

# Sri Sarada Society Notes

Dedicated to Holy Mother

Winter 2002, Volume 8, Issue 2

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## REFLECTIONS, VISIONS, AND APPRECIATION

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the founding of Sri Sarada Society as an independent, nonprofit devotee organization dedicated to promoting the manifestation of Holy Mother's inspiration in the West. When the idea came to offer devotees in the United States a convenient way to receive *Samvit*, the semiannual journal published in India by Sri Sarada Math, one could scarcely imagine the challenges and adventures ahead. This was a simple, modest project.

Soon, "simple" became exciting. As preparation for the Centennial Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's arrival in America was taking form, a new project emerged. With the help and enthusiasm of devotees across the country, Sri Sarada Society had the privilege of sponsoring Pravrajikas from Sri Sarada Math as participants in the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions. The visit of Pravrajika Amalaprana, who is now General Secretary of the Order, Pravrajika Vivekaprana, and Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana to America forged a lasting bond between Western devotees and Holy Mother's monastic daughters in India.

Sri Sarada Society continues to sponsor periodic visits by pravrajikas, together with other devotee organizations and groups which are forming.

In 1993, the Society received a substantial donation which was to be used to assist Sri Sarada Math in establishing its work in the United States. At nearly the same time, the Ridgely estate was being put on the market for sale. After being assured that the various Ramakrishna Vedanta groups were not interested in acquiring the estate, Sri Sarada Society became involved in a project which seemed the next step to take: the purchase of this property, which was intimately associated with Swami Vivekananda and made sacred by his presence.

Although Mother and Swamiji had different plans for Ridgely, Sri Sarada Society feels blessed to have launched this effort. Entering into an option contract to purchase took the 83-acre estate off the open market and was the beginning of three years of ground-breaking work to get the word out and raise funds. We did this through special events, pamphlet distribution and other means, including a television appearance on a regional station. Newspaper

ads were placed, sponsored by friends and admirers of Swamiji. During presentations to Vedanta groups around the country, a video, *Swami Vivekananda at Ridgely*, told the history of the estate.

Because of insufficient funding, Sri Sarada Society was unable to renew its purchase option in January 1997. Nevertheless, we continued our fundraising efforts until March, when we were notified of Belur Math's interest in the estate. Later that year, Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely, was founded and Ridgely's future within the Vedanta tradition was secured.

Prior to the Ridgely project, fundraising was not a part of the Western Vedanta movement. Setting aside our own reluctance in this regard has, perhaps, opened the way for additional projects, large and small, which flower from the service and generosity of others.

In 1996, "Holy Mother's Cyber-Tantu," our website dedicated to Sri Sarada Devi, was among the first Internet offerings from the Ramakrishna-Vedanta tradition. Since then, Mother's presence on the Internet has fostered companionship and sangha among devotees, many of whom do not have a Vedanta center nearby.

We have expanded this issue of SRI SARADA SOCIETY NOTES to six pages, in honor of our anniversary. In this issue, we are pleased to announce the release of *A CHALLENGE FOR MODERN MINDS*, a book containing selected lectures given by Pravrajika Vivekaprana. The publication represents a three-year collaboration with Edith Tipple, who approached Pravrajika Vivekaprana and Sri Sarada Society about publishing a book of edited talks.

We are also excited about the feature article on Holy Mother. It comes from Sreemati Mukherjee, a devotee who has undertaken the service of translating reminiscences of the Mother written in Bengali.

And, appropriately, for our anniversary issue, we include an article on Frances Leggett, the daughter of Frank and Betty Leggett. It is through France that the Ridgely estate remained within the Leggett family for three generations,

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**IN MOTHER'S WORDS:** "I am the mother of the wicked, as I am the mother of the virtuous.

Never fear. Whenever you are in distress, say to yourself, 'I have a mother.'"

## HOLY MOTHER: POWER UNVEILED

*Sreemati Mukherjee of Kolkata, West Bengal, India, has given us a portion of her translation of Lavaya Kumar Chakraborty's reminiscences of Holy Mother, originally published in Bengali in SRI SRI MAYER PADAPRANTE Vol III, compiled by Swami Purnatmananda and published by Udbodhan Karyalaya in 1997. We are pleased to include this excerpt in our 10th anniversary newsletter.*

The secrecy and mystery of the Veda that is Mother's life make it very eloquent. The Divine Mother remained in this world like a nineteenth-century Bengali housewife, enveloped in modesty. When we think of Brahman and his Shakti, the masculine and feminine, we think of the duo that was Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother.

The immensity and magnificence of Thakur's spiritual life were perhaps revealed to some, but Holy Mother remains an eternal mystery. So secret and yet so deep! When questioned closely about her, Ramakrishna's sannyasi disciples declined to answer most of the time. Swami Premananda once remarked: "Who has ever known Mother, who has ever understood her?" He would close his observation with an invocation to her: "Salutations to you Mother, Salutations to you!"

I once heard the same Swami narrate a visit of Swami Vivekananda to Holy Mother. It was during the monsoon season in Calcutta. The Ganges had swollen its banks. Swami Vivekananda and Swami Turiyananda had set out from Belur Math to visit Mother at Baghbazār. Swami Vivekananda was then unwell, running a temperature of 102 F. Suddenly Turiyanandaji observed Swamiji drinking the water of the Ganges, and putting some on his head. When the former cautioned him about how it could further impair his health, Swami Vivekananda remarked, "O Brother!



I am going to visit Holy Mother. God knows, if there is even a trace of impurity anywhere in my being, I'll be destroyed. My heart quakes with fear!" Perhaps, in these words of Swami Vivekananda, who is said to carry the chalice of Thakur's spiritual work, we get some indication of the true nature of the Holy Mother.

Swami Vivekananda was Thakur's foremost disciple, the inheritor of his spiritual riches, and the primary exponent of Thakur's spiritual principles to the world. Although Thakur described Swamiji as a Saptarshi brought down from empyrean yogic realms to aid Thakur in his work, many people in those days failed to regard Swamiji with that kind of exalted respect because he was the son of a Kaisthya. They simply viewed him as Narendranath Dutta, the son of Vishwanath Dutta, hailing from a caste that was inferior to that of the

Brahmins! Some of them therefore wondered whether it was appropriate that Swamiji should be seated on the same pedestal as Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother, and receive the same kind of worship that was being offered to them. A group of devotees from East Bengal had therefore exempted Swamiji from occupying the same position in their shrine, which they offered Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. When news of this occurrence reached Holy Mother's ears, she chastised this group of devotees by forcefully declaring, "Where Naren is not worshipped, Thakur does not accept worship!"

Let me allude to another incident. Another group from East Bengal had done the very opposite of the group mentioned above. They had enshrined Swamiji on the same pedestal with Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. While visiting Mother's residence at Baghbazār, a doubt crossed some of their minds: "Was it all right to place a disciple (Vivekananda) on the same seat as his Master? Would Mother approve of their decision?" With trepidation in their hearts, they informed Mother of their action. Mother's face momentarily became grave. The devotees once again experienced fear in their hearts. Suddenly, Mother declared in a severe tone, "What do you think Thakur would have done had he been present. Would he have placed Naren beside him, or would he have taken him on his lap?" The devotees found the answer that they were seeking and their hearts filled with joy.

I've witnessed a particular scene with my own eyes and received confirmation of it from other devotees too — Swami Brahmanandaji Maharaj would often quake with fear when he went to meet Holy Mother. He would not even be able to articulate his words properly. Even though the great householder disciple Sadhu Nag Mahasay would manage to reach the steps leading to Mother's residence with trembling feet, he could not manage to reach Mother's room, and often had to be carried there. Thus, what else is left to be said about Mother? It is because we have served at her feet that we are now required to answer queries from interested and eager devotees. Otherwise, am I equipped to speak about Mother?

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"You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life, none of you. But gradually you will know. Without Shakti (Power) there is no regeneration for the world." — Swami Vivekananda

I have seen that at one time only initiated devotees were given Mother's picture. Today, of course, Mother's image can be seen everywhere — on roads, in theater halls and on cinema halls. Undoubtedly, for the benefit of the whole of society, shy and retiring Holy Mother was fiercely guarded by Thakur's sannyasi disciples. Once Swami Saradanandaji Maharaj had cautioned me about writing about Holy Mother. He had said that if I ever quote her, I should do it very, very carefully. About Sri Ramakrishna he said that although I could quote him from time to time in my writings, I should do it with extreme caution and care.

Nowadays, I observe with a profound feeling of awe how Thakur's thoughts, teachings and intuitions about God and spiritual life are flooding the whole of Indian society, and spiritual seekers are drawn like a magnet towards him. We must remember Thakur's inimitable words in this context: "Those who have ever called on God with deep yearning in their heart, will have to come HERE." His words have indeed come true.

Swamiji had remarked that what would the full unleashing of the power of Thakur's coming be like, when its beginnings were already creating such a stir! I note with wonder that those who are being attracted to this new path, are mostly interested in knowing about Holy Mother. Mother was *Mahashakti* but few people are aware of the manner in which she expressed the infinite power of her being!

My mind goes back to an incident that is deeply significant, but is not known to many. I had the good fortune to learn about it from revered Swami Abhedanandaji Maharaj. Abhedanandaji had composed a *stotra* for Holy Mother and had an earnest desire to read it out to her. When he expressed his wish to Mother she appeared startled and asked him, "What *stotra*? Dedicated to whom?" Whereupon, the Swami replied that it was dedicated to Her. She seemed quite taken aback by his answer and quietly replied, "Son, why a *stotra* for me?" However, she had to give in to the entreaties of her sannyasi son and devotee, and started listening quietly. Abhedanandaji started to intone the now famous "*Prakriti Paramam...*" When Abhedanandaji came to the part where he says *Ramakrishnagatapranam* or "she who is dedicated to Ramakrishna soul and body," Mother became absolutely still. When he uttered the words "*Tattnamasravanam priyam* or "she who loves to listen to the name of Ramakrishna," tears started flowing from her eyes. When Abhedanandaji uttered *Tattbhavaranjitakaram*, or "she who enriches the bhava or spirituality of Ramakrishna", he found Thakur seated where Mother had been sitting all this time — Mother's figure had completely vanished! Maharaj, who had been sitting, his legs folded beneath him, also transcended the limits of his being. There may have been other experiences that the Swami had but they remain untold to us, although he leaves us enough to build upon.

## *Happy Anniversary,* **SRI SARADA SOCIETY!**

Congratulations to Sri Sarada Society, and my gratitude to all who have involved in it for all these years. Each of us is important; those who lead with ideas, and those who shoulder responsibilities, as well as those of us who benefit from so many wonderful blessings.

I send my appreciation to Joan-Ma who, as friend and mother to me, has seen me grow spiritually. My best wishes for the realization of the high goals that Sri Sarada Society stands for.

*Shradha, Puerto Rico*

Swami Vivekananda said that in order for Vedanta to become real and viable, we must experiment with it, thereby making it our own. He believed every attempt mattered, for each attempt, each experiment, draws us closer to realizing the significance of Vedanta's teachings in our everyday life.

As I look back over the decade, I am heartened by the growing number of devotees everywhere who are embracing and expressing their Vedanta grounding through a variety of avenues, including the arts, literature, music, service and study. I am grateful that, through the Sri Sarada Society, Mother has

given me the privilege of working closely with others and the opportunity to communicate with and learn from devotees via the Internet. I am constantly reminded of the universal aspect of devotion and spiritual commitment which binds us together.

*Jayanti, San Diego*



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thus keeping alive the direct and sacred connection with Swami Vivekananda.

While each project undertaken during this past decade has brought with it a measure of satisfaction, we have discovered that the path from start to finish is seldom straight. Often a project has required more time and energy than we imagined. However, looking backwards in time, we are reminded that it is in the struggle that we find the greatest opportunity for self-discovery and spiritual growth.

We look back with gratitude to the Holy Mother for the opportunity to serve and to meet, to work with and be inspired by, sincere devotees across the country and throughout the world.

*Joan, Albany*

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"She is Sarada, Saraswati. She has come to impart knowledge. She has descended by covering up her beauty this time... She is full of wisdom. Is she of the common run? She is my Shakti."— *Sri Ramakrishna*

## A BLESSED HERITAGE

*May all blessings follow her through life. She was keenly desired and prayed for and she comes as a blessing to you and your wife for life. I have not the least doubt. I only wish I could come to America now if only to fulfill the form—"the sage of the East bringing presents to the Western baby" But the heart is there with all prayers and blessings and the mind is more powerful than the body.*

These words of benediction from Swami Vivekananda marked the birth of Frances Howard Leggett, daughter of Betty and Frank Leggett and niece of Josephine MacLeod. Born on November 30, 1896, in New York City, France, as she came to be called, was to play a pivotal role in the preservation of her ancestral home, Ridgely Manor.

It might have been young France who greeted Swamiji on his return to Ridgely on August 26, 1989. We can imagine her running barefoot across the lawn to see this impressive stranger. Her father, who would pull her around in a little wagon, writes in a letter to Joe (Josephine MacLeod or Tantine), "Babe enjoys nothing so much as walking over the Ridgely lawn and taking her daily drives." Almost three years old at the time of the "Great Summer" of Swamiji's visit, France was enchanted by the country life on the estate, running from one chestnut tree to the other, wandering to the stables to visit the horses and Tweed, the collie, feeding the chickens, and playing with her cousins who stayed at the Inn, a house on the grounds of the estate.

From the account given by Alberta, Betty's daughter from a previous marriage, we can imagine a special morning in the Hall of Ridgely Manor, when a very young France presented Swamiji with flowers she had gathered in the garden. Swamiji accepted them, saying, "In India we give flowers to our teachers." He then blessed her, uttering some Sanskrit words.

Relentless logic, a lifelong characteristic of France, was evident from her early years. In letters written by her guardian, Miss Looker, and her mother, some of the child's sayings were recorded. Asked if she would like to have her hand held, France replied, "No, if I had only one leg you could take my hand but I can walk alone because I have two legs." One day, while in church, she inquired, "Why do you pray?" Her mother responded, "to ask God to take care of us." The quick reply came: "You needn't do that. He takes care of his children anyway. Father (referring to her own father) does and we don't pray to him. It seems silly."



France Leggett  
Taken at Ridgely, 1958

In her book, *LATE AND SOON*, France describes in vivid images her childhood memories of an evening in late autumn at Ridgely, the hour before her father was to arrive home.

*Apples piled high in the bowl by the door; leaves, crimson and yellow glimmering in the vase by the stairs; flames from the big wood fire reflected in the dark panes of the windows; outside, the silent lawns spreading wide about the house, protectingly. The house in the midst of these, its white columns reared into the darkness, aglow within, secure. The hour for Father's coming: Being dressed to greet him; the listening for the carriage wheels; the feeling of being someone, someone needed and important.*

When France was 12, her father suddenly passed away. The focus of her life then became England. Living in the Margesson home gave France a sense of comfort and belonging. Lady Isabel Margesson was her Aunt Josephine's close friend. It had been in the Margessons' London house that Swamiji conducted classes and met Margaret Noble and the Seviars, disciples who would serve significantly in Swami Vivekananda's mission.

In 1916, France married David Margesson, the son of Sir Mortimer and Lady Isabel. As a young boy, David had also been blessed by Swamiji. Although France and David made their life in England, family visits to Ridgely kept alive a connection with her past. Like her father, she was drawn to the familiar; like him, the simplicity of country life spelled contentment to her. Eventually, a search would draw her back to her childhood home.

It was during one of her visits to Ridgely that France found an old black box containing letters of her parents. Many years later, on a summer day in England, she happened to open the box. France's special contribution to the history of the Vedanta movement in the West took seed at that moment. The fruit, a book, told the transatlantic story of her parents' marriage. It also spurred France to explore her own life and heritage, leading her to return to Ridgely in 1942. Now a woman of 46, she came this time to stay.

Written at Ridgely and published in 1968, *LATE AND SOON* gives a personal account of Swami Vivekananda's interaction with her family members and the shadow that his death cast on the family. We read of Swamiji's close relationship with the extended circle of family and friends, and of the contributions they made to the new Ramakrishna Vedanta movement, both in the West and in India.

We are also given insight into her aunt, Josephine MacLeod. From France's research we are reminded of how much Swamiji shaped Tantine's

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**WHO WE ARE:** Sri Sarada Society is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the furtherance of Holy Mother's inspiration in the West, particularly as it manifests through women.

destiny, inspiring her to make his mission her own. We also are given insight into Tantine's role in her niece's upbringing.

Reading *LATE AND SOON*, we are transported into richly written scenes involving Swamiji, as in the following glimpse of his stay at Ridgely in 1999.

*Oh, the golden days and velvet nights and walks under the stars barefooted on the dewy grass; and talks of God and the human soul – and late hours gatherings in the Hall, door open to the summer night, while song of crickets interpenetrated the Swami's rolling sentences that none dared to answer as one by one they crept silently to bed.*

In the 50's, in search for a structured form of spirituality, France converted to Catholicism for a brief period. She had the music room in the Manor converted into a chapel. Today, that room serves as the shrine room for the year-around Vivekananda Retreat center, now at Ridgely. Eventually, France returned to her Protestant roots.

It was France's habit to read in the mornings from the *GOSPEL OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA* by "M", and Vivekananda's *THE YOGAS AND OTHER WORKS*, published by the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1953. She made notes in the margins of these two books, which are now in the possession of her son, Frank Margesson.

In consultation with Swami Prabhavananda in Hollywood, she reedited the letters of Vivekananda which had already been published. She sent him pages of names and expressions which needed elucidation writing, "I think it very important to know who the recipients of the letters

are, as far as possible." In one letter to Swami, dated October 11, 1967, she defined her reasons for undertaking the editing. "Grammatical mistakes should be corrected for smoother reading," she wrote. But the "main reason in my opinion for a new edition of the letters is not to have them published in a void as have been the other editions." France sent her editing to Swami "for your judgment." Christopher Isherwood wrote the introduction to her book. This introduction was published in *Vedanta in the West* in 1968, issue number 164. France had intended to publish these reedited letters in England, either through George Allen and Unwin Ltd. or Robinson and Watkins Books Limited. This did not come to pass.

France also drew upon the friendship of Swami Nikhilananda, who was in New York. The Swami would visit Ridgely on the way to Thousand Island Park. He was very protective of her and sent copies of all his books to her signed, "With warm personal regards." In fact, France welcomed a number of Swamis into her home at Ridgely, as evidenced in the family photo album.

France passed away in February 1977. She was buried next to her parents, Frank and Betty, in the Leggett plot at Sleepy Hollow, some 80 miles from Ridgely on the other side of the Hudson River. The estate was willed to her son.

On April 21, 1902, shortly before he left his body, Swamiji wrote to Josephine MacLeod, "Frances Leggett has my blessings from before her birth and will have forever."

*Our thanks to France's son, Lord Margesson, for his assistance with this article.*

## Publishing Notes

### COMING FULL CIRCLE

#### Happy Anniversary, Samvit!

The year 2003 marks the 25th Anniversary of *SAMVIT*, the semiannual journal published by Sri Sarada Math's New Delhi Center.

Help Celebrate by requesting *SAMVIT*!

The suggested yearly donation for *SAMVIT* via Air Mail within the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico is \$6 (U.S. currency only). New requests and renewals may be sent to Sri Sarada Society at the address below. Be sure to include your mailing address and to write "Donation for Samvit" on your check.

*SAMVIT* was the initiative of Revered Pravrajika Muktiprana, the first General Secretary of Sri Sarada Math and Ramakrishna Sarada Mission. The journal offers readers a broad range of spiritual reading. Poetry, biographies, and scriptural studies are found together with scholarly and reflective articles about a variety of spiritual topics.

#### Soon To Be Released

Sri Sarada Society is happy to announce the publication of *A CHALLENGE FOR MODERN MINDS* by Pravrajika Vivekaprana of Sri Sarada Math, India. The volume includes twelve lectures given by Pravrajika Vivekaprana in the United States. They have been selected and edited by Edith D. Tipple of Santa Barbara, California. An excerpt appears on page 6.

We expect *A CHALLENGE FOR MODERN MINDS* to be available mid-December. Individual copies may be reserved by sending \$15 (includes shipping) per book to Sri Sarada Society.

We also welcome contributions to offset publishing cost and to purchase copies to be sent to India.

Additional information will be posted on the Internet at <http://www.srisarada.org/challenge.html>.

Sri Sarada Society joins with Edith in expressing our gratitude to Pravrajika Vivekaprana and Sri Sarada Math for being given the privilege of undertaking this project.

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## DOES IT MAKE ME FREE?

*The following is an excerpt from A CHALLENGE FOR MODERN MINDS by Pravrajika Vivekaprana.*

Basically, we are all doing only one thing, seeking freedom. Swami Vivekananda said that every single atom seeks freedom. He also said that, though no one seeks anything else, we do not understand what we are searching for, what freedom is, and because we do not, we get entangled in pleasures which give satisfaction — but not freedom. Vedanta asks you not to forget that you seek nothing but freedom. In order to do that, we need to know what the word means.

There is only one standard: Does it make me free? Food gives me freedom for the moment, but hunger comes back again. Something is useful; something else is aesthetically appealing. Each gives me satisfaction, but not permanent freedom. The moment I get hold of something that I think will give me freedom, the mind moves on to something else. Though we have the feeling that this world is very real, if it were, if it were the ultimate, the attention would not wander, it would remain fixed.

Vedanta acknowledges the presence of the subtle, but it says that freedom is not there either. If it were real, after getting it, we would not feel frustrated. The mind which wanders to something else proves that what it leaves cannot satisfy the basic standard.

Vedanta encourages us to apply the same standard to everything: Does it make me free? Social, economic, and political issues make our reality, our laboratory, but they do not give us the conclusion, which is only to be found in our own understanding. We forget this reference to our own understanding. We have become externalized again and again and need to get back to the self. We need methods of training our attention in order to bring it back to the source, which is within. That is what meditation is, the constant getting back to oneself.

To say that we have become materialistic means nothing. There is no question of right or wrong, good or bad, but a question of understanding. Understand properly, get hold of a method, and go straight to the heart of the question. It is personal research and can only be done alone. Group experience can give participation, but that is external and cannot be internalized. If we want the external, then we should realize that we are not going to reach that deeper level.

Swami Vivekananda also predicted that science would make discoveries which would support Vedantic ideas. The West now offers the East tremendous insights. The problem is that we fail to observe those insights which are right there in front of us. Science has gone deeper, and more deeply still, into matter and has come to understand that shapes and forms and all that is considered physically very real, in actuality is not so. When you look at an object, the form seems to be very real and solid, but the same thing seen through electronic equipment vanishes. Unfortunately, the common Western man has no awareness of this scientific truth.

These ideas must be given back to society. The principles have been discovered, but the proper language is now needed to link human experience so that every human being can understand the depth of these ideas.

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