male monastics is a felt obligation to adhere to Śaṅkara's strictures, as this is seen as giving validity, in the eyes of many, to the Ramakrishna Order in the wider, largely conservative world of Hindu monasticism.[10]

However, the egalitarian potential that is strongly present in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, in the affirmation of the divinity of the Holy Mother, and in the leadership of other important female figures of the tradition, starting with Sister Nivedita, has yet to be fully realized. This potential can be more fully manifested when women in the tradition are able to assert themselves and confront the paradoxes that emerge when the profoundly egalitarian teachings of the Holy Trio are taken in tandem with women's lived experiences in patriarchal structures.

7. Conclusions

A frequently cited quote of Sarada Devi that well summarizes the spirit of her life and teaching is the following: "Learn to make the world your own. Nobody is a stranger. The whole world is your own." (Dasgupta 1979, p. 122). One could perhaps say that this is the essence of Sarada Devi's teaching: that we all belong to one another, as children of the Divine Mother. In this insight rests her unique interpretation of Advaita Vedānta: that nonduality is not merely a matter of metaphysical abstraction, but of lived oneness.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 This article draws liberally upon my entry "Sarada Devi" for *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Long 2012). Permission to use material from this article has been granted by the publisher.

2 The author visited Jayrambati personally in January 2014.

3 Saraswati is also revered in the Jain tradition, as well as in the Shinto tradition of Japan as Benzaiten. See (Long 2009, pp. 15, 162, 203).

4 The reality of impoverished Brahmins clearly belies any simplistic equation of caste and economic class.

5 Jayrambati is roughly 92 km from Dakshineswar, and Kamarpukur is roughly 86 km from Dakshineswar. The two villages are roughly 7 km from one another. (http://maps.google.com) Sarada Devi's visits to Kamarpukur after her marriage occurred in 1860, 1866, and 1867 (Sen 2022, p. 208).

6 Sen agrees with the second, 5 June 1872 date, and gives persuasive reasoning for this conclusion. See (Sen 2022, pp. 80–81).

7 Such as, famously, *Bhagavad Gītā* 2:11–2:30.

8 See, in particular, (Sil 2003; Sen 2022).

9 There are discrepancies in the source materials about when, precisely, this celebrated incident occurred. Evaluating all of the available evidence, including knowledge about the climate of Bengal, Sen locates it, compellingly, in February of 1881. This would have been during Sarada Devi's fifth visit to Dakshineswar, and roughly nine years after the Sodashi puja.

10 Personal communication with a variety of swamis and pravrajikas–'monks' and 'nuns'–of this tradition.

References

Akshaychaitanya, Brahmachari. 2009. *The Compassionate Mother: The Oldest Biography of Sri Sarada Devi*. Translated by Swami Tanmayananda. Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, p. 50.

Dasgupta, Abhaya. 1979. *Saradadevi: Atmakatha*. Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, p. 122.

Facebook Page. n.d. Children of Holy Mother Sarada Devi. Available online: http://www.facebook.com/groups/ChildrenofHolyMother/?fref=ts (accessed on 19 May 2023).

Gambhirananda, Swami. 1977. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, p. 50.

Ganeshananda, Swami. 1984. How the Holy Mother Influences Her Western Devotees. In *Prabuddha Bharata 89*. Mayawati: Advaita Ashrama, pp. 495–96.

Herman, Phyllis K. 2011. Sītā Rasoīs and Śākta Pīthas: A Feminine Reclamation of Mythic and Epic Proportions. In *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-Envisionings*. Edited by Tracy Pintchman and Rita D. Sherma. New York: Springer.

Ishanananda, Swami. 1396–1989. Matrisannidheye. In *Mother's Company*, 5th ed. Kalikata: Udbodhana Karyalaya.

Isherwood, Christopher. 1965. *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*. Hollywood: Vedanta Press, p. 145.

Lokeswarananda, Swami, and Swami Prabhananda. 2006. *The Story of the Ramakrishna Mission*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.

Long, Jeffery D. 2009. *Jainism: An Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 15, 162, 203.

Long, Jeffery D. 2012. Sarada Devi. In *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Edited by Knut A. Jacobsen. Leiden: Brill, vol. 4.

Nikhilananda, Swami, trans. 1942. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. New York: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center, p. 18.

Nikhilananda, Swami, trans. 1984. *The Gospel of the Holy Mother*. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, p. xxiii.

Raghaveshananda, Swami. 2003. *Mother Speaks on Japa and Meditation*. Bangalore: Advaita Ashrama.

Richards, Glyn, ed. 1996. *A Source-Book of Modern Hinduism*. Richmond: Curzon Press, pp. 37–38.

Saradananda, Swami. 1952. *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*. Translated by Swami Jagadananda. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, p. 163.

Saradananda, Swami. 2003. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*. Translated by Swami Chetanananda. St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, p. 244.

Sen, Amiya P. 2022. *Sarada Devi: Holiness, Charisma, and Iconic Motherhood*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books, pp. 192–93.

Sil, Narasingha P. 2003. *Divine Dowager: The Life and Teachings of Saradamani the Holy Mother*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, p. 15.
Tapasyananda, Swami. 1986. *Sri Sarada Devi: The Holy Mother*. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, p. 329.
Vivekananda, Swami. 1979. Letter to Brother Shivananda. In *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, vol. 7, p. 485.