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Apotheosis of Motherhood: Nationalist Aspiration, Sarada Devi and Self-Identity

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Abstract

This paper tries to comprehend how *Saradadevi* 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 also try to interrogate and investigate how *Sarada Devi,* despite submitting herself to the ideologies of the two powerful men in her life, did carve out a separate existence for herself and others. The paper will explore how 'motherhood' was reformed and reshaped into a new identity by *Saradadevi*.

Keywords: *Motherhood, femininity, identity, nationalism, Sarada*

Introduction

The Apotheosis of motherhood, which is integral to Indian philosophy and cultural tradition, reached its pinnacle in nineteenth century India, with the nationalist resistance gaining momentum against the colonial civilization indictment discourse. The Nation too was reconfigured in the figure of mother Goddess, Bharat Mata, reaffirming women's traditional roles as wife and mother in the process. Professor Jasodhara Bagchi's article, "Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal" (Bagchi, 1990), throws light on the hidden exploitation of women in the ideological glorification of motherhood. In her opinion, 'the ideological aspect of motherhood—it has served the purpose of taking away real power from women and creating a myth about her strength and power… Such an ideology was based on a philosophy of deprivation for women in the world of practice' (Bagchi, 1990).

Objective

This paper focuses on the subjectivity of *Sarada Devi*, wife of Sri Ramakrishna, who was not only worshipped as a divine goddess, but her motherhood was also transmuted to divine motherhood by her husband. It presents *Sarada Devi's* life and works in the light of nineteenth century ideology of motherhood and her becoming the Mother of the Ramakrishna Order from a peripheral character of '*gurumata*' or Master's wife. The paper tries to contest both the Eurocentric definition of motherhood

as well as the nationalist utilitarian perception of maternal power, and attempts to interpret motherhood from Indian woman's perception. It also highlights the erasure of real women's immeasurable loss and distress from nineteenth century nationalist and religious textual and oral representation. It therefore traces the gradual evolution of *Sarada Devi* from obscurity to prominence, her rise as a cosmopolitan mother and establishment of her identity in a male domain of control and power.

Literature Review

Problem of this research is highlighted by the fact that no writings are left by *Sarada* herself save the word '*ma*' or mother in the letter addressed to Mrs. Ole Bull (Lokeshwarananda, 1985). This work therefore heavily depends upon biographies, recorded letters, reminiscences and documentaries and other socio-cultural theories to unlock the lived experiences of *Sarada*, and gain insights about the socio-religious cultural influences shaping an individual woman's life within Bengal's spiritual domain. *Sarada* is therefore understood through the readings and representations of her followers and disciples who have seen her from close quarters and have recorded their reminiscences of her. These reminiscences and memoirs are often candid in expression and offer introspective reflections on people's perspectives, concerns and the rising impact of *Sarada* on the common mass. However, the secondary resources motivated by individual writer's perception, beliefs and intentions, view *Sarada* from multiple coordinates. They construct her as model femininity, a befitting wife, a true disciple and a spiritual guru. The hagiographical literature on the other hand recounts her life and works with mysticism, and effectively communicates *Sarada's* divine aura through a series of conflicting ideas. The ideas of 'Universal Mother' and the 'Mother of the Mission, Divine Goddess and model femininity, the spiritual Guru and the ideal housewife are juxtaposed and related in a way to impress upon the readers the idea of inscrutability of the divine goddess, *Sarada Devi*. The representations reveal how societal beliefs and norms are influenced through repetition of patterns and images, use of persuasive language and promise of authenticity. Yet, neither of these constructions is successful in reading her as an individual self. This research paper seeks to bridge the research gap by uncovering *Sarada*'s struggles and challenges in the seemingly empowered domain of spirituality.

Methodology

This research follows an inductive approach in order to gain fresh perspectives on the relationship between the diverse socio-cultural concepts of gender, sexuality, nationalism and spirituality. The research paper opts for contextual analysis since *Sarada*'s life itself was the plane of praxis for her theories. This paper borrows theoretical insights from both Indian and Western Feminist theories and literature to comprehend the extraordinary life of *Sarada*, who proved to be an exemplar of inclusivity. Thus, this research draws heavily from the theories and critical literature of eminent scholars like

Jasodhara Bagchi, Tanika Sarkar, Indira Chowdhury, Himani Bannerji and others on the concepts of nationalism, Hinduism, women and Spirituality and at the same time tries to impart a new direction to the theoretical understanding of motherhood and womanhood in general.

Period and Place of Discussion

The research delves deep into nineteenth century Bengal's religious-political and cultural phenomenon shaping *Sarada*'s life and choices. This paper, for the purpose of unfolding *Sarada*'s experiences and achievements as a woman in the spiritual domain of nineteenth century, critically explores the biographies and reminiscences penned by some authors after the publication of *Holy Mother Shri Sarada Devi* in 1942 by Swami Gambhirananda. The book is seminal not only because it is the first widely acknowledged full-fledged biography on *Sarada*, but also because it heightened the curiosity and emphasis on *Sarada*'s life multiple times henceforth. The intensity, number and multiplicity of engagements have reached unscaled heights in the 21st century. It traces the journey of *Sarada*, from a girl born into a poor *Brahmin* family of Jairambati, a village in Bankura district of West Bengal on 22 December, 1853, to her monumental rise as the *Sangha Janani*, the Spiritual Guru and later as the mother of the universe. She was married to a twenty-three year old Gadadhar alias Ramakrishna at the mere age of five. She was wedded into a relatively poorer family in exchange of a bride price[i]. The mundane life of an ordinary village girl, yearning for a glimpse of her husband who had remained oblivious of her and devoted himself to spirituality, took an extraordinary turn with *Sarada*'s arrival at Dakshineswar and her subsequent divinization.

Sarada, though an ardent follower of Ramakrishna's teachings, went on to become a giant spiritual leader on her own accord. Mother, as conceived by society, is the passive and obedient 'other' of the primary agent; the donor of the see ds of life, the father. In this case, Sri Ramakrishna sows the seeds of spirituality and *Sarada* Devi carries and nurtures them to maturity. She presumably appears just as an agent in the annals of hagiography. The fact of her becoming a spiritual guru in her own right though is not over looked in the later literatures of her own disciples but has not received much attention either. Her spiritual growth in the face of constricting circumstances post the death of Ramakrishna remain subsumed under the looming presence of the mystical giant.

Research findings and Discussion

Sarada Devi (1853- 1920), the child bride of Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886), the great religious figure and spiritual master of nineteenth century India, is identified only as a helpmate or as a spiritual consort of her husband in history as well as in theological literature. During Ramakrishna's lifetime, she was an obscured being, apart from her faint existence as the mere wife of the Master. There were even some followers like Ram Datta, who refused to acknowledge the identity of Guru's widow, after

his death. Therefore, Ramakrishna's declaration of *Sarada* as the Universal Mother and the guiding light of the newly formed Organization, alone could notseal her place and assure her acceptance as the spiritual guide in the minds of his followers. Yet, *Sarada* emerged as the Holy Mother of the Monastic Order formed by Ramakrishna and few of his intimate disciples, years after the death of her husband. She acted as a pillar to both the Ramakrishna Mission and the Ramakrishna Movement, contributing significantly towards much of the Mission's varied enterprises. Eminent feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Spivak, 2007), remarks that *Sarada* after being proclaimed as the advisory head of the organization 'performed her role with tact and wisdom, always remaining in the background'[ii]. She became the locus of the Organization with the aid of a few steadfast Ramakrishna's disciples like Vivekananda, Saradananda, Yogananda, Premananda, Niranjanananda, and Girish Ghosh, who invoked her divine motherhood and pronounced her as the mother protector of the Order. The entire corpus of literature highlighting the contribution, significance and impact of the Holy Trio, is eerily reserved about the struggles, sacrifices and compromises in *Sarada*'s life. The handfuls of hagiographical texts, available on her, either reiterates and imitate their predecessors or suffer from an anxiety of certain disclosure. Therefore, the texts lack transparency and authenticity. Saradananda, a dear disciple of *Sarada* Devi, reminded the other authors, '(b)e careful if you quote Sri Sri Ma, do it economically and wisely' (Purnatmananda, 2003). This warning message of Saradananda to be vigilant of their utterances on *Sarada*, appearing in many vernacular books, endows an aura of mystery and mysticism about her. The enigma thus created, highlights her remarkable grit, wit and excellence to sail skillfully through the extraordinary and challenging circumstances of her life. One notes that *Sarada* betrayed similar negotiation between compliance and defiance asevident in the writings of exemplary nineteenth century Bengali women like Kailashbashini Devi, Rassundari Devi, Saradasundari Devi and others, while making her voice heard and presence visible.

The religious pedagogy celebrating *Sarada* as the true consort of the spiritual giant Ramakrishna, however remained indifferent to *Sarada* as a saint because she was not a renouncer according to the scriptural terms. She defied norms and alike the Master, re-defined asceticism by integrating the ideology of renunciation into the daily existence of the worldly householders. However, *Sarada*'s identity as a Mother and her maternal bonding with the followers proved to be some what disadvantageous in the path of establishing her sainthood. *Sarada* was often doubted for her worldliness while privileging motherhood over narrow idealisms of spirituality, patriotism, and renunciation. *Sarada* was extremely rigid and determined in appeasing the hunger of her devotee children as she strongly believed that it was impossible to pursue spirituality in an empty stomach. This step was revolutionary within the spiritual realm because customary Hindu ritual promotes absolute renunciation in the path of spiritual fulfillment. *Sarada* redefined the concept by advocating renunciation of caste and gender

prejudices. In other words it suggests renunciation of ailments of the mind rather than bodily attachments for spiritual progress.

References pertaining to her appear, though limited in theological sources, they escalate in her mature years of spiritual intensity. She, who remained incognito during Ramakrishna's lifetime and even couple of years after his death, suddenly appeared in full excellence in 1890 when she was acknowledged as the third leader of the nascent Ramakrishna movement, besides Vivekananda and Rakhal, Gambhirananda. Her fame reached unprecedented heights post Vivekananda's return from his successful trip of America and Europe in 1897. Subsequently, the literatures began to vouchsafe of *Sarada*'s innate spiritual genius and divinity citing the facts of her meditative capacity and Ramakrishna's worship of her. In other writings, *Sarada* has appeared as an appendage to highlight Ramakrishna's non-carnal marital life and successful training of his wife into a fitting disciple of a spiritual Godman. The image of *Sarada*, thus, has been constructed, rewritten and reinterpreted over a period of time depending on the necessities of the individual or a group of authors, and perceptions of the reformers or devotees at a particular historical context and time. 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 each of them. In all the representations, she is primarily understood in relation to Ramakrishna or his followers (her children), instead of as an individual being. The human figure is literally and metaphorically veiled, preventing not only the male gaze but the very view of the outsiders. The mystery instigates the mind rationale to decode and decipher the human *Sarada* from the existing array of canonical sources and secondary texts, and thereby throw light on the basis of *Sarada*'s divinization and universal accolade as incarnation of Mother Goddess. As a corollary of this research, the condition of nineteenth century Indian women and their relationship with spirituality are illuminated.

Imposition of gender idealism and nationalist ideology of motherhood on *Sarada*

Sarada's life 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. Henceforward, *Sarada*'s life took an unexpected turn and she was forced to embark upon a journey which will impact her life and relationship forever. With the sudden leap of fate, she needed to act accordingly and fit into her new, transformative role as an incarnated Goddess, the Divine Mother, and a fitting counterpart of her husband. The changed circumstances and religious patriarchy endowed her with a fleeting identity; from that of a mere human wife to a 'Devi' in actual terms[iii]. This research is an exploration of her unique mental and physical journey which happened to be a balance between renunciation and indulgence.

Sarada, an introvert, *antahpurbasini* woman, was thrusted upon the role of Mother Goddess and with the charge of care and salvation of hundreds of people, by Ramakrishna, the mystic giant, at a very early age. Ramakrishna had imagined *Sarada* as the spiritual deliverer of the mass, as the priest of the great *yagna* and had therefore introduced Latu, one of his followers, to *Sarada* as a prior preparation for the proposed role. On the other hand, Vivekananda regarded *Sarada* as the nucleus of the Order who was supposed to provide emotional anchorage to hapless women and Indians in general. She was assumed to be the touchstone translating his dream of India's rejuvenation into reality. Later on, Vivekananda, following his guru's path, conferred the status of 'Mother of the Mission', 'the Holy Mother' on *Sarada* Devi, and thereby fortified her position as the centre of the Organization. She was further introduced as the *Sangha Janani*, Holy Mother of the Order, to the public by Vivekananda after his unprecedented success at America. This was in conformity with the ancient Indian tradition of honouring the lady sage or wife of a Guru as the executive head of the hermitage and addressing her as the mother[iv]. After the unprecedented success of Vivekananda in the West, the theological 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. Thus, Vivekananda played a pivotal role in establishing *Sarada* as the unofficial advisory Head of the Organization.

In both the projections, of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda respectively, she was supposed to be unique or different from the commoners. She was idealized as the 'perfect' woman, embodying masculine imagination of feminine power, and commanding the worship of both man and woman. *Sarada* was exalted and glorified in her suffering and chastity as the much-cherished Sita in the eloquent speeches of Vivekananda. He praised her as 'She who suffered that life of suffering without a murmur, she the ever-chaste and ever-pure wife, she the ideal of the people, the ideal of the gods, the great Sita, our national God she must always remain'[v].

Vivekananda promoted *Sarada* as the metaphorical *Shakti*, responsible for awakening the dormant power and energy residing within every woman. Swami Gambhirananda too similarly conceded that Indian women needed to be invigorated and energized by drawing inspiration from exemplary women. He said that 'India eulogized chastity and motherhood, since the ideal aimed at is a spiritual freedom which has for its foundation absolute self-control' (Sil, 2003). *Sarada* became the best fit as she manifested abstinence in divine motherhood, and combined within her the ideals of femininity and 'true' womanhood. By true womanhood is meant the cult of domesticity, or the value system of the upper and middle-class bourgeois society upholding the attributes of piousness, purity, submissiveness, devotion and domesticity within women. The anti-colonial nationalist identity politics affected the philosophy and perception of the bourgeois and erudite upper-class Hindus. These bourgeois Hindu

men tried to find a balance between the materialist philosophy of the west and the spirituality of the east. In their quest for a nationalist identity and history, a majority of the urban, didactic middle-class society remained anchored in the traditional Hindu India. The canonical representations discuss Sarada on similar analogies of the material and spiritual. Swami Mumukshananda argued that Indian life's ultimate goal is to attain "spiritual objectives: realization of the self, of God, truth and liberation. *Sarada*'s life manifested the fruition of these eternal goals of life and, with her serenity, stability, sincerity, and above all adaptability; she offers a link between tradition and modernity" (Sil, 2003). Therefore *Sarada* ultimately became the archetype of spiritual India, and therefore the symbolic point of difference between east and west.

Indian nationalist sentiments projected motherhood as the emblem of Indian spirituality, Indian femininity, hospitality, cultural tradition and many more. Motherhood that was once considered as impure and filthy and was attributed the darkest, unhygienic, isolated corner of the house for the process of birth to take place, suddenly began to be accentuated to glory in the magniloquent nationalist speeches. The same bourgeois society which debased femininity through analogies of fragility and frailty, sung praises of heroism of motherhood. Eminent scholar, Tanika Sarkar remarks, 'for Bengalis, accustomed to the worship of a variety of female cults, emotional resonances connected with an enslaved mother figure tended to be particularly powerful' (Sengupta, 1992). The necessity of physically and mentally strong sons to fight the Imperial power and release Bharat Mata free from the fetters, accentuated the need for strong willed and efficient mothers in nineteenth century colonial India. It is at this time that the popularity of *Sarada* Devi as an embodiment of motherhood gained fervor. The political situation of the nineteenth century therefore aided in publicizing the popularity of *Sarada*.

It is a widely acknowledged fact that Ramakrishna's development of the Mother-symbolism of the nurturer and protector influenced the ascetic image of Bharat Mata of the incipient Indian nationalism later on (Amaury, 1961). Through her idolization and worship, Ramakrishna emphasized her motherhood to his followers. Ramakrishna was often heard to say that the Mother Goddess he worshipped was the same as the one who lived in the *Nahabat*. He wanted *Sarada* to manifest the Motherhood of God to the world, which however entailed asexuality and sacrifice of her biological motherhood. The idea of motherhood of God emphasized conception of God as a mother. This conception conjoins with the nationalist imagination of India as a Divine Mother. Ramakrishna projected *Sarada* as the avatar of Goddess Saraswati, who had taken re-birth to guide and teach life's ideals to the spiritually confused generation (Gambhirananda, 1983). Thus, the objective was to manifest through *Sarada* Devi a living example of motherhood liable for shaping children's mental health and education. He once exclaimed in praise of his follower Keshab Chunder Sen's mother that 'people will celebrate her entrails' suggesting glorification of mother through greatness of sons (Bagchi, 1990).

Swami Vivekananda, the nationalist spiritual crusader, developed upon his guru's imagery of motherhood and tried to impress upon his global followers, the high status and respect enjoyed by Indian women as mothers. However, in his upholding of motherhood, he unconsciously devalued women as wife in his speeches. In the chapter on 'Mother Worship', Vivekananda decries that 'the highest of all feminine types in India is mother, higher than wife. Wife and children may desert a man, but his mother never [vi]. The Mother within the nationalist paradigm was also the de-sexualized female. Femininity and female sexuality were associated with negativity and impasse. The idea of woman began to be used interchangeably with the idea of Nation and appeared as a signifier of the latter in the nineteenth century nationalist discourse. Vivekananda envisaged Bharat as the mother encouraging 'co-existence of all religions and faith'[vii]. Therefore, motherhood became a ploy for the Indians to counter the civilization indictment discourse of the colonials and posit an elevated image of women's position in India. At the same time, the counter discourse enabled to enthuse a spirit of Indianness, nationality and oneness among the widely disparate and disconnected individuals of the land. The sacred biography of the Twice-Blessed Mother suggests *Sarada* to be the role model for India as a whole since she paved the way for India to regain its lost glory and grandeur. The author prays, 'Let India be awakened to that Ideal. Let all differences among nations…and untouchability…be wiped out forever by the examples of Mother's life. Let the disregarded race of the mothers gain their personal rights' (Sil, 2003).

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 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. After, the death of her husband, she was reduced to a penurious state and almost faded into oblivion. The young naïve girl inherited the fortune of a penniless, deserted being and a life full of uncertainties[vii]. While reminiscing of her distress at Kamarpukur after the death of Ramakrishna to one of her woman followers, Sarada states that it was only Bhanupishi who could perceive her depth of pain and mental hankerings and to whom she could rely on in moments of dejection. She added with a sense of assuagement to her sore heart that 'thereafter one by one her sons came' (author's translation), (Purnatmananda, 2003). The reminiscences thus testify to the fact of her loneliness and her inability to confide in others her mental turmoil but bear it in silence.

Despite everything, *Sarada*, emerged as the unofficial head and advisor of the Ramakrishna Math in a course of few years and controlled everything from the back. All the monk leaders consulted her for guidance regarding various actions of the Math and none could override her decisions or objections. Her statements were received as the order of a Guru (Sil, 2003). Although, there is a strict injunction

on the Ramakrishna Order of male monks to stay away from 'woman and gold' or *kaminikanchan*; this did not apply in case of Mother who was their pillar of strength and love. Vivekananda's letters imploring the brother monks of the Ramakrishna Order to comprehend the power and significance of *Sarada*, attest to the fact that her future position as the invisible administrator of the organization and her permanent placement in the hearts of the masses was a remarkable feat achieved singularly by her. They therefore defied general perception of the earlier biographers of Sarada's easy embarkation on a path prepared by her husband. *Sarada* could not avail the opportunity of reading scriptures, religious texts or traverse different places like her husband and Vivekananda, before assuming the role of the future spiritual guide. She was not even allowed to study beyond the primers by her husband or to attend religious gatherings along with him for fear of public scrutiny and humiliation. *Sarada* eagerly watched and listened to Ramakrishna's theological explanations and witty informative exchanges from behind the bamboo curtain, so much so that she developed severe rheumatism from long hours of standing. The biographers have referred to this anecdote as proof of *Sarada*'s love and longing for her husband, and have missed the fact that, that *Sarada* ached to read. She nursed a great desire for 'complete and autonomous understanding' of religious texts which she ultimately accomplished in a course of many years by seeking aid from different women[viii].

Sarada's life was problematic and did not entail a regular form of wedded bliss wished by most women. It was full of sacrifices. Vivekananda said, "No Hindu can be a priest until he is married, the idea being that a single man is only half a man, and imperfect" (Vivekavani, 2023). Ramakrishna's marriage with *Sarada* ensured success in his spiritual path but robbed her of her desire for motherhood. It should be noted that socio-culturally and historically, motherhood was then the only vocation open to women and the only sphere of self-expression and self-realization. But Ramakrishna's offer of "universal motherhood" and divine motherhood traded woman's instinctive desire, choice of essential motherhood, and sense of belonging for a public role. The rhetoric of Ramakrishna's divine motherhood defined her role as a preacher and emphasized on the perpetuation of his teachings as his aide after his death. *Sarada* Devi on the other hand, insisted on becoming the mother to her devotees and impressed on their minds the same. This is evident when she insisted her followers to think of her as a real mother and not as the Master's wife or mother *per se*. She declared in bold terms to Girish Ghosh, the popular dramatist and ardent follower of Ramakrishna, and also to her followers in her advanced years of spiritual maturity, that she was 'a mother not by virtue of being (their) Guru's wife, nor because of, any assumed relationship, nor by way of empty talk, but truly the mother' ("Life Girish Chandra Ghosh", 2017). Although, she eventually complied with her husband's ascetic mode of living and her denied motherhood but she prevented him from exercising control on her maternal love. She was firm, unflinching and independent when she urged her husband to stay away from her motherhood

and thereby reclaimed the space of woman's autonomy. The scholars have argued for the divergence in principles of Ramakrishna and his disciple Vivekananda, but no attempt has been made to understand Sarada beyond the idea of a subordinate or a helpmate in the fulfilment of the dreams of the two men. It is true that all three of them were striving towards a common goal of mass spiritual upliftment, but my study shows that, they each followed a distinct path depending upon their own individual personalities and projected performing identities. This paper explores how *Sarada* navigated the world of the imagined and the world of the real on the vehicle of motherhood.

In the context of early Nationalism, the relationship between the image of Bharat Mata as first imagined by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in his *Ananda Math* and that the lived experiences of women were complexly layered. Eminent scholar Indira Chowdhury remarks that," 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"[ix]. The imagined ideal of motherhood during nationalism proved to be a double-edged sword and pushed woman to a further compromised position. Indian nationalist discourse refashioned the Indian state into the symbolic figure of 'Bharat Mata'. The image of mythical goddess was further imported and imposed on women. Other aspects erased, women were merely viewed and glorified as mothers or simply as deliverers of heroic sons. Thus, the unexpected discovery of latent heroism in mothers was not located in any penitent realization of active agency in woman but was linked to the birth of heroic sons. The heroic pedagogy of mothering neither did strengthen the position of ordinary women nor did deify her in any respect but treated her as a means of achieving cultural self-understanding, agency, pride and glory. The figurative mother figure within Indian nationalist discourse is pronatalist and emphasizes the gendered roles of nurturing, caring and self-sacrifice in women. Woman's chastity and purity became a matter of grave concern at this time and consequently, woman, was simultaneously 'defiled and deified'[x] within the nationalist discourse. The idea of Bharat Mata is entwined with this idea of female sexuality and body where honour resides only with a chaste female body devoid of sexual desires. In the words of scholar, Hira (2017), "The sexuality of a woman gets both invoked and repressed, defined and regulated" in the rhetoric of 'Bharat Mata'[xi]. On one hand, she was eulogized and glorified in her motherhood, and on the other, she was debased and tormented as a wife. It was these twin tenets, firstly, the nationalist ideology which gave precedence to mother over wife, and secondly, the religious image of the divine mother, which influenced *Sarada*'s life and role.

The course of *Sarada*'s life was determined at this time of political differences. Her life was meant to be read (much like Rassundari Devi) as a single narrative, the two lives of God's and the devotee's intertwining and interanimating each other (Sarkar, 1993). Here, there were two Gods; one was her husband, the great Seer Ramakrishna, who dictated her future and the other was Vivekananda who

provided her with the launching ground to embark on her spiritual journey. There was also a third factor, as potent and powerful as the other two. This was the role played by the authors and the critics representing her and her life. But, *Sarada* refused to remain a dummy or an agent and charted a new journey of her own. She possessed a rare combination of unflinching devotion to husband God as well as fierce assertiveness and authority. Almost all nineteenth century women narratives depict a quest for identity and autonomous subjectivity. *Sarada* too embarked on a journey that not only enabled her in finding her individuality and identity, but also enabled others to reconstitute themselves and find integrity in life simultaneously.

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. After Ramakrishna's death, Sarada Devi truly arose as the key figure in the Ramakrishna Movement and helped in disseminating his teachings world-wide but in her own unique way. *Sarada* countered the conservative biological and gender essentialist approach to motherhood and re visioned it as inclusive, incorporating all differences into the fold of humanity. *Sarada*'s carving a niche of her own in the male dominated realm of spirituality was therefore a 'maternal triumph' over dry renunciative notions of exclusion and rejection. And she accomplished this solely on the basis of cosmopolitan motherhood which became the only religion of her life. *Sarada*'s proclamation, "I am a woman and I follow my womanly nature" (Sil, 2003) seem to pave the way for feminism in India by positing a combination of both personal and community form of religion. This thesis is an attempt to understand how Sarada rose to the position of power and eminence sometimes by submitting to the whims of the patriarchal men influencing her life and at times by charting a path of her own.

Sarada's understanding of the ideology of motherhood

Although, her biographers painted *Sarada* as a 'Mother who is not a mother', in other words a Goddess or a *Guru-mata* or Brahmani meaning wife of a Brahman; who shares mental attachment but not physical ties with her children; *Sarada*'s endeavour was to prove that she was not a mother in the conventional sense of the term. She once declared to dramatist Girish Ghosh that she was 'a mother not by virtue of being your Guru's wife, nor because of any assumed relationship, nor by way of empty talk, but your own true mother'[xii]. The separation that the imposition of divinity entailed was repudiated by *Sarada* every time she came closer to her children and served them. She even once remarked in irritation to a disciple who addressed her as the Divine Mother that 'You always harp on that one theme. I say that I am your mother, and that does not satisfy you.'[xiii] *Sarada* never wanted to create a feeling of remoteness in the minds of her children and thereby desisted from asserting herself as divine Goddess to her intimate disciples. And even if she complied with the fact of Divine Mother

in certain circumstances, she perceived it differently. She was once heard to reflect that, 'People call me the Divine Mother. I think, maybe they are right. How otherwise can one explain the strange things that have happened in my life?. . . If I say to myself that a certain thing should happen, the wish is always fulfilled'[xiv]. So, divinity for her was a way of explaining women's pragmatism and visionary power in a world that refuses to accept women's intellectual compatibility with the men. The anecdotes and the reminiscences overlook the challenges of being deified. She was always under the radar of the public. She had to offer clarification for every action and reaction of her. Given the social restrictions of her time and her own pitiful predicament, it was impossible for *Sarada* to rebel against society's preoccupation with superstition or the hagio-political agenda of mystical representation. In order to survive and carve out her own space and identity, she too complied and even added dimension to the fabricated tales of divinity.

Sarada manifested that in femininity, which is perceived as an ensnaring and debasing thing by patriarchy as a whole; alone lies the power and possibility of regeneration of mankind. Despite living and working in an oppressive patriarchal domain, she is seen to protest and stand firm in matters relating to motherhood. Motherhood in case of *Sarada*, emerges as a symbol of strength and autonomy influencing woman's identity and position. Food and feeding are deeply rooted in maternal nurturing. *Sarada* protested when Ramakrishna complained of her extravagance in distribution of food to his followers, and forcedhim to comply and allow her will to triumph. These instances indicate that she was very keen on establishing maternal bonding and asserting her maternal identity. The act of giving food creates a sensation of warmth and love between a mother and her child, and establishes communion with people by providing an immediate experience of fulfilment, a sense of belonging, and thereby provides for both psychological and physical nourishment. *Sarada* sought to re-constitute and develop the close bonding between mother and child through the act of providing nourishment. *Sarada* even refused to abide by the rule of the spiritual organization to address the disciples inducted to renunciation by their *sannyasi* names, and called them by their birth names (Gambhirananda, 1983). She cited the logic of the relationship of attachment between mother and children. Thus, the conventional feminine practices were used as a trope for fighting suppression, asserting independence, and negotiating identity in case of *Sarada*.

Ramakrishna imagined her as the future spiritual benefactor of the masses after his death, but she was never allowed to actively participate in the public world prior to his death. *Sarada* lived almost in imprisonment inside the tiny room of *Nahabat*, the musical tower above the gate of the temple. She never left it even for ablutions or calls of nature except in the wee hours of night. She could not even get access to the spiritual discourse taking place every day in the room next to the *Nahabat*, where her own husband was the cynosure of attraction. However, the strict confines of her *antahpur* could not

deter strong-willed *Sarada* from acquiring knowledge or from developing maternal bond with Ramakrishna's followers. *Sarada*, propelled by curiosity, perforated the bamboo screen divider just enough to have a peek into the public realm. Thus, *Sarada*, instead of dismantling the wall between the public and the private, punctured it and stood at the juncture of transition between the modern and the traditional.

Women of nineteenth century lived a puppet like existence bereft of both significance and purpose, save as raw materials for social progression. *Sarada* encouraged mass moral awakening, and initiated the suffering, the deprived and the marginalized to spiritual philosophy, for whom the reformative measures and access to social institutions, religion and empowerment remained a distant dream. *Sarada*'s motherhood can be explained as a "metaphorical way of giving birth" (Sengupta, 1998) to herself as also to her devotee children. Many girls subjected to patriarchal torments, found freedom, peace and identity in her protected shelter. Some girls even became *Pravrajikas* (nuns) of the Sarada Math, the women's wing of the Ramakrishna Math, under her guidance. As for example, Parul, who became *Pravrajika Bharatiprana*, the first President of Sarada Math. Motherhood for her became a tool for transforming patriarchal maternal ideology and redefining female identity and femininity. Femininity normatively defined through the parameters of ontological functions and sexuality, transforms in case of *Sarada*, into a qualitative attribute affecting human understanding of oneself and his/her connection with the world of creations. Motherhood as lived and practiced by *Sarada* was an evolved spiritual experience making way for collaborative living, human empathy and bonding. Motherhood in case of *Sarada*, transcends the limitations of its narrow-codified definition of bonding between mother and children and adopts the macrocosmic Indian philosophical view of the connection between all human beings, and connection between man and the outer cosmic world. It transcends even human diversities of language, class, caste, nationality and others, and gives rise to homogeneity and inclusivity.

Conclusion

Sarada Devi is one of the earliest women to question and unsettle dominant gender power equations. She through her craving for biological motherhood, voluntary rearing of her niece and caring for the needs of hundreds of devotee children with the joy and satisfaction of a biological mother, gave voice to subjugated womanhood. She prioritized woman's choice, desire, autonomy and self-identity. The scholars are thus propelled to revisit the concept of motherhood from the perspective of Indian womanhood.

Spiritual movement, which indirectly aided nationalism, as it rejected caste distinctions and religious prejudices, evolved as a unifying weapon at the embracing call of Holy Mother. She provided a

resolution to the question of 'embodying the twin problems of female agency and female subject-formation' (Sengupta, 1998). *Sarada* by affirming the inseparability or oneness of God and Goddess time and again to her followers, based on the tenets of foundation of the Vedanta philosophy, created an enabling space for femininity and womanhood. Research says, "Woman-centred spiritualism allowed women ample space to examine and subvert Victorian gender norms"[xv]. The act of forming spiritual communities by women was emancipating in itself since it provided comfort, mental peace and support to helpless women. It offered visibility, voice and autonomy to hitherto marginalized women. Spirituality allowed women to savor freedom and control within an otherwise "uncontrollable social organization and relations of power" (Bannerji, 2002). *Sarada*'s idea of motherhood is therefore inseparable from the interconnected relation between women and spirituality, and her identity as the spiritual leader. However, her identity as the spiritual gurustill remains subsumed under the reflection of the two powerful men, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, and requires detailed exploration and exposition with relation to femininity and administrative pragmatism.

End notes:

i Swami Gambhirananda., *Holy Mother Shri Sarada Devi*, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1942.

ii Gayatri C. Spivak*., Other Asias*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2007, p 207. The reference is repeated in S. Sharma, "Sarada Devi" in Long, J.D., R.D. Sherma, P. Jain., M. Khanna. (eds) *Hinduism and Tribal Religions. Encyclopedia of Indian Religions*, Springer, Dordrecht. 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1188-1_841

iii One is reminded of Satyajit Ray's film Devi (1960), based on Provat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's short story, exploring the psychological upheavals in young girls worshipped as incarnations of Goddesses Durga or Kali. The film depicts that the repercussion of the act on young Doyamoyee was too much. She moved on from initially believing herself as Devi to being psychologically distraught at the sight of her failed powers in curing and bringing Khoka back to life. Ray deals with the inability of young girls voicing their own feelings and opinions and the absence of free will in religious orthodoxy.

iv Sage Anusuya and sage Arundhati are a couple of such figurative mythical examples who held a place of authority in the hermitages of Guru Atri and Guru Vashishtha respectively.

v Swami Vivekananda Views On Women - Indic Today (indica. today)

vi The sayings were accumulated as fragmentary notes of a class lecture by Vivekananda at New York. Mother worship (ramakrishnavivekananda.info)
www.msn.com/en-in/news/world/abanindranath-tagore-rejected-european-art-promoted-hindu-spirituality-to-convey-indianness/

vii Ramakrishna had dictated her to keep the door at the south open, and will claim no right to Ramlal's (his nephew who stayed with Sarada at Dakshineshwar) property even if he builds 'Kothabari' or whorehouses. Sarada states that Ramlal truly earned so much that he had enough to spare in building whorehouses. [source missing

viii During her stay at Kamarpukur, Laxmi who frequented the village pathshalas, helped Sarada to learn how to read a little. Later in life, after the death of Ramakrishna, at Dakhineshwar, Sarada used to gift leaves and vegetables to a girl who made her learn the letters.

ix Indira Sengupta Chowdhury., "Mother India and Mother Victoria: Motherhood and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal". South Asia Research, Vol.12, No.1, 1992. (PDF) Mother India and Mother Victoria: Motherhood and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal (researchgate.net)

x A term used in book description of Tanika Sarkar., *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Time*s. Orient Blackswan.

xi Hira Naaz., "Women's Sexuality in The Indian Nationalist Discourse", Aug 14, 2017, https://feminismindia.com>woman

xii Girishchandra Ghosh., "Sri Sarada Devi: The Holy Mother", 2017. Sri Sarada Devi – The Holy Mother

xiii Swami Nikhilananda., "Sarada Devi: The Holy Mother", Sarada Devi: The Holy Mother | Vedanta Society of Southern California

xiv *Ibid*

xv Vivekavani, "Gauri Pandit", January 16, 2023. GauriPandit - VivekaVani

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