

With her fiery, independent spirit, bottomless courage and managerial prowess, Gauri Ma, who founded India's first ashram for women, the Sri Saradeshwari Ashram, is a role model for the modern woman seeker, rhapsodises Nandini Sarkar



Gauri Ma

The mystic manager

A woman was drowning in the Ganga and a crowd of men was watching from the banks, raising a commotion but not going forward to help her. A sanyasini who had come to the spot scornfully addressed the men, "There is a person drowning, yet all of you men are standing here and watching the show." Without a moment's hesitation, she shouted, "Jai

Mother Kali," and threw herself into the river – this despite the fact that she did not know how to swim! Realising that Gauri Ma could not swim out far enough to save the drowning woman, a few people from the crowd finally jumped in and saved her.

Gauri Ma has long been a hero for me, ever since I read about her in Swami Nikhilananda's, *They Lived With God*. Sri Ramakrishna said of her, "Gauri is that gopi who has received the grace of the Lord through many births. She is a gopi from Brindavan."

Modern prototype

Though born in backward nineteenth century India, she epitomised the modern empowered woman, seeking to balance the spiritual with the temporal. Her bright, intelligent mind stumbled upon concepts for women to achieve financial independence long before management gurus like Prahlad thought of people at the bottom of the pyramid; she taught how to love and care for animals long before PETA became fashionable; she quietly introduced schooling for women long before London women suffragettes started their protests; she ran after eve-teasers with a stick in her hand long before Kiran Bedi became the famous baton-wielding woman cop. Above all, she became a rare woman saint to achieve emancipation.

I am an unabashed admirer of her forceful yet loving persona. As she traversed the Himalayas in the tradition-ridden early 19th century, dressed like a man to avoid undue attention, she boldly said, "I crush lustful men under my feet like worms!"

In the year 1882, in the city of Calcutta, a young Gauri Ma was absorbed in worship of her Ishta Devata. Suddenly, she saw two luminous human feet. She rubbed her eyes and looked intently. Lifting up the image, she touched it to her head and heart, bowing to it again and again with intense devotion. At this time Gauri Ma was staying with the family of Balaram Bose of Kolkata, a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa of Dakshineswar.

Enter the guru

Interestingly, just before this incident, Balaram had been urging Gauri Ma to visit the Paramahansa, but she had declined, saying, "Dada, I have met many sadhus in my life. Now, I no longer have the desire to meet any new sadhus. If your sadhu has such power, let him pull me there. Unless he pulls me, I will not go."

The next morning as she tried to leave Balaram's house unnoticed, before dawn, the doorman stopped

her. Balaram came up to her and asked if she would like to visit Dakshineswar. As they entered Sri Ramakrishna's room, he was seated on a wooden platform winding a thread around a piece of wood, all the while singing softly to himself. As Gauri Ma bent down to make the customary pranams, she again saw the same luminous feet that she had seen the day before. Sri Ramakrishna smiled and said, "I have known her for a very long time." At that time, Gauri Ma was just 25 years old.

Gauri Ma was born Mridani, in the year 1857, to devoted parents. When Mridani was 18 years old, she ran away from home to the Himalayas. For nearly three years, she practiced austerities in the Himalayan heights. In the beginning, physical discomforts like hunger, cold, and the strain of walking bothered Gauri Ma, but her body soon became accustomed to hardship. She would earnestly pray to the Lord that her beauty

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should not prove to be an obstacle in her path. Sometimes she would smear her face with mud, sometimes with ashes. At times she would cut her hair short or disguise herself as a man.

After her first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna, she went back, alone, to meet him. She then asked him, "That you are hiding here, at Dakshineswar, so close to Calcutta – could I not have known this earlier, Father?" Sri Ramakrishna smiled and replied, "Then how would you have done so much sadhana?"

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The mission

One day at Dakshineswar, Gauri Ma was plucking flowers for worship, when Sri Ramakrishna appeared. In his left hand was a flowering branch; in his right was a mug filled with water. Suddenly, he began to pour the water. “Look, Gauri,” he said, “I am pouring water. You knead the clay.” Gauri Ma stared at Sri Ramakrishna in astonishment. “Where is the clay to knead here? It’s all full of gravel.” Thakur laughed and replied, “I have meant one thing, but you have understood another! Look at the plight of the women in this country. Their miseries have no end. Enough of tapasya. You must now be ready to serve them and work for their regeneration.”

Not letting herself be swept away by emotion, the sanyasini said to Sri Ramakrishna: “I cannot adjust to the hectic activity of such a life. Give me some selected young girls, and I will take them to the Himalayas. There, I will mould their character.” Sri Ramakrishna insisted: “No! You must stay in this city, and work here.”

But how could she start this great work without workers, money, or support from anybody? Slowly, things began to take shape. First, two bighas of land were purchased. Then, with the permission and blessings of the Holy Mother, Sarada Devi, Gauri Ma established the Sri Saradeshwari Ashram in 1895 on the banks of the Ganges River at Barrackpur. When Swami Vivekananda saw the convent, he was filled with joy. He said, “The education should be such that, once more, we will see women like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Arundhati in this land.”

In 1911, a house was rented at Goyabagan Lane, and the whole Saradeshwari Ashram moved to Calcutta. The story of her days in the ashram is a lesson in modern management. Finding students for the school, interviewing women who came to join the ashram and selecting the capable ones from among them, running the ashram



Gauri Ma in her sunset phase: Older, frailer but still feisty

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smoothly amid the flurry of the many visitors who came, and, above all, worrying about the finances of the ashram – all these tasks were successfully handled by Gauri Ma, who never lost hope and always remained calm. There were many obstacles and difficulties, scarcities and hardships. She went through them all with her head held high. Not for a moment did she deviate from her goal, nor was she ever afraid. So often there were let-downs and disappointments, but no one ever heard her speak ill of anybody or ever glance backward. She manifested a great inner strength.

The complete woman

Once, when the famed scientist, Prafulla Chandra Ray visited Saradeshwari Ashram, one of the residents presented him with a hand-spun and hand-woven coat that had been made there. Professor Ray was surprised to see and hear that Gauri Ma had encouraged handloom fabrics long before the Swadeshi movement had begun. One day, a well-known solicitor and a respected High Court judge were discussing her ashram. “For a woman,” said the solicitor, “the work done by Gauri Ma is truly amazing. When she first told me about the land she had purchased, I would never have believed that one day there would be such an ashram on that land.” At this the judge remarked, “Why do you say ‘for a woman’? How many men are there who could do

this work by themselves?”

There was one thing she told everyone, “Whether you are a householder or a sanyasin, the important thing is the mind. If your mind is pure, everything else is pure. Only if the mind is pure can we receive the grace of the Lord. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, ‘With a pure body and mind, if you pray sincerely, your prayers are answered.’ In all your work, always remember Him. Pray to Him sincerely – that you may have pure devotion for His lotus feet.”

She not only took care of the people at the ashram, but also of the animals there – the cows and the horses. One day, some monkeys managed to catch hold of a little puppy and carry it to the roof of the house where they began to scratch and bite him. Seeing that agonising scene, Gauri Ma tucked her clothes securely, tied a stick to her back, and, stepping onto a broken wall, slowly began to climb up to the roof, finally rescuing the puppy and bringing it down with her.

Gauri Ma’s mind was without a trace of ego. She once said, “Do your work with a detached attitude. You must treat name and fame like garbage. When you go to serve others, if you find any desire for praise or prestige lurking in the corner of your heart, it is a spiritual suicide.”

On Shivaratri day in 1938, Gauri Ma repeatedly

said, “The master is once again pulling that thread. Today, we are not going to talk about anything else – only about Thakur.” It was 8:15 in the evening. Gauri Ma now slowly entered mahasamadhi, giving up the body.

By the dint of Gauri Ma’s efforts it has been possible for many women to lead dedicated spiritual lives at the Saradeshwari Ashram. The administration of the institution is entirely in the hands of women. As Swami Vivekananda once said, “Where is Gauri Ma? We want a thousand such mothers with that noble stirring spirit.”



Nandini Sarkar is Co-founder, C-Quel, a management services company. A lover of the spiritual masters she is a follower in the Kriya Yoga tradition.

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