

# Pravrajika Shraddhaprana



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People wish for a long life. But its fulfilment and glory lies in consciously dedicating that life, from the beginning to the end, to some great, noble ideal. In 1941, Swami Virajanandaji Maharaj, in a letter to his disciple, Lakshmi Sinha, wrote: "I am overjoyed to find that you cherish a sincere desire to lead your life with a spiritual goal. Since you have taken refuge in Sri Sri Thakur, believe that you are blessed with good samskaras. Now, depending on the intensity of your efforts in spiritual life, with patience and perseverance, you will experience within you that veil after veil will be lifted. ...But it will not happen all of a sudden in two days. As I have told you, you will have to toil year after year with constant faith and courage. How many God-realized souls have been born among women! If you try to become one among them, why should it be impossible?"

This blessing, full of assurance from her Guru, great Seer as he was, sustained her throughout her journey along her chosen path. In this connection, there is an incident worth mentioning. In 1948, she had joined the group of dedicated women workers at the Sister Nivedita Girls' School in Kolkata. Before that, she was teaching in the Annie Besant College at Varanasi and at the time she used to frequent the Advaita Ashrama there. She had the opportunity to meet Swami Omkaranandaji and other senior monks and received their blessings, love and inspiration.



In 1951, after working three years in Sister Nivedita's school, she revisited Varanasi and met the Swamis at the Advaita Ashrama. About this, she wrote in a letter to Asha-di (later, Pravrajika Muktiprana), who was in charge of the dedicated women workers at the Nivedita School, "Yesterday morning I had an interview with Ananga Maharaj (Swami Omkaranandaji). After scolding me a lot, he said, 'You have gone there from this Shiva-kshetra and have again come to this Shiva-kshetra. Before you leave here again, make a vow. Daily, when you wake up from sleep, say these words with great stress: "I will die, sacrificing each moment of my life for the sake of His work"".' In the history of the Ramakrishna Order, the long life of this ninety-year old great *sadhika* is verily a rare example of steady and sustained dedication.

### **Father Touches Sri Ramakrishna Feet**

Pravrajika Shraddhaprana was born in the city of Patna in 1918 on Kojagari Lakshmi Puja day and therefore named Lakshmi. Her father, Mathuranath Sinha was a well-known Advocate in the Patna High Court. His identity, however, was not limited to simply being an Advocate as far as the Ramakrishna organisation is concerned. As a student in Kolkata, he frequented the Brahmo Samaj where he was greatly attracted to its charismatic leader, Keshab Chandra Sen. Once, on the streets of Bagbazar, Mathuranath happened to see Sri Ramakrishna at a distance. He rushed towards him and offering his pranams, touched his feet. Later, he divulged this incident to his youngest and dearest daughter, Lakshmi. She had been under the impression that her father was a Brahmo by faith, so she asked him, "Why did you run and make pranams to Thakur?" "Irresistible desire!" was the reply. "Then, didn't you go to him again after that?" "No." "Why?" "Keshab Sen dazzled our eyes."

Actually, Keshab Chandra's influence on the younger generation of his time was overwhelming. Once earlier also, Mathuranath chanced to see Sri Ramakrishna. That was when he was a student in the Metropolitan School. Vidyasagar himself was his local guardian. One day, Thakur came to his school accompanied by Master Mahashay. The boy Mathuranath saw him through the window of his classroom. Thakur looked in searchingly at the students as he passed by.

### **Meeting Swami Vivekananda**

Years later, Swamis Vivekananda and Akhandananda set out as wandering monks, intending to do tapasya in the Himalayas. Wearing shabby, worn out gerua clothes and with a staff and kamandalu in their hands, no one could recognise them. On the way, they stopped at Bhagalpur, where they took shelter in the house of Manmathanath Chowdhury, the guardian of Kumar Nityananda Singh. Within a short time Manmathanath Babu discovered that these shabby looking sadhus were highly learned and well-versed in Western and Indian philosophy. Mathuranath Sinha was at that time the private tutor of Kumar Saheb and was living with Manmathanath Babu. He had not yet started practising Law. Mathuranath has recorded his meeting with the two sadhus:

On first sight itself I was attracted to them. I remembered that I had seen one of them in Kolkata while I was a student there. In the Brahmo Samaj he used to sing. He was the one who later became famous as Swami Vivekananda. We discussed several topics with him—literature, philosophy and religion—especially the last two.



In spite of his success as an Advocate, Mathuranath suddenly determined to give up his profession, come what may. Later in life, Shraddhaprana Mataji reminisced: "The intelligentsia of the city often came to him for advice and legal counsel. When Sister Nivedita visited Bodh-Gaya along with Rabindranath Tagore, Jagadish Chandra and other distinguished people, Jadunath included Mathuranath in the party as a lawyer because they were involved in a dispute regarding the Bodh-Gaya temple. At that time, the Buddhists started claiming the temple to be theirs and demanding that it be under their control, although it was built and maintained by the Hindus till that time.

About her father, Shraddhapranaji said that just before leaving for his heavenly abode, he was heard to say, "I am going into the arms of the Divine Mother."

### **Mother Teaches Her Daughter to Serve Others**

Lakshmi-di's mother, Sushila Devi, was also a wonderful person. Even when the family income stopped when her husband renounced his profession, she managed to make both ends meet as well as maintain liberal hospitality towards friends and relatives. How she did so could never be fathomed. To her daughter, she used to say, "Guests come only to the homes of good and pious householders. Consider yourself fortunate that people visit our home, regarding us as such."

When Lakshmi-di was about to appear for her M.A. examination, she was busy with her studies. To remind her of the urgency of attending to the guests who had come, her mother asked her, "I want to know, if guests come to our house, will they get a cup of tea or not?" To her, entertaining

guests was much more important a duty in the household than her daughter's studying for an examination.

During that difficult time of economic crisis, the bank where Sushila Devi's jewellery was kept, failed. Nevertheless, she was unperturbed. When someone showed sympathy, she simply said, "The One (God) who gave it has taken it back." Sushila Devi was a voracious reader, not only of Bengali literature but of Bengali translations of English books. Lakshmi-di was a student of English literature. Her mother once surprised her by narrating the whole story of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The depth of character, the sense of dignity and nobility which were the fragrant flowers of her parents' personalities were all found to be fully bloomed in their youngest daughter.

### **Holy Company at the Patna Ashrama**

From the early age of six or seven, Lakshmi-di started visiting the local (Patna) Ramakrishna Ashrama in the company of her parents. Swami Jnaneswarananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda was in charge of the Ashrama. He was called "Chhoto Swamiji" (Junior Swamiji). In those days, the Ashrama consisted of only a few mud-huts with a verandah and thatched roof. There was no electricity. Lanterns were the only source of light after sunset.

Some memories of the Ashrama made such a deep impression on little Lakshmi's mind that they remained vivid throughout her life. On Christmas Eve the Chhoto Swami would decorate Jesus on the mud-verandah of the Ashrama with candles, roses, chrysanthemums and so many other things; but the child's eyes would be fixed on the cakes and pastries!

When Jnaneswarananda Maharaj would discuss various topics with her father and other gentlemen, beside her father would sit this young child, old in wisdom. When the revered Maharaj would hold scripture classes for the devotees, her seat would be next to his and none could move her from there. Once, during a solar eclipse the child went to the Ashrama and saw Chhoto Swamiji spreading his asana to do japa in a corner of the small shrine room. At once she sat down next to him. She had no idea that Maharaj would sit like a statue for more than two hours. Imitating him, she tried to sit with eyes closed, but every five minutes she opened her eyes and looked at his face or at the devotees.

Lakshmi-di retained similar such bits of memories in connection with Swamiji's birthday celebrations. On the previous day, the children of devotees would gather flowers and make garlands. When the poor were fed, these children would serve the water and salt. That was one of her greatest joys.

The Chhoto Swamiji had a golden voice. Remembering his divine singing, Shraddhapranaji has written, "On the occasion of a gathering in the courtyard of our home, Swamiji was singing in his God-like voice, that famous song, *"Jo kuch hai, so tu hi hai!"* ("All that exists art Thou!") I was sitting next to Swamiji and was looking at his face; . . . lanterns were hanging from the trees. The light was shining on Chhoto Swamiji's face in a picturesque way, as if there were a halo around him. Suddenly, one of the lanterns fell to the ground and dashed to pieces. But Swamiji did not notice it. . . . He continued singing. I remember . . . tears trickling from his eyes. I can still see those tear-stained cheeks with the light of the lantern upon them."



This holy association with the sadhus in childhood built a strong foundation of spirituality in the life of Shraddhapranaji. She was not old enough to receive any spiritual instruction from Jnaneswarananda Maharaj, but she wrote, "I still feel that all the time, Swamiji was kindling my latent spiritual energy by allowing me to move in his company."

Swami Jnaneswaranandaji spent the major part of his sadhu life in the West. He preached Vedanta in Chicago and there he breathed his last when he was just forty-four. Later, his devotees brought out a book of reminiscences about him. Included in them are Shraddhapranaji's memories of her childhood days. She wrote, "I have a childish faith—though when I grew up I knew he was among the liberated souls and one with Sri Ramakrishna—but still I have that childish faith that I shall meet him, just as Chhoto Swamiji, as Jnaneswaranandaji, after my death."

Just opposite Lakshmi-di's home lived her bosom friend, Padma Sarkar. Padma's aunt, Saralabala Sarkar who had been closely associated with Sister Nivedita, used to spend a few days there now and then. Lakshmi-di was inspired to hear her absorbing, vivid description of Sister Nivedita.

### **An Extraordinary Guru, an Extraordinary Disciple**

In November, 1941 an opportunity presented itself for Lakshmi-di's initiation. Srimat Swami Virajananda Maharaj, the sixth President of Belur Math had come to the Patna Ashrama. When she went to the Ashrama for her initiation, her mother, Sushila Devi accompanied her.

Swami Virajananda was not an ordinary guru. He had received mantra *diksha* from Holy Mother. Swami

Vivekananda, himself, had ordained him into sannyasa. He was Swamiji's Kalikrishna. Swami Virajananda's conception of Swamiji's ideals was as clear as daylight. He was one of the earliest among the group of boys who frequented the Baranagore Math soon after the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna went to live there. He thus formed a bridge between the older generation of direct disciples and the younger generation of monastics at the Math. As such, he was an exceptional person in the Order. He was equally capable of long hours of meditation and tapasya in places of pilgrimage in the company of the direct disciples and of starting missionary work in a remote place in the Himalayas, inspired by Swamiji.

Swami Virajananda quickly understood the deep spiritual power latent in his disciple, Lakshmi-di. He was well aware of the minute details of all the advantages and disadvantages Lakshmi-di had to face in the orthodox framework of her family. In spite of that, he encouraged her to cultivate in herself the qualities that would make her fit to do Swamiji's work.

Soon after her initiation, a steady stream of correspondence ensued between the guru and disciple regarding the lofty ideals he knew she would imbibe—and what inspiring letters they were! In June, 1942 Virajanandaji wrote:

....In his conversations with Nivedita, in several places, Swamiji dealt in detail upon the problems of women. Read these selections. In Nivedita's writing also, wherever there is a discussion of women's problems, know it for certain they are based upon ideas given by Swamiji. . . . He had great hope in educated and pure Brahmacharinis like you. He

wished that such women, inspired by the high ideals of Brahmacharya, renunciation and service would work among women—by work, by example and through education they would help them to develop. Then alone would Gargis, Maitreys and Madalasas be born in our country. If you can do this, then I say, “*bahadur!*” (bravo!)

During this period, Lakshmi-di had to cope with household duties along with her post-graduate studies. Her parents were getting old, so, naturally it was expected that their unmarried daughter would shoulder these responsibilities in the family. Even on the day she was to appear for her M.A. examination, she had to finish cooking for the family before leaving home. The results were not up to her expectations and she wanted to take an M.A. in another aspect of her subject but Maharaj did not approve of it. Rather he encouraged her to accept the offer of a teaching job in the Annie Besant College for girls at Varanasi.

### Teaching at Varanasi

In those days it was not easy for an unmarried girl to work in a college in a place like Varanasi. Her students of those days say her dignified personality commanded respect. Moreover, she used to appear aesthetically well-dressed. Many of her students later held high posts in the field of education.

Lakshmi-di was quite fond of North Indian cuisine: *rooti*, *dal sabji*, and so on. Instead of milk she had *channa*. The boarders at the college hostel had their evening meal at 5 p.m. Lakshmi-di, after finishing her duties at the college, would attend the readings and discourses by Ananga Maharaj which were regularly held at the Advaita Ashrama. By the



time these classes ended, it would be dark and the street by which she had to return would be almost deserted. At that time, the elderly Ramananda Maharaj (the "Boro Maharaj" of the Patna Ashrama of her childhood) was staying at the Advaita Ashrama. One night, after the class, Lakshmi-di requested him to accompany her through the lonely street. "Boro Maharaj" was a good singer. He replied in jest, "Already my throat is dry after singing, and now I have to accompany you!" Lakshmi-di, looking straight at this fatherly Maharaj, blurted out, "And what about *me*! I forego my evening meal whenever I come to attend this class!" She wrote,

From the next day, Ramananda Maharaj used to accompany me through the dark streets and when we neared the college hostel, he would bring out a packet from under his chaddar and hand it over to me. It would invariably contain *rooti* and *sabji* prepared in the Ashrama.

Throughout her life, Shraddhapranaji treasured these memories of the pure love and blessings of the sadhus of the Ramakrishna Order.

Swami Virajananada Maharaj, during this period would spend quite a number of days every year at Dehradun in the house of Captain Mitra. His health would improve in the salubrious climate of that place. Whenever Lakshmi-di got an opportunity, she would rush to Dehradun from Varanasi to be in the presence of her guru and be immersed in that atmosphere. From Varanasi, she used to send *pranami* and fruit and vegetables to Maharaj. He would be pleased to receive them and would write to her, conveying his blessings. Once he wrote, "I am pleased to receive your offerings and

*pranami* on the occasion of my seventy-fourth birthday. My infinite love and blessings to you!" Sometimes he sent prasad to his beloved spiritual daughter after his birthday celebration on the *Snan-yatra* day.

### **Her Cherished Destination: Nivedita School**

After staying in Varanasi and having the holy company of the sadhus there, a clear picture of her future life took shape in the mind of the disciple. She expressed to her guru her wish to join the Sister Nivedita School as a dedicated worker. Maharaj was waiting for this auspicious moment. He immediately replied:

I am filled with joy on reading your letter of the 14<sup>th</sup>. If you can take up a noble ideal and dedicate yourself to the work of Thakur, Ma and Swamiji, what else can be happier than that! I am really glad that after all these years you have chosen a definite course of life and feel satisfied. . . . If you work in Nivedita School, it will help you in the improvement and progress of your spiritual life, no doubt. And it is also true; women like you are needed there. . . . But may you not have the attitude that you are going there to help them.

Strengthened by the blessings of her guru and by her own sincere and ardent aspiration, in 1948, she set out for her cherished destination—the Sister Nivedita School. It was then a branch centre of the Ramakrishna Mission. When she entered the precincts of the School and stood there, she felt it was not a mere school but a holy temple. All the weariness of her journey vanished in a moment. Though she arrived at an odd hour, the ashramites welcomed her with love and affection and helped her to settle comfortably. She was enchanted by their sincere concern for her.



She met the Headmistress, Renu-di (Pravrajika Moksha-prana) that day at 4 p.m. At first sight, she was overwhelmed by Renu-di's sweet personality. This is her experience of her first day in her own words:

The school building was three-storeyed. The rooms on the first floor and a part of the ground floor were used as classrooms, in the other part, was the kitchen and dining area. The shrine was on the eastern side of the second floor and the other sides were used as residential quarters. The evening *arati* (on that day) was performed by Rabeya-di (Pravrajika Shrutiprana). On that marble floor of the shrine, she stood wearing a narrow red-bordered sari of coarse silk, holding the lighted *arati pradip* in her hand. Seen from a distance, she appeared as an image of some goddess. Till now, the sight of the *arati* on my first evening at Nivedita School is vivid in my mind.

On climbing the staircase to the second floor, the first room on the left side was allotted to Lakshmi-di. There, for thirty-eight years, from 1948 to 1986 she did uninterrupted sadhana amidst students, teachers and workers of the ashrama. There were special advantages to staying in the school building at Bagbazar. Udbodhan office, Holy Mother's house and Balaram Mandir are all close by. In fact the whole of Bagbazar is blessed by the touch of Sri Ramakrishna's feet and hence it is a holy place of pilgrimage. Lakshmi-di started visiting Belur Math every alternate day. She used to frequent the Cossipore Udyanbari which was a witness to Sri Ramakrishna's last days on earth. A few hours spent there in solitude filled her with peace.

Slowly, a sisterly kinship developed with the contemporary ashramites—Renu-di, Gouri-di (Pravrajika Dayaprana),



Bijoli-di (Pravrajika Vidyaprana), Sura-di (Pravrajika Pavitraprana), Jayalakshmi-di, Sushama-di (Pravrajika Amiyaprana) and above all, Asha-di (Pravrajika Muktiprana) and Kalpalata-di (Atmaprana)—as though all belonged to one single family. Everyone did her utmost to develop the school into a temple of learning through their pure life of regular spiritual practice combined with the selfless service of imparting education. This school is the dream that Sister Nivedita turned into reality through sustained struggle and sacrifice.

After reading a small booklet by Saralabala Sarkar regarding Nivedita, Lakshmi-di gained a new perception of the school. She made the ashramites as well as the teachers, and students aware of the honour and glory of the school associated with the name of Sister Nivedita. Through her, they could also understand the significance and importance of the School.

Old students remember that the moment she came and stood on the first floor verandah, just before the Morning Prayer, there would be pin-drop silence. Her personality commanded such respect and awe. It would appear at that time, as though Sister Nivedita herself was standing there. She loved to listen to the song in praise of Sister Nivedita sung by the students with depth of feeling:

Today we have come here, Sister  
To offer this *arghya* at your feet...

When she described in a few inspiring words the glorious sacrifice of Nivedita, she reminded those students of their great and difficult responsibility of holding high that ideal of the School. Lakshmi-di displayed a big map of India on the left side wall near the School entrance to remind the students

of Sister Nivedita's teaching: "Do *japa*—*Bharatvarsha* (India), *Bharatvarsha*, *Bharatvarsha*, *Ma, Ma, Ma*". Even today, the students pay their respects to this map and to a life-size picture of Nivedita on entering or leaving the School premises.

If any of the monastic workers in the Sarada Mandir (Boarding School) expressed annoyance at the noise of children shouting and running around, Lakshmi-di would remind her: "We are supposed to live under a tree (as *sadhus*). The building is for them. We live in this big mansion for their sake—to look after them and to teach them." She, in fact, enjoyed the joyous shouting of children at play in the ground floor courtyard. One monastic sister was required to sleep in each dormitory for the students in the Sarada Mandir. Students of the higher classes used to study an hour or two more at night than the usual time stipulated before their final examinations. If the monastic sister in charge of that dormitory complained of any inconvenience on account of this late hour, Lakshmi-di would admonish her saying, "At home, the mother willingly and patiently keeps awake with her children. How can you complain?"

Lakshmi-di was the Headmistress of the School from 1955 to 1967, and was the Secretary from 1955 to 1986. During her tenure as Headmistress and Secretary, the School, which was up to Class X till 1956, was up-graded to Class XI in 1957. An extra building was needed for it. The Ramakrishna Mission had acquired an adjacent plot through the State Government. A new building was built on it and it was consecrated by Srimat Swami Vishuddhananda Maharaj, the Vice-President of Belur Math on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1958 and it was formally declared open by Dr. B.C. Roy, the Chief Minister of Bengal on 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1958.

The School, so long under the Ramakrishna Mission was transferred to the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission on 9<sup>th</sup> August, 1963. Before this, two more buildings were added, one for the Primary Section and another for the Science Stream of the Higher Secondary course. In 1964, Shraddhapranaji undertook the construction of a building for the Industrial Section. In 1979, she purchased the adjacent premises on the southern side. She demolished a dilapidated house on it and converted this plot into a small garden. She loved plants and could not bear cutting trees or removing plants. Before leaving for the Math, she had applied for the acquisition through the Government of another house facing Ramkanto Bose Street and had worked hard to finalise it.

Shraddhapranaji inspired the teachers to take extra classes for the weak students. This inspiration was so deep that they took it as their mission to raise equally the standard of all the students—not merely cultivate a few brilliant ones. Shraddhapranaji had personal contact with each of them. Even when she was not the Headmistress, the senior teachers used to meet her before starting their school work.

Shraddhapranaji saw to it that the monastic teachers maintain a congenial relationship of cooperation with the other teachers and help them. She knew that such cooperation and unity is essential for any organisation's success. As a result of her sagacious administration, the school bearing the name of Sister Nivedita won fame as one of the best schools.

### **An Appropriate Name**

In 1953, along with six other dedicated women workers of the Ramakrishna Mission, Lakshmi received the vows of Brahmacharya at Belur Math from the President, Srimat



Swami Shankarananda Maharaj, and in 1959, Sarala Devi (Pravrajika Bharatiprana) and these seven Brahmacharinis were given sannyasa by him. After sannyasa, Lakshmi-di received her new name—Pravrajika Shraddhaprana—an appropriate name for her. She had by nature, *shraddha* or respect for, and trust in all. She was known for the catholicity of her outlook and the nobility of her heart.

During her administration in the Nivedita School from 1955 to 1986, several important events took place. She had to organise and conduct celebrations of Swami Vivekananda's and Nivedita's birth-centenaries and the Platinum Jubilee of the School. Apart from these, she took a keen interest in the yearly Independence Day celebrations and School-anniversary celebrations. For the latter, she, herself, would select the drama, the opening song, the passages for recitation, and so on. Her literary and aesthetic sense as well as her sense of humour would be appreciated and even imbibed unconsciously by the teachers and students, raising their consciousness in these areas and adding to their joy in their work.

The Independence Day celebration of her time is one to be remembered. All the students of each class would have to sing in chorus one of the patriotic songs, among those selected for the program. Incidents in India's freedom struggle would be presented through readings and recitations, interpolated by these songs. The students would prepare visual aids like charts and posters depicting the same theme. Men of literature or national leaders and such distinguished people would be invited guests and they would pay their homage to Nivedita's love for India. All these aspects of the program were originally planned by Shraddhaprana Mataji and continue even now.

The souvenirs that Shraddhaprana Mataji brought out on the occasion of Sister Nivedita's Birth-centenary and the Platinum Jubilee certify her ability to coordinate the teachers, prominent writers and research scholars who were admirers of Sister Nivedita. Her exposure to the company of the intelligensia in her childhood, which apparently at that time seemed to be of no consequence, had built in her the ability not only to move at ease among distinguished personalities but to bring them together for such a cause. The close connection they established with her in this work would be irrevocable.

The Birth-centenary of Sister Nivedita was celebrated on a grand scale from 28 October, 1967 through the end of the next year. Women delegates from various States of India were invited to participate in the conferences, meetings and so on, organised in this connection. Senior monks of the Ramakrishna Order, including the President, Srmat Swami Vireswaranandaji visited the School to pay homage to Sister Nivedita. In the public meeting at Mahajati Sadan, the Revered President Maharaj presided and prominent scholars were speakers. Behind the success of these celebrations was the leadership of Shraddhapranaji.

In 1967, there was a politically motivated teachers' strike which continued for several days. On the first day, some people came to the School to picket. But by the time they arrived, the School had already started functioning for the day—the Roll-call had been taken and teachers were holding classes. The picketers demanded that classes be dismissed. Shraddhapranaji told them calmly that since the Roll-call had been taken, it had already been recorded that the day was a working one and that would belie the success of their strike; so it would be immaterial to them whether classes



were held or not. They retreated but warned that the School may be harmed if it functioned from the next day from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.—the usual school hours, even if nobody comes to picket. Shraddhapranaji arranged for the classes to be held from 4 to 6:30 p.m.; so, the teaching continued!

Again, in 1970, there was a Naxalite movement—a violent movement that adversely affected the student community. Threatening warnings were given that schools should be closed and no examination should be held. But in the Nivedita School, under the able leadership of Shraddhapranaji, the Secretary and Swarupapranaji, the Headmistress, regular classes and examinations could be held even in the face of threatening and trouble. With closed windows, classes continued. As for the Annual Examination, Shraddhapranaji informed the students through the Headmistress that the day for the examination would be announced only on the previous day.

After a few days it was announced that exams would start the next day. The next morning the atmosphere was tense. The students had assembled for the paryer and at that moment there was some trouble created by two girls. However, under the calm leadership of Shraddhapranaji, the examination duly began. The culprits—one girl from Class IX and another from Class VII were caught. Their guardians were called and they were sent home.

All the teachers demanded that the girls be rusticated—denying their right to education in any school. But Shraddhapranaji argued on behalf of the girls. She said these minor girls had been instigated to commit this incident by their Naxalite elder brothers. The girls had been good students. Shraddhapranaji deemed that they would not be



allowed to appear for the examination, nor could they continue in this school. However, with her help, they were transferred to a neighbouring school when she appealed personally to the Headmistress of that school on behalf of the students. They later turned out to be good and successful citizens.

### **Resemblance with Sudhira-di**

Pravrajika Bharatipranaji enjoyed Shraddhapranaji's company, her conversation and her humour. She depended upon her whenever she went outside Kolkata. Once, Bharatipranaji was to go to South India. But Shraddhapranaji was scheduled to go somewhere else with Muktipranaji for some official work. Before leaving, Shraddhapranaji went from Nivedita School to Sarada Math. Bharatipranaji was then lying on her bed and did not even look up when Shraddhapranaji entered her room and called to her. Bharatipranaji was piqued like a child. Shraddhapranaji understood the situation and quickly said, "Ma, I am going with you!" At once, Bharatipranaji sat up with a smile. Bharatipranaji used to say that there was a marked resemblance in the appearance and nature of Shraddhapranaji with Sister Sudhira, who was Bharatipranaji's teacher in Nivedita School, and was the one who inspired her to renounce her hearth and home.

### **At the Headquarters**

Even while staying in the Nivedita School, Shraddhapranaji often went to the Math since she was Assistant Secretary of the Math and Mission. She helped the General Secretary, Muktipranaji who invariably consulted her before making any major decision. There was mutual understanding and respect between them. In 1986, after staying thirty-eight years at the Nivedita School, Shraddhapranaji went to stay

permanently at Sri Sarada Math Headquarters. Muktipranaji had a massive heart attack in 1988, after which her activities were restricted and Shraddhapranaji had to shoulder more responsibility. To keep Muktipranaji free from worry and anxiety, such was Shraddhapranaji's art of conversation that even when consulted on a serious matter she lightened it with witty comments. Shraddhapranaji daily had meetings with President Mataji. She personally monitored her physical condition and arranged for treatment whenever necessary.

Shraddhapranaji never supported increasing the activities of the centres; rather she advised improvement and maintenance of the activities already undertaken. To do anything for her own enjoyment was impossible for her. She was never interested in sightseeing or even going anywhere on pilgrimage. If at all she went anywhere, it was in the course of duty. She was not much interested in places. It was people in whom her real interest laid and with whom she would enjoy talking on various subjects. Otherwise, her favourite pastime was to read books on a wide range of topics.

### **As General Secretary**

After Muktipranaji's demise in 1994, Shraddhapranaji was elected General Secretary, which post she held till 1999. While she was in the Math as Assistant Secretary and General Secretary, branch centres were started at Varanasi, Gangarampore (W.B.), Indore, Siriti, Almora and Calicut. Her practical wisdom, foresight and ability to make decisions according to the situation were extraordinary. Mokshapranaji went to the Indore centre with a group of sannyasins including Shraddhapranaji. They were to return via Delhi, but Mokshapranaji wanted to visit Omkareswar. Accordingly, arrangements were changed for her but her



brahmacharini-attendant was to go to Delhi as scheduled. As she was Mokshapranaji's disciple and was eager to go to Omkareswar with her, she approached Shraddhapranaji for permission. Shraddhapranaji flatly refused. A while later, however, realising that this was the only chance for the attendant to visit Omkareswar in the company of her guru, Mataji gave her consent and made all the arrangements for her trip. The same attendant was helpless when she was required to cook rice for thirty people and in a place where there was no large vessel or other equipment. When Shraddhapranaji came to know the situation, she unhesitatingly, with folded hands, humbly requested three women devotees whom she had never met before to bring cooked rice to thirty people. They were overjoyed to comply.

### **A 'Singhini' for President**

Outwardly, Shraddhapranaji maintained a stern and serious look, especially when she was in the Nivedita School, where she earned from her students the nick name, "Singhini" (lioness), reminiscent of Nivedita. However, this totally changed once she became the President of the Organisation in 1999 after the Mahasamadhi of Mokshapranata Mataji. As third President of Sri Sarada Math, she started giving Diksha from 13<sup>th</sup> January 2000. At this time she took extra care to maintain close contact with the disciples of Mokshapranata Mataji so that they may not feel the loss of their Guru and continue to visit the Math as before.

During Shraddhapranaji's term as President of Sri Sarada Math, she laid the foundation stone and performed the opening ceremony of Rasik Bhita, the new building of the Primary Section of Nivedita School, the Golden Jubilee Block of Matri Bhavan, the Sarada Math building at Varanasi and the Sarada Math temple at Shihar. She also inaugurated the



centres at Valsad (Gujarat), Guntur (Andhra Pradesh), Colombo (Sri Lanka) and Balad Bandh (West Bengal).

Mataji would bear all personal inconveniences without a trace of displeasure. She would readily help her attendant in her duty by giving her necessary directions. She was always ready to listen patiently to problems of people who went to her and clearing their doubts with sympathy and foresight, would give them necessary advice and financial help also if needed. She was always sensitive to others' feelings and needs. One woman asked her, "If I surrender to God, can I then pray separately for this and that?" Mataji replied by asking, "If you ask the cook to feed you well, would you instruct him about how to cook: what ingredients are needed and so on? No. You will leave the responsibility to him and he will try his best to make the food delicious. Similarly, if you surrender yourself to God, then how can you pray for this and that?" Another time, she said, "You must have faith in Mother. If you pray with full faith, Mother will listen."

### **Service to Devotees**

A devotee asked Mataji, "What is meant by remembrance of God?" Mataji: "It is not like remembering a subject of study in the examination hall. It means lifelong constant remembrance, while eating, walking, lying down—to think of God all the time." She often told devotees, "Remember these three things:

1. Ma and Thakur are always with us.
2. Holy Mother said, 'Do not see others' faults.'
3. Householders should live in harmony, adjusting with one another in the family.

Apart from such conversations, she kept contact with those who were far away or incapable of coming to the Math,

either through letters or by telephone. She considered this her service to devotees. She always made herself available. Mataji would serve the members of the Sarada Mandir in Nivedita School and in Sri Sarada Math by reading to them selected portions of books or speaking to them about life in the Sangha. Once while talking about Thakur and Keshab Chandra Sen, she said:

Thakur said he is the dust of the feet of all. Swami Vishuddhananda had several times told us of Thakur's humility. God has everything. But how is it that He is humble? Who is greater than He? To teach humility, he comes as incarnations. They teach us how to consider the great as greater and to think of oneself as small. Let us learn to be humble.

### **The Sangha, Her Very Life**

The Sangha was to Mataji her very life. This spiritual organisation has been founded on the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda and the other direct disciples. She used to remind the monastic members that the Baranagore Math is the foundation of our Math also. She said, "The sadhus of Belur Math gave shape to this women's Math, based upon the ideals of Thakur and his direct disciples." Even in her advanced age she stressed this point, "The sadhus of Belur Math established such a big Math for us. What have we done for it? We have to try our utmost to preserve the purity and spirituality of this Math. May we hold on to Truth, to Dharma; may we respect and honour one and all. In our behaviour let us not express even a shadow of the egoistic pride that we are highly advanced. One sadhu told me, 'Don't forget that behind this Sri Sarada Math is the tapasya of many senior sadhus'."

If sadhus of Belur Math contributed articles for *Nibodhata* she would say, "This is a very good gesture. If they send articles, considering our journal as their own, the more they send the better." And she would add, "*Nibodhata* should be run keeping in mind the tradition, the tapasya and sacrifice behind the *Udbodhan*."

By the term, "Ramakrishna Sangha" is meant not merely the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission..., but also Sri Sarada Math and Ramakrishna Sarada Mission. She could never bear to differentiate one from the other. She believed that the liberal ideas and ideals of Sri Ramakrishna can be broadcast throughout the world only by mutual regard.

In the last Annual General Meeting of the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Association, held on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2008, Mataji could not be present, but she uttered a few words from her bed when asked for a message. This was recorded. A part of it runs,

This is the age of writing and speeches. But Swamiji has given a message. Before him, Thakur had hinted that if any message is to be given, with it life should be given. Without proper tuning of life there is no meaning in speech. That is why the few words Thakur's disciples had uttered within that short period could not be forgotten. They did not deliver lectures. They did everything informally. My prayer to Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and their disciples is: May they not allow us to forget their words. May their inspiration guide our lives!



## Her Sense of Humour

Mataji's sense of humour, keen intelligence and sensitive mind attracted people. One day, a young lady reporter from a newspaper office came to interview her. Mataji shouted that she would not even meet her. The girl assured her that she would not question her and just offered her pranam and left. When she told this to her Editor, who was well-known to Shraddhapranaji, he telephoned her and said, "I sent a girl to you and you shouted her out? She was frightened and could not ask you even a single question." Shraddhapranaji's quick reply was, "I shouted in self-defence!" The Editor laughed.

Once she went to address a gathering on some occasion. There were several children in the audience and they were making a good deal of noise. When her speech was over, one lady ran up to her and congratulated her saying, "What a wonderful speech!" Shraddhapranaji asked her, "Tell me: what did I say in the speech?" The lady replied, "There was so much noise, I couldn't hear at all."

Once, she returned from a public meeting where they announced her name as Shrāddhaprana instead of Shraddhāprana. On the verandah were seated other sannyasinis of the first group: Muktipranaji, Mokshapranaji, and Dayapranaji and Bhaktipranaji. Pretending to be angry, she said, "You are all Mukti, Moksha, Daya, Bhakti and *me*—Shrāddha!"

She would give funny names to youngsters and call them by those names, like 'Bagchi' became 'Bagchu', 'Santra' became 'Santragachi'. A short girl was named 'Tentul Bichi' (Tamarind Seed) and a thin girl, Tej Pata (Bay Leaf). A boy from Orissa whose name was Duryodhan came to work in Nivedita School. Before the other members of the School

hostel could come to know it, she changed his name to 'Udhishter' ('Yudhishtira').

Someone asked her, "You people live in comfort; what have you renounced?" The immediate reply was: "Freedom and future."

Even when her health failed in her last days, Mataji's sense of humour remained bright. When the monastic heads of almost all the centres came to see her, she turned to Amalaprana ji and feigning seriousness, asked her, "You have sent word only to these leaders; why have you left out those two: Pratibha Patil and Sonia Gandhi?"

One morning, she seemed to be semi-conscious or in deep sleep, so the attendants started calling her loudly—"Mataji, Mataji!" She slowly opened her eyes and said, "I will ask the doctors: is this the proper method of calling the patient—loudly, as though a dacoit has entered the room?"

### **Lakshmi-di's Last Lakshmi Puja**

Shraddhaprana ji completed ninety years on 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2008 on the Lakshmi Puja day, her last birthday. For quite a few days she was taking very little food. She was to go to our New Delhi Centre on 15<sup>th</sup> October to see Atmaprana ji but on the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup>, she suffered acute abdominal pain. She recovered a little in the evening, but again, had pain at night so the trip to Delhi had to be cancelled.

On the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> she was admitted to Bellevue Nursing Home for investigation. Although the doctors suspected some trouble in the colon, they could not recommend colonoscopy considering her age and health condition. On the 21<sup>st</sup> October, she returned to Sarada Math,

but the next evening, again, the colic pain started and she was admitted to Seva Pratishtan. From there she was brought to Matri Bhavan on the 25<sup>th</sup> morning. As she could not take enough food by mouth, a PV line was made.

On October 28<sup>th</sup>, she was brought to Sarada Math as she wished to be in the Math during her last days. It was the Kali Puja day. Sannyasini and Brahmacharini doctors and nurses nursed her, day and night. On 11<sup>th</sup> November, a Pick Line intravenous channel was made on her arm by a doctor who is a devotee of the Math. Homeopathic treatment started from 25<sup>th</sup> October, and that relieved her pain.

Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President of Belur Math and Swami Prameyanandaji Maharaj came to see her on 9<sup>th</sup> November. When President Maharaj wished her a speedy recovery, she said firmly, reciting a couplet in Bengali: "The time has come near; bondage has to be cut.' I hope you will pray for me."

On 18<sup>th</sup> November, Sister Sudhira's birthday, she felt better and was helped to sit in a chair. All the residents of the Math offered her pranams. It was hoped then, that she may recover. But on the morning of 11<sup>th</sup> December, she suffered a heart-attack. For about fifteen minutes there was no pulse. Due to the timely arrival of the doctors and with their help, she revived, but from that day she could not speak.

Within a few days breathing became difficult due to the accumulation of phlegm. It had to be suctioned out with a nebulizer. As this condition worsened, Tracheostomy was performed on 28<sup>th</sup> December. Feeding through a Ryles tube sustained her for about a month. Though her physical condition was deteriorating, she appeared calm and peaceful



without a trace of suffering. Ultimately, on 3<sup>rd</sup> February at 1:15 p.m. she breathed her last in her holy room at the Math, resounding with the chanting of sannyasinis.

Soon, the news spread. Devotees gathered in the Math premises in large numbers to have the last darshan of Mataji. Seniormost and distinguished monks came from Belur Math and Udbodhan, Mayer Bari, to pay their respects. Late at night, the mortal remains of Most Revered Shraddhapranaji were consigned to the flames at Cossipore crematorium.

Om Purnamadah Purnamidam  
Purnat Purnamudachyate  
Purnasya Purnamadaya  
Purnamevavashishyate  
Om Shantih Shantih Shantih

\* \* \*

## Excerpts of Letters to Shraddhaprana Mataji from Swami Virajananda

...Opposition has come and let more come —if you can withstand it, you will gain strength. If you are afraid, don't come; languish—nobody will oppose you. They will in fact appreciate you. This one says this, that one says that; by listening to all this, neither will your life's desire be fulfilled, nor will any problem be solved. Totally surrendering to Sri Sri Thakur, you have to stand on your own feet. If you are brave enough, if you have self-confidence and love for the ideal, then no obstacle will obstruct you—you will surely be able to go forward. If you sincerely want Him, Sri Sri Thakur will hold your hand and lead you to the goal. Be happy in Sri Sri Thakur's will. ...Lots of love and blessings (27.11.47)

\* \* \*

Very happy to read your letter. I can see Swamiji's power is gradually entering into you. I could sense an attitude of great courage and determination in your letter—quite different from what you were before. Don't worry. Thakur and Swamiji will certainly give you strength. Just depend on them. Take everything easily and calmly, depending upon their divine protection and guidance. (29.7.48)

\* \* \*

Never allow depression to enter your mind. The environment is not favourable, I understand. Still, you have to struggle within that situation. Struggle is life. Life is moulded only through struggle in the midst of sorrow, difficulties and failures. The one who has no struggle in life is the 'living dead'. How many days can you spend without calling on God, try

and see. Even if you give up the practice, it won't leave you. The cobra has bitten you, how will you escape? (26.9.43)

\* \* \*

Rest assured, that due to His infinite grace, you have now found refuge at His feet. He is always protecting you and He will provide whenever and whatever is needed for your spiritual progress. If you can surrender to Him your body, mind and speech and collect your thoughts scattered towards different sense objects and turn them towards Him and love Him with all your heart and soul, you will see how much compassion He will show for you and you will be overwhelmed with faith. However much doubt comes to your mind, try to apply that much great will and determination to hold on to Thakur. (17.6.45)

\* \* \*

If you want to take up a high ideal, you have to sacrifice, you have to leave everything in the hands of God. Let Him do whatever He wants. If there is 'me' and 'mine', how can there be any spiritual progress? Those two are the greatest obstacles. Solely depend on Sri Sri Thakur, looking to Him alone, surrender yourself at his feet. He is your all in all. He will definitely do whatever is necessary for your welfare. Go forward; don't look back! (21.8.47)

\* \* \*

All big storms and dangers will come. You have to manage everything on the strength of your own firm will-power and unflinching love for the ideal. Strength of mind is needed. It is no use asking me to do anything. You have to stand on your own feet. Even if the whole world goes against you, you must have determination. Yes, you have to consider all points



before doing anything. Can any great goal be achieved by the whims of the mind? And it is not a bed of roses. You have to struggle continuously. If you cannot, you will collapse. Who will protect you? The best weapon to fight these is faith in yourself. You will be able to do it You have to have firm faith that you will--why won't you be able to do it? It won't do to depend on me? If you stand on your own feet, my help and Sri Sri Thakur's power will automatically strengthen you and protect you always. Then you will succeed in all struggles. This cannot be gained by weeping. The goal can only be attained by exerting yourself with all your might. ... You have observed everything very well. You have to think it over and decide your own course of life. (27.11.47)

## Shraddhapranaji's Letter

Sister Nivedita Girls' School  
Bagbazar, Cal.-3  
21.8.80

Dear.....

Received your Inland (letter). I understand your inner feelings. Rightly have you written: "whom else shall I call upon? The child calls its mother alone..." Ramprasad has elucidated in his songs. For us also, Mother is there in weal or woe. Make this attitude strong. This life is short. We were born a thousand times before and died a thousand times. Now we are in this life in the midst of the drama. If we can play our part well, the one who directs the drama, the one who acts and those who see it all, feel satisfied and happy. What a great consolation, a great relief it is that this drama is not unending! The curtain will be drawn. The drama will end. The one with a name and a body will change its name and form and will wait for a part in another drama or it will get free from the stage. For it, will be no more drama, no more part to be played. Till then, let the part be played—in Kolkata, Madras or Delhi, Sarada Math or Baruipara or in Nivedita School or Matri Bhavan.

This picture of life may be seen in two different ways. In one, I see myself from a great distance through a binocular. This gives a clear vision. The other, is the ordinary way of looking through the window of my mind in which everything is smeared with the colour of my mind. In this (vision) it seems as though the others in the world do not understand me;

whereas I am able to understand them. But what is there after all? You have anchored your life in the feet of Sri Thakur, Ma or your Guru-Ma. So, have no fear of being carried away. He is in your heart; His name is on your tongue—the mahamantra. Now there is no fear, no worry. We won't be lost. We will ever be in Her lap. With love, yours,

*Shraddhaprana*

\* \* \*



## **Letters to Lakshmi-di from Swami Sraddhananada, Swami Virajananada's Attendant and Secretary**

You were born with the ability to love selflessly, expecting nothing in return. And that is why you are open in your dealings with people. You know in your innermost mind that even if you say anything rude to anybody, there is no selfish motive in that; so whatever you said for the welfare of another would not be misunderstood. ...

Daily, at least for a few moments, you should raise your mind to that higher level where all doubts, uncertainty, hopelessness, depression, weakness, vacillation--all these vanish like darkness at sunrise. The responsibility that fell on the sannyasi disciples of Thakur after his demise, the same responsibility has fallen on your batch as as the pioneers of the women's Math. ...(17.2.1950)

You are born to do the work of the Divine. Day after day, continually, your life is becoming more and more meaningful. You are doing their work as their instrument. It is their Power that is manifesting through you and will do so in future also. With how much deep insight had Revered Maharaj-ji given you the name, 'Shanta'! (April, 1962)

The spirit of renunciation becomes strong if you read books like the *Vivekachudamani* and the *Panchadasi*. Self-surrender, knowledge, devotion, work--everything is necessary. You have all these. The Beautiful is formed by the combination of all these. That is Thakur; that is Swamiji, that is our Mother. Study deeply, then there will not be anymore misconception or haziness re-

garding the principle, practical life, and so on. It is a different issue: what or how much I can do or not. But I must know what is my ideal, my principle, my life. Will you grope in darkness? You should definitely read, again and again. Before reading the *Gita*, it is necessary to read the Upanishads. You know Sanskrit quite well, so have nothing to worry about. It is a great achievement if intellectual conviction is gained. (no date)

Today How happy Revered Maharaj-ji feels, who lovingly gave you the name Shanta--that I can imagine. Now he is not in his physical body but he lives among his spiritual sons and daughters. Don't feel helpless. Your natural qualities of selflessness, catholicity and purity will bring sure success in Thakur and Ma's work. (25.1.55)

Maharaj-ji calls you 'Shanta'. That is not meaningless. The one whose mind is free of all clamour of desires, that daughter is Shanta. Shanta's peace will give peace to many other daughters. Seeing you from above, how glad Maharaj-ji is! Maya cannot even come near you. (April, 1955)

\* \* \*