

Swami Vagishananda



Ramakrishna Math

Belur Math

Howrah 711202

Published by:
Swami Smaranananda
Ramakrishna Math
Belur Math, Howrah 711202

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24th March 2021

Price: Rs. 15/-

Printed in India at:
Soumen Traders Syndicate
9/3. K. P. Kumar Street
Bally, Howrah - 711201

SWAMI VAGISHANANDA

India was then just preparing herself for freedom from foreign rule. Contrasting feelings of new dreams in an independent nation together with the pain of losing other dear things could be tangibly felt in people. The Ramakrishna Mission was contributing in its own way to this new-nation-to-be-born idea. The irresistible call of Swami Vivekananda was inspiring the country's youth in thousands towards this rosy dawn. One such college student was to be found in the suburbs of Calcutta (as Kolkata was known then) in the Kamarhati-Agarpara area (in today's North 24-Parganas district). College studies notwithstanding, the electrifying teachings of Swami Vivekananda were not lost on this youth but in fact guided him silently to a wonderful destiny. This young man, Samaresh Chandra Mitra, was to become the Revered Swami Vagishanandaji Maharaj of the Ramakrishna Order.

Samaresh Chandra was born to Ramesh Chandra and Pankajbala Mitra on 12 January 1930, in Chittagong (Chattogram) district of today's Bangladesh. It was a large family of 5 brothers and 2 sisters, Samaresh being the 4th child. His father was an auditor with BNR before independence and subsequently with the Indian Railways. The family originally belonged to village Rakfiqpur in the Noakhali province of (what is today) Bangladesh. His father's work did involve a lot of touring but young Samaresh was born and grew up in his maternal uncle's (*maama's*) house in Chittagong. Later the family settled in the Kamarhati-Agarpara area. It is said that in his student days Samaresh was very fond of cycling and swimming. He often talked about these two favourite hobbies of his early days.

In 1940 young Samaresh Chandra was admitted to class 4 of the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar, and continued here till he passed the matriculation exam in 1947. He was an accomplished student of the Vidyapith and Maharaj in later days jokingly said to one of the heads of that centre, "You must have heard that I was a

very good student of Deoghar Vidyapith!” And it was not just at studies that Maharaj was good but also in sports and other activities. He was a good fast bowler in the school cricket team, the captain of the football team, and also played hockey and basketball. He was in charge of the morning drill of the junior students.

After Deoghar, from 1947 he studied at the St. Pauls Cathedral Mission College and passed the ISC in 1949, staying during this period at the Ramakrishna Mission Students’ Home in Gouripur. Next we find Maharaj completing his science-graduate studies from the Banga-Vasi College in Calcutta in 1952. He enrolled for studying medicine after this at the Homoeopathic Medical College when, however, a new horizon started beckoning him and did not allow him to complete the medical course. It was during this period that he started visiting the Janasikshamandira of Ramakrishna Mission, Saradapitha, as a volunteer.

When he visited his home at Agarpara during his hostel days, he could be found sitting silently by the nearby pond lost in deep thought. Many a sunset passed like this. Those who had seen Maharaj during this period of his life have all remarked about this growing aloofness. His studies were almost over by then and he was staying in the Students’ Home Hostel from where he visited his parents and other relatives at home. An incident during one such occasion sheds much light on what was going on in young Samaresh’s mind at that time. He insisted on taking his elder sister-in-law (*baudee*) and younger sister to a cinema, but would on no account say which cinema they were going to. It was only after reaching the movie-hall that they realised that they had come to see the just released film *Bhagavan Shri Krishnachaitanya*. The theme of the movie was the burning uncompromising renunciation of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. It was only then that it dawned on the others that the flame of renunciation was now burning bright in their dear *Maanik*’s heart (Samaresh’s nickname).

Samaresh also got the chance to participate in the *Kumbha-mela* at Haridwar around this time. Here he could witness first-hand the

timeless spiritual traditions of this ancient country where spirituality has always been accorded the highest honour. The spirit of renunciation which had been kindled during his sojourn at the Deoghar Vidyapith and the Students' Home, thanks to his interaction with the all-renouncing sadhus of the Ramakrishna Sangha, could not but burn brighter after this. Swami Vivekananda's call for *Atmano Mokshartham, Jagaddhitaya cha* seemed to resound in his ears. The conviction was growing within him that he was not meant to follow in the footprints of the numberless people of this world. He felt immediate kinship with the world-renouncing minority.

And thus it was that on the 1st of February 1954 he left home for good and aspiring for monastic life joined the Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha. No words can describe the joy of such a dream being fulfilled. Even before this he had the good fortune of associating with two stalwarts of the Mission: Swami Vimuktanandaji, the Secretary of Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha and Swami Tejasanandaji, the first Principal of the Saradapitha's Vidyamandir. Their exemplary lives left an indelible impression on (now brahmachari) Samaresh's mind. Indeed he has reminisced about these two noble souls on many occasions.

Owing to its proximity to Belur Math, Saradapitha offers the unique opportunity to easily mix with sadhus of both the places. And in those days when Br. Samaresh had joined, there were many disciples of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swamis Brahmananda, Shivananda, and other direct monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, working and staying here. As a result Br. Samaresh got the rare blessing to associate very closely with these exalted souls and could thus establish his monastic life on rock-solid foundations. He could say later on without any qualms: "It is easy to feel some renunciation by reading a book or two of Swami Vivekananda or by getting some *sadhu-sanga* (association with sadhus). It is not such a great deal to give up home and relatives to enter monastic life, but it is quite difficult to build up one's sadhu life... These disciples of Sri Sri Maa, Raja Maharaj and Mahapurush Maharaj had spent long years serving

the Sangha. They would narrate incidents from their lives which would inspire newcomers like me. They would jokingly say, now that you have come to the Ramakrishna *machine* there is nothing to worry about. They would smilingly say that this is not Ramakrishna Mission but Ramakrishna *machine*. All our defects and crookedness of the mind, all shortcomings like anger, jealousy, attachment, sense of pride or self-importance, which are our eternal companions, get flattened out in this Ramakrishna machine... The very nature of this world is selfishness. Every action will get its due reaction. But if the mind, senses, ego and all are surrendered at the lotus feet of Sri Ramakrishna, there is no repulsion or revenge, no anger or hatred that will result. All gets converted into childlike simplicity in us”.

This single reminiscence from Maharaj tells us silently but very surely, how the young Br. Samaresh could metamorphose into the Revered Swami Vagishananda, who would fill countless lives tormented by this world’s miseries, with peace, hope and joy.

Having joined the sangha, he was blessed with *mantra-diksha* in 1955 by Swami Shankaranandaji Mj who also conferred on him the brahmacharya vows on 20 February 1958, with the name *Brahmachari Smritichaitanya*. Subsequently on 8th May 1962, on Shankar Jayanti, Swami Vishuddhanandaji Maharaj blessed maharaj with *sannyasa* and the name Swami Vagishananda.

Between 1954 and 1957 he was engaged in assorted activities at Saradapitha. He worked at the Vidyamandir College attached to Saradapitha, from 1958 through 1965: (a) first during 1958-59 in the West hostel (today’s *Vidyabhavan*) under Swami Adiswarananda who later took over as Minister of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, and (b) during the following year in the East hostel (today’s *Sribhavan*) assisting Swami Gokulananda who subsequently was head of the Mission’s New Delhi centre. Always soft-spoken and a person of few words, Br. Smritichaitanya is fondly remembered by the then students. He is specially remembered as being very enthusiastic in solving whatever problems the hostel inmates came

with. He also now and then assisted students in the chemistry laboratory.

It was in 1960 that Swami Vimuktanandaji assigned a difficult and important task to Smritichaitanya. The Vidyamandir was to be upgraded to a 3-year degree college. This brought in its wake its own share of responsibilities and problems including the construction of college and hostel buildings. This massive construction work fell to the lot of Br. Smritichaitanya who had no inkling of what this involved. Undaunted and knowing that he was a soldier in Swamiji's army, he accepted this challenge. He quickly learnt the nitty gritty of this work from an elderly expert draftsman. An especially nightmarish part of this work was the construction of the chemistry section of Vidyamandir. The 3-storied building had to come up after draining out an entire pool of water, removing slush from a depth of about 8 feet and erecting RCC columns after piling. He also attended to the building of the physics department, the North hostel (*Vivek Bhavan*) and the South hostel (*Vinay Bhavan*). One remarkable feature of these 3 buildings is the temple like dome adorning their top, which suits the epithet *mandir* given to the Vidyamandir. Quite happy with his manner of working, Swami Vimuktanandaji now asked him to take up the construction of the chemistry laboratory also. To do full justice to this assignment, Samaresh visited the laboratories at Presidency College, Scottish Church College and St. Xaviers in the illustrious company of Principal P. C. Sen and Jyotirmoy Banerjee. Most of the laboratory equipment was to be imported from abroad and installed. Br. Smritichaitanya discussed all related matters in this connection with concerned experts and completed the task to the satisfaction of all. His silent perseverance is fondly and respectfully remembered by the then teachers, non-teaching staff and students alike. Indeed he laid the foundation of all the glorious reputation that the Vidyamandir commands today.

Apart from the Vidyamandir duties, Maharaj was associated with many other activities of Saradapitha. The Janasikshamandira catered to about 100 young children of the poorest sections of society in the

neighbourhood. They were given free coaching, sports facilities and afternoon snacks. Maharaj was closely associated with these welfare schemes for the poor from the early days. He also helped with the mobile library and mobile educational film-screening. For a short while he was also involved with the Social Education Organisers Training Centre (SEOTC) supported by local government funds. Between April 1965 and November 1967 he served as Assistant Secretary of Saradapitha. After serving at Saradapitha for about 13 years, he left on 15 November 1967 to assume charge as Assistant Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission's Institute of Culture, Gol Park. He always recalled his first assignment at Saradapitha with joy and discussed these memorable days with enthusiasm. He has left an indelible impression on the minds of all those with whom he interacted then. The *seva yajna* that he participated in, through Vidyamandir and Saradapitha laid the foundation for the fulfilment of the vow of *Atmano Mokshartham, Jagaddhitaya cha* that he had taken upon himself.

Even though he was at Gol Park only for a brief period from late 1967 to March 1970, he impressed all with the same work dexterity along with less of talk. In March 1970 he was sent for extensive relief work at the Taki centre of the Mission (in North 24-Parganas today). He experienced here first-hand what it meant to be absolutely devastated by natural calamities, an experience which stood him in good stead when dealing later with the needs of the downtrodden who were literally *Narayanans* to him. After this relief stint for 6 months, he was sent as Assistant Secretary to Ranchi-Morabadi centre (then in Bihar). He continued here from April 1972 as Secretary of this Ranchi centre.

He was particularly keen that rural work be done through the Ranchi-Morabadi centre. He had now the additional responsibility of shaping the life of new entrants to monastic life. During his tenure a number of young men have joined the Order at Ranchi-Morabadi. He kept a sharp eye on the conduct of these newcomers. Despite their busy work schedules, he would insist on their coming to him

for scriptural classes. He would encourage independence in work but would always keep an eye on how things were done to ensure that it was indeed done as Thakur's Seva. He ruled more through love and feeling and less through rules and regulations. A new brahmachari's shirt was torn on the side but he was not aware of this. However, Maharaj noticed this and said jokingly to the boy, "Hey! You are wearing a torn shirt. Do you want to bring me discredit?" And he asked him to get a new shirt stitched immediately. He would ensure that all monastic brothers attended evening aarti and participated in all ashrama activities.

After about 4 years at Ranchi-Morabadi, the headquarters at Belur Math asked Maharaj to take over as head of the combined Math and Mission centre at Malda. He served the Sangha through the Malda branch from December 1976 to mid-September of 1982. The Malda centre was not in good financial condition then. Though all had to put up with many inconveniences, the feeling heart that Maharaj possessed held monastics and devotees together. An interesting incident of this time is narrated here. A young boy had just lost his father. His efforts to get a job also had not borne any fruit. Thus confronted with many family problems, destiny brought this lad to Vagishanandaji through a devotee. Maharaj's soft-spoken words, his concern for the boy's problems, his natural laughter, all combined to give the youth fresh impetus to face his problems at home. The cheerful atmosphere that Maharaj could create in the ashrama cast its spell on this young man also. He also started attending the Gita classes that Maharaj took at the centre. Much later in 2018 when Vagishanandaji Maharaj went to Malda to give *mantra-diksha*, this person who was a senior citizen now, went to see Maharaj. Through the good wishes and blessings of Maharaj, the boy had successfully embarked on his life's journey having overcome his initial troubles. He had also got a teacher's job in 1979. On seeing him Maharaj immediately asked him, "You were trying for the teacher's job, right?" The man was stunned to note that Maharaj was still aware of a problem that the boy faced 40 years ago. He could not believe this empathy.

During his Malda stay, Maharaj went to many nearby places like Purnea, Seuri, etc for Bhavaprachar activities. He would participate in the functions and celebrations of the local ashramas and encourage them to spread Thakur's message. Many villagers around Malda would come to Maharaj with their worldly problems. He would patiently and smilingly listen to their tales of woe. Even today the surviving elders in these areas recollect Maharaj's smiling face and the compassionate and ready help they got from him. Floods were almost an annual occurrence in the Malda area. Maharaj would always take the initiative to start relief activities for the distressed. The massive relief operations at Devipur and another one at Kumarganj are particularly worthy of mention here. He kept a watchful eye on the working of the schools run by the ashrama. During his tenure here he arranged for the school students to stage a drama based on the Katha Upanishad Nachiketa-theme. This drama was very much appreciated and Maharaj himself too enjoyed the acting of his students. He attended to the all-round uplift of the Malda centre with a silent but firm hand. Even after he left Malda centre, he visited this place again in 1987 to participate in flood relief operations and stayed for a long stretch of about 25 days. Many of these flood victims respectfully remember Maharaj's participation in *Shiva Jnanay Jiva Seva*.

In 1982 Maharaj was sent to head the Cossipore Math centre. This first stint at Cossipore was for a short period only since he was soon sent to assume charge of Kamarpukur centre in January 1985. His stay here also proved to be for a short duration since Maharaj was appointed head of the Bombay centre (called Mumbai today).

It was with a little trepidation that Maharaj accepted this new assignment going as he was to a different state, with the people speaking a different language and also with differences in habits and life-styles. His only fear was how successfully he could serve Sri Ramakrishna in this new capacity. However, the future 25 years would prove how unfounded his fears were! Everyone who came in contact with him during his stewardship of the Bombay centre, both

sadhus and *grihasthas*, remember with affection, gratitude and reverence his capacity to guide them all in their respective vocations. This holds true not only for the city of Mumbai but for the entire state of Maharashtra owing to the Bhava Prachar activities that Maharaj avidly participated in.

The barrier of not knowing any local language (like Marathi, Gujarati or for that matter Hindi even), cultural differences owing to being Bengali or non-Bengali, and what not, evaporated in the presence of Maharaj's radiating smile and warm hospitality. A festive atmosphere pervaded the ashrama at all times just by Maharaj's loving motherly presence. His arrival at the Bombay centre coincided with the year-long celebration of Sri Ramakrishna's 150th birthday. He knew very few people here, yet funds were to be collected. In his own way he went ahead and what a grand year-long programme took place studded with music programmes at different prominent venues of the city with artistes like Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, Kumar Gandharva, Purshottam Jalota and Sudha Malhotra. On the heels of this followed the celebrations of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's 150th birthday celebrations and the centenary celebrations of Swami Vivekananda's Chicago addresses. Devotees fondly remember how Maharaj oversaw all these celebrations with expert hands.

The ashrama's financial position also began to improve by the grace of Sri Ramakrishna, without any conscious effort. He could thus add a new floor to the centre's hospital and start several new sections there. A special room for the sangha's President in the monastic quarters, a room for President Maharaj to meet devotees, an elevator in the monastic quarters, all these were added during his stay at Mumbai centre. Again, a new office block which houses an airy and well stocked bookstall was also constructed. The Rural Health and Welfare Centre at Sakwar Village (about 80 kms away from Mumbai) underwent several noteworthy changes under the guidance of Maharaj. What had begun purely as a medical centre to serve adivasis was converted into an ideal Rural Health and Welfare

Centre with activities like *Bahwadi* (Pre-Primary School for boys and girls), agricultural training for men and women, tailoring classes, carpentry, *goshala* (cow shed with cattle breeding), etc. Maharaj was keen on educating the villagers to become self-reliant in every way. The medical centre also got modernised with facilities of X-ray, pathology and other specialised departments which were not available anywhere nearby.

Maharaj was much concerned for all-round development of these villagers: social, economic as well as spiritual. During his tenure many adivasi villagers received *mantra-diksha* and this trend continues.

At the Mumbai centre a manager swami would help Maharaj in his ashrama work. Once, when a new manager was to assume his responsibilities, Maharaj called him and said to him, “Look here, this is Sri Thakur’s place, your first duty is to oversee the Shrine, to see that Sri Thakur’s offerings are prepared as per traditions and offered on time. Your second duty is to take care of our monastic brothers. There are so many old sadhus staying here, see that they are looked after well. Your third duty is to take care of our devotees, since they come here to Sri Thakur. Out of His Grace He attracts them here. There will be different types of devotees and you must be courteous to all”. Thus what Maharaj was doing was instilling in the new sadhu the values which he should cherish as a member of the Ramakrishna Sangha. His main concern was Thakur Seva, Sadhu Seva, Bhakta Seva and service to the poor.

The next day of the new manager taking charge Maharaj again called him and explained to him, “Devotees come to the Math at any time and ask for noon *prasad*. Sometimes they come without any prior information just before the food bell. I will not consent till I ask you, but when I ask you, never say no, you must agree and see that you manage to arrange lunch *prasad* for them”.

Anyone coming to the Math to meet him would first be asked if he or she had been to the shrine. He would insist that everyone

coming to him must first go to the shrine and only then come to meet him. Everyone who came to him would be requested to have some *prasad* before leaving or to have some tea or snacks in the pantry.

Mumbai is a place where many patients from all over India and Bangladesh frequently come for medical treatment. Many cancer patients too would land in Mumbai and Maharaj unhesitatingly provided accommodation to them at the Mumbai ashrama. Quite often, Mumbai being a costly city, many patients would run out of money and Maharaj would give them money whenever they needed from the pranami money (offerings) he received from devotees. Once a sadhu of the centre saw a young man in tears and asked him if there was any problem. The young man replied that it was Maharaj's kindness that brought him to tears. He had come to Mumbai with his mother for her cancer treatment and had spent all his money. At that time there was no Mobile Banking and ATM cards were very rare. Perhaps Maharaj could understand from the expression on the boy's face that there was some problem and asked him about it. When the boy said that he had no money left, Maharaj immediately gave him a few thousand rupees and told him to take more when required. There were many such cases and Maharaj would always provide them monetary and moral support. He would say to sadhus of the ashrama that these people are already suffering from disease-distress, which took a toll on their purse as well.

He was like a guardian angel to many devotees, young and old alike. Many elderly devotees often lived alone as their children worked or were settled abroad. The younger group comprised those who had come to work in Mumbai from far away and felt homesick. He would inquire about their well-being, their finances and would be their local guardian. He would help them to get suitable accommodation and whenever they were sick, he would arrange for their treatment at the ashrama hospital. If he was particularly busy on some days or was out of station, he would instruct the manager sadhu or someone else to attend to such youngsters.

Once one old lady telephoned him and started crying saying she could not come to the Math and could not meet him owing to her illness. In the afternoon that day Maharaj called another sadhu and asked him to drive him to her house. They left at 3 pm and returned before 5 pm. The old lady was so elated that she started thanking Thakur again and again. She just could not believe that Revered Maharaj could go all the way just to see her. Sometimes Maharaj would often go to hospitals to see serious patients with Sri Thakur's *charanamritam* and *prasadi* flowers or garland. Almost always he would ask some sadhu to accompany him. One can imagine what a sense of peace would descend upon these patients at the sight of this smiling sadhu come to see them in the hospital, all on his own initiative.

Maharaj's Mumbai days have many anecdotes like these. We can consider another unique instance here. There was an old lady whose daughter had joined the Sarada Math as a sannyasini (nun). Her son had passed away and she was a cancer patient. She must have felt orphaned and all alone in this vast world. But Maharaj not only spent for her entire treatment but also admitted her into a hospice. When she passed away a few days later, he told the ashrama sadhus to organize her cremation too! There was another widower who too was staying all alone. Once he was seriously ill and could not eat. Coming to know of this, Maharaj arranged to send him lunch *prasad* from the ashrama for more than a week. Maharaj would say to sadhus that since such people did not have anyone to call their own, we must do our bit for them.

An incident at Mumbai shows how Maharaj looked upon the ashrama workers. It was the colour-festival day of Holi (*rung-punchmee*). All the workers of the centre were enjoying this popular colour festival smearing one another with multiple colours. There was no one to serve tea or *prasad* in the pantry. At this the manager swami called the pantry boy and shouted at him for neglecting his duties. Maharaj heard this scolding and after some time called the swami and said "Look here brother, they are having some fun. They

always work sincerely. On some occasions they must have some fun too. You must not treat them like servants for they too are serving Sri Thakur here. You must look upon them as our family members.”

Let us now look at one incident which shows his feeling for the poor. Maharaj had been to visit Japan once. He entrusted one sadhu with a task which was to be done on the first day of the following month. He had given the sadhu some money and 4 addresses of four persons and told him to arrange to send money-orders to those addresses in Kamarpukur. When he was the head of Kamarpukur centre he used to personally help some poor families. This he continued when he was in Mumbai too. For more than 20 years he was silently helping these poor families without anyone knowing about it. It came to light only because he was out of town.

Another incident reveals the alertness with which Maharaj used ashrama funds. The manager swami once presented a project for beautification of Mumbai ashrama. Maharaj said to him very sternly that if they had some extra money it should be spent on improving and further subsidizing their medical services. According to Maharaj, keeping everything clean, neat, and tidy is itself an expression of beauty. He did not like extravagance. At the same time he would always encourage skill development programs for the youth and the poor through the centre at Sakwar.

A senior sadhu of the sangha who has stayed a long time with Maharaj at Mumbai centre revealed his attitude towards ashrama activities. He never liked to construct too many buildings, or to prepare grand seva schemes. He firmly believed that it would suffice to improve the way existing seva projects were carried out instead of adopting new ones. Very rarely would he approach devotees for financial help. He was confident that Thakur Seva and ashrama activities could be comfortably carried out through whatever funds came unasked. He would also generally discourage unusually large donations saying that he did not like sadhus to take on more responsibilities that such donations would necessitate.

During the horrific riots in Bombay in early 1990's Maharaj received a phone call one afternoon from one of the worst affected areas. The caller informed Maharaj that a few hundred people including women and children were staying without any food. He requested the Ramakrishna Mission for help. Owing to the gravity of the situation Maharaj called a devotee of the ashrama and asked him to arrange for some food grains and other eatables and to distribute these items the next morning with the help of a few volunteers.

Maharaj was highly respected by the then Governor of Maharashtra, Hon'ble P. C. Alexander, who invited Maharaj to attend many important functions at the Governor House. The Governor too came to the Mumbai Ashrama a few times on invitation from Maharaj.

The substantial contribution by Maharaj to the Maharashtra Bhava Prachar Parishad, both objectively and subjectively, is fondly remembered by all concerned. Even though he was the President of the Parishad he had neither any attachment to that post nor did he ever dominate the functioning of the Parishad. He always respected Swami Bhaumanandaji Maharaj, the head of Pune centre (who was senior to him), and made him speak words of benediction at the end of every conference. He always informally requested Swami Bhaumanandaji to preside over bhava prachar meetings. Even though he was a Trustee and a very senior monk of the Order, none ever felt afraid of him. He was very much approachable. He always encouraged people to take the initiative and would support any improvement plans of the Parishad. His policy was to give full freedom to act and watchful supervision. During his tenure as the President of the Maharashtra Parishad, many new centres joined as member ashramas of the Parishad. Under his leadership the Maharashtra Parishad became a model in terms of perfectly organizing the half-yearly and yearly conferences. The functioning of the Parishad was appreciated by many at the headquarters of the Math & Mission at Belur Math. Maharaj remained calm and balanced

during turbulent situations at the Parishad. His motherly heart would always win over some of the difficult trustees of member ashramas. When the Parishad was passing through a financially difficult period he donated about Rs. 2.50 lakh to the Parishad. This money was collected by him as delegate fee during Holy Mother's 150th Birthday anniversary celebrations held at Mumbai. He planned first-of-a-kind three-day-long state-level spiritual and cultural programme and invited devotees from across Maharashtra to take part in these celebrations. He made excellent lodging and boarding arrangements for the thousands of delegates. This is cherished by all the participants with nostalgia even today.

An interesting event occurred when he was about to leave for Cossipore. The half yearly conference of Maharashtra Bhava Prachar Parishad was to be held soon. The President of Ichalkaranji Ashrama (host centre) invited him to the conference, which would be his last conference as President of Maharashtra Bhava Prachar Parishad. However, Maharaj informed him that it would be tiresome for him to come to Ichalkaranji. The Convenor of the Parishad and the host ashrama's President, went together to Mumbai, met Maharaj and fell at his feet with a prayer to attend the Ichalkaranji Conference even if only for a short duration. Maharaj's heart melted immediately and he agreed to attend the Conference! In his speech at this Ichalkaranji Conference Maharaj emphasized the need for youth involvement at the various private ashramas. He further added, "The Holy Trio is the symbol of catholicity and large-heartedness. As the bhava of the Holy Trio is spread across everyone, our heart will also become broader and broader."

In March 1990 when he was in Mumbai, Maharaj was elected a Trustee of the Ramakrishna Math and a member of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission. In 2010 he was once again requested to head the Cossipore Math. Even at that advanced age he consented to this second stint at Cossipore.

In the month of July 2011 the Trustees at Belur Math decided that Maharaj should start giving *mantra-diksha*. Accordingly on 8

November 2011, the Jagaddhatri Puja day, Revered Maharaj initiated the first batch of 31 *sadhakas* at the Cossipore Math. This *mantra-diksha* continued without break for a little over 8 years ending at Ramakrishna Math, Sinthi (Kolkata), on 15 March 2020, where he gave *mantra-diksha* for the last time. During his lifetime he blessed 50,885 people with *mantra-diksha*. He had to travel extensively all over the country solely to satisfy people's thirst for spiritual initiation. These *diksha* programmes were arranged not only at the Math and Mission branch centres, but also at many ashramas which come under the Bhava Prachar umbrella of the Ramakrishna Math. Special mention can be made here about his *diksha* visits to Bilaspur, Dhubri, Alipurduar and Lumding. Subsequently some of these Bhava Prachar ashramas have become branches of the Math and / or Mission. In Silchar (Assam) many tea plantation workers were given *diksha* by Maharaj. Once after initiating 12-14 tribals folks at Kamarpukur Maharaj felt great satisfaction and said, "These people have prepared themselves very well". Maharaj has also initiated a few persons individually in Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's Shrine at Cossipore. Maharaj himself decided on such special matters. Of these fortunate few, one young man has joined the Ramakrishna Math aspiring to become a sannyasin. Generally he would initiate only persons above 12 years of age. Only in two cases Maharaj has given *diksha* to 2 girls who were 9 years old after a detailed talk with both of them. He never allowed any haste during *diksha* time and ensured that the person receiving the mantra could pronounce it correctly. He would patiently persist until the repetition was to his satisfaction.

Persons who have worked closely with Maharaj all testify that he had this unique capacity to rightly assess which person was fit for what task. He had faith in persons who worked with him, gave full freedom in their field of work and never interfered. He would always make people remember that they are all engaged in doing Thakur Seva. He kept a keen eye to ensure that the tasks were correctly carried out. He had to be kept informed about all ashrama work that

was done. Even the minute details of ashrama work did not escape his attention. All he wanted to ensure was that through all work being done no one should move away from Thakur. This was the yardstick through which he supervised work done. He was liberal enough to oversee lapses in work but cautioned that such lapses should not be repeated. One can sense *work is worship* in the way Maharaj himself worked and encouraged others to work. Following the teachings of Sri Ramanujacarya, he tried to avoid the extremes of too much elation and excessive despondency in the field of work. The soothing effect of this has descended on many people he associated himself with.

Shaping of the monastic life (*sadhu-jeevan-gothon*) and living that life (*sadhu-jeevan-jaapon*) were of paramount importance to him. All the treasures of monastic life which he was fortunate to accumulate during his initial days he wanted these to percolate down to others also. He was particular that all monastic inmates attended *mangal-aarti* and *Sandhya-aarti*. Even in old age he was himself keen to attend *mangal-aarti* and *Sandhya-aarti*. He could be found sitting in the temple at least 30 minutes before evening aarti and would observe whether the *dhuna* (soothing smoky incense) was waved in Thakur's shrine on time. He also ensured that all practised japa and dhyana at dawn and dusk regularly. When in Mumbai he once noticed that a monastic inmate did not attend morning and evening prayers (*aarti*) for two or three days at a stretch. Maharaj said to another senior inmate, "Have you not noticed that this brother has not been attending prayers? Have you asked him about this? Is everything to be done by the head of the centre alone? Everyone has to participate. That is the beauty of Thakur's sangha. Each one keeps an eye on the other. That is how all can progress in spiritual life". He has shown very clearly through his own life how the monastic life is to be lived. He was particular about maintaining proper timings not only in the temple but also in the dining hall. He insisted that all monastic inmates ate together in the dining hall. At Cossipore one inmate wanting to practice a little austerity would not come to the

dining hall. Maharaj too would daily enquire about him. After some days he asked the person to come to the dining hall made him sit near him and saw that he ate well. When the person was leaving Maharaj said to him, “See how happy we are all feeling today since you also ate with us”.

He never liked monastic inmates spending much time talking with devotees but wanted that they talk only as much as was necessary. He was also very particular that there was not much talk with women devotees. He always insisted on maintaining the dignity of monastic life. In our Ramakrishna Order living up to the ideals set by Thakur is the true tapasya. It was his conviction that if one can live one’s life holding on to these ideals, the grace of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi will surely descend one day on all of us.

Maharaj paid a lot of attention to shape the life of monastic inmates and equal attention to ensure that a holy serene atmosphere was maintained in any Math premises. It was his conviction that Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swamiji were ever present in all our centres. Thus the life of every monastic, devotee, worker or volunteer should be centred round this living Holy Trio. He himself conducted himself in this light so that others could emulate.

A sadhu who had worked under Maharaj for many years at Mumbai ashrama had been asked to take over as the head of a branch of the Mission. Before embarking on this new assignment, this swami went to Cossipore Math to seek blessings and guidance from Maharaj. The swami says that Maharaj insisted on his spending a few days at Cossipore Math before going. One evening Maharaj called the swami when he was having his evening walk and took him to Thakur’s shrine. There, very seriously he said to the new head-of-centre, “Listen, you should not think that you are the head of the centre. Try to always feel that you are Sri Thakur’s *sevak*. Every morning when you go to the shrine and offer your pranams to Sri Thakur, pray to Him saying - Thakur make me serve you sincerely.” People close to Maharaj will readily agree that, in fact,

this was his own attitude and that he followed it till the very end of his life.

He had to take steroid-nebulization twice a day. Observing this, one swami strongly objected and said to Maharaj that steroids have many side effects. Maharaj immediately said that if he did not take the steroids, he would not be active enough to serve the sangha. He would not allow himself to be selfish by thinking of his own body and the side effects of the steroids. He insisted that he must remain active and go on serving the sangha. Indeed, everyone who came in touch with Maharaj felt fortunate and blessed.

Maharaj is a wonderful example of an unostentatious, unassuming, simple life, without any pretensions. It was difficult to fathom the depths of his wonderful life since he kept himself hidden from the common gaze. He did not speak much. An elderly swami has an interesting incident to narrate in this connection. He was the head of Aalo (Along, Arunachal Pradesh) branch of the Mission and had come to Belur Math. Maharaj was then a trustee of the Math and was having a cup of tea in the verandah of the monastic quarters wearing just a dhoti and vest (banian). The Aalo swami just kept staring at Maharaj for a long time without saying anything. At last Maharaj himself broke the silence saying “Why are just staring? Do you want to say anything?” Getting no answer, Maharaj invited the swami to have a cup of tea with him. In the twinkling of an eye Maharaj became fully active, made the swami sit on a chair and himself prepared and served him a cup of tea, and thus endeared himself to the swami by his warmth. This swami remembers this incident with much feeling even today and says that Maharaj invited him to Mumbai and Cossipore centres on several occasions.

A unique characteristic of Maharaj’s life was his punctuality and his systematic approach to everything. All those who have worked with him are unanimous on this and have drawn inspiration from him. A monk who lived with him in Mumbai centre for a long time has reminisced that, when Maharaj had to travel to some place, he

could get ready in a very short time. He was always the first to reach the place of work before others. If he were to attend any meeting he went there well ahead of the scheduled time. Cossipore Math holds celebrations on the occasion of *Kalpataru Day* every year. Many monks and distinguished persons are invited to address the devotees on this occasion. It is a common experience of all guest speakers to see Maharaj waiting for them at the venue to receive them. He would also remain present on the stage throughout the programme and listen attentively to all the talks. At the end he would say some encouraging words to the speakers and personally take them for refreshments. There was orderliness and a definite method in all these. He carried this trait till the very end of his earthly life.

His meticulousness in following the monastic routine at Cossipore Math, even after he became Vice-President of the Order, is worth emulating. He would get up at a fixed hour in the morning, spend time in japa and meditation, and then read *Bhagavad Gita*, *Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* and *Inspired Talks*. Around ten o'clock he would meet with devotees for about an hour. After this he would attend to the mail and answer letters. He would always go to the dining-hall for partaking noon *prasad*. If devotees had to speak to him, they could do so after lunch. Next he retired to his room for studies and a little rest. In the afternoon there was again meeting with devotees and answering their questions. He attended *sandhya-arti* daily. He would observe whether all monastic brothers attended *arti*. After *arti* he returned to his room and after a while ate a very light night-meal. Maharaj followed this routine with clockwork precision.

Although he appeared serious Maharaj had a lively sense of humour. Once, a monk was transferred to Cossipore Math from a nearby centre. Coming to know of this, Maharaj telephoned the head of that centre and asked him to send that monk that day itself to Cossipore Math. The other swami requested Maharaj to spare at least seven days so that the monk could hand-over his duties to someone else. But Maharaj insisted that the monk come that day

itself and, if necessary, go back to that centre later for handing over charge. The second swami had to yield to this request and asked the monk to report to Maharaj that day itself. In the evening, that monk presented himself before Maharaj. Seeing him Maharaj smiled and said, “So you have come away. Good. I’ve been in administration for nearly twenty-five years. If not anything else, I’ve learned this much that, in business matters, first and foremost you should take possession of the thing!” Everyone present roared with laughter. Maharaj retained his sense of humour till the end of his life.

Once, on a special occasion *prawn-malai-curry* had been prepared in the ashrama. Since one of the *sevaks* had allergy to prawns, egg-curry had been prepared specially for him. Maharaj was, however, served both the dishes. Surprised at this he asked the reason for preparing two special curries. When the matter was explained to him, he called his *sevak* and said, “Because of your allergy to prawns, egg-curry is prepared for you. But I’ve got both. So I’m the one who has benefitted most from your allergy!” It was not that Maharaj was fond of eating, for he ate sparingly. He delighted more in feeding others and never cringed in that matter. Every year after Durga Puja celebrations at Belur Math, a group of monks who had carried out the worship used to visit him to offer their pranams. On such occasions, Maharaj would arrange for them a variety of dishes and remain present when they were served. He would insist that the visitors taste every dish without fail. None can forget his deep love.

Generally he did not like giving lectures. Just a few days before his last admission to the hospital the Annual General Meeting of the Ramakrishna Mission was held at Belur Math. Narrating the highlights of the meeting to Maharaj, his *sevak* mentioned that President Maharaj who usually gave the Chairman’s address could not attend the meeting and hence Swami Shivamayanandaji, senior Vice-President of the Mission, who was in the audience, was requested to address the meeting. Maharaj remarked humorously, “You see, I was luckily absent in the meeting. Otherwise, I would have been asked to speak!”

Once, Maharaj desired to visit Dakshineswar Kali Temple for *darshan* of the Divine Mother. On the way he saw a monk of a nearby branch of the Mission. Maharaj knew that the monk was acquainted with the administrators of the Kali Temple. So he asked him to join them. The monk made suitable arrangements for *darshan* within the short time at his disposal and Maharaj could have *darshan* of the Divine Mother to his heart's content without any problem. Later, he happily thanked the monk saying, "Oh! You arranged such a wonderful *darshan* for me in the temple! I was treated there as though I were a VIP!"

He loved the birds of the ashrama very much and fed them with his own hands. The birds too seemed to look upon him as a friend. Once, a severe storm blew away their nests. As a result, these winged visitors were not seen for a few days in the ashrama. Maharaj grew uneasy over the matter and started complaining to a monk, "You have cut the branches of the trees. So the birds are unable to come here." Another day, seeing the garden-area manured, he lamented with the simplicity of a boy, "The foul smell of the manure has driven away all my birds!" Within a few days, however, the birds started coming again to the ashrama and Maharaj's mind was at rest.

He had a very feeling and compassionate heart for poor and needy people. He had thoroughly imbibed Swami Vivekananda's dictum of *Shiva Jnanay Jiva Seva*. He was averse to making a show of the service rendered to people. If someone took a photograph of his giving a sari or a blanket to a poor man he would say in disgust "What is the need for advertising?" He received from devotees a considerable amount of *pranami* (money offering). This he would spend to help the poor and often sent money orders personally. Even the monks living with him would not know about it! "When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" – was his attitude. Once he enquired about the accumulated *pranami* amount. His *sevak* gave him the full account of the money received. Maharaj heaved a sigh of relief and remarked,

“I was worried. How will I manage my family without money?” Truly speaking, his “family” consisted of the innumerable poor people living in Malda, Kamarpukur, Ranchi, Mumbai, Kolkata and other places, who have all through their lives enjoyed his unbounded sympathy and tasted his generosity.

Children were very dear to Maharaj. Whenever he saw them he gave them chocolates or sweets to make them happy. At Cossipore Math hundreds of children would go to him and he would distribute chocolates to them with his own hand. Or he would tell his sevaks, “give them chocolates generously. Do you think they come to me for offering pranams? They come here with an eye on eatables!” He showed much consideration for children of the non-formal school at Cossipore Math. It was his habit to go to them and check the food given to them. He delighted in arranging special snacks for them once in a while. On such occasions, he would invariably go there to see if children were relishing the food. This reminds us of an incident that happened towards the end of Swami Vivekananda’s life when he arranged a feast in Belur Math for *santals* and seeing them relishing their meal, remarked that he saw Narayana Himself partaking of the food.

Maharaj led an exemplary life dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna. By coming in contact with him hundreds of people have found the direction to navigate their boats in the sea of life, many spiritual seekers have found solace, and a few others have even embraced monastic life by joining the Ramakrishna Order or the Sarada Math. Once, his *sevak* asked him about the quantum of japa done by him. Maharaj replied, “Ten to fifteen thousand.” He had great reverence for his guru Revered Swami Shankaranandaji Maharaj and said that he had not received any rosary (*japa-mala*) from him. His guru had asked him to perform japa keeping count on his fingers, since, he said, hands were given by God just for performing japa. Those who have seen Maharaj from close quarters have observed that whenever he would be sitting alone or walking or travelling in a vehicle, his fingers would be constantly moving – a sure indication that his mind

was engaged in continuous japa. He would encourage devotees to practise japa. Of the different forms of japa, he held mental japa to be the best. Once he shared his conviction in this regard with his *sevak* and told him that he had been practising mental japa since his days in Mumbai Ashrama. His *sevak* replied in despair, “Maharaj, we are not able to do mental japa always.” Maharaj immediately replied, “You can do it. Go on practising. Whatever you seek from the Lord you will get.” He often encouraged devotees thus: “Take the name of the Lord in all earnestness. What is most important is intensifying our hankering for God. Haven’t you seen this in Sri Thakur’s life?” One day his *sevak* put this intriguing question to him, “Maharaj, have you seen God?” Maharaj burst out laughing in his characteristic way. Perhaps this was his answer and assurance, conveyed without words but through the expression of inner bliss, to enquiring aspirants and countless devotees of the present and future that he had found without a shadow of doubt priceless treasure within himself.

A memorable incident happened when Maharaj was in Kamarpukur. The day before the birthday celebration of Sri Thakur, he called the monk in charge of the kitchen and told him, “This time no one has brought green-peas-filled *kachoris* for offering to Sri Thakur. I haven’t heard from any devotee so far that he or she would get it for offering tomorrow. Let us see what will happen tomorrow.” On the same day, a devotee of Chandannagar while returning home from his office saw a vegetable vendor with a heap of green peas. Prompted by some unknown urge he bought the whole lot. Coming to his home he suggested to his wife that if *kachoris* could be prepared with these green peas, he would take them the next day to Kamarpukur for offering to Sri Thakur. She was doubtful if she could do it within the time available. But he insisted that it should be done and both set themselves to the task. Although it was strenuous they succeeded in preparing the *kachoris* before dawn. Next day both of them went to Kamarpukur and offered their preparation. Seeing these peas-filled-*kachoris* everyone

was happy and surprised. The pious wish of a sincere devotee had fructified by Thakur's grace.

Vrindaban and Nabadwip held a special attraction for Maharaj. Associated as they are with the blessed memories of Sri Krishna and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, these two places never failed to strike devotional chords in his mind whenever he went there. It seemed as though he was taking part in the eternal Divine Sport at these two places. One of his *sevaks* happened to be associated with Nabadwip. Maharaj knew about this and he would remark towards the end, "See my helpless condition. In my last days, I'm forced to accept the service of a person from Nabadwip." These words reveal his high regard for that sacred place and also absence of self-conceit.

It was not in his nature to seek any special treatment. Once, Maharaj and a few other monks were on a pilgrimage to Badrinath and Kedarnath. One day they stopped at a restaurant for their meals. But the food there was not to their liking. Maharaj, however, started eating his meal without any reaction. After a while a devotee chanced to come there and took them to a good restaurant nearby. All were happy at this turn of events. Maharaj, however, once again ate without any reaction. The others in the party were impressed to see this practice of Bhagavad Gita's teaching *yadrichha-labha-santushta* (content with whatever comes unasked). There have been many such instances in his life.

Maharaj kept a special eye on the comfort of his *sevaks*. Soon after finishing his meals, he would enquire if they had taken their food. He was reluctant to accept any special service from them. It was his nature to do his personal work himself. When old age started taking a toll on his energy, he inevitably had to depend more and more on his *sevaks*. That was a cause for remorse for him – that he was troubling his *sevaks*. He had given up everything for the sake of others and retained with him only devotion and self-surrender to the Lord.

Maharaj had his inimitable way of pursuing studies. His reading was extensive, especially during the years he spent in Cossipore Math. In addition to the books on Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and Swamiji, which he read daily, he was keen on going through *Udbodhan*, *Prabuddha Bharata*, *Vedanta Kesari*, and other magazines published by the Ramakrishna Order. If he liked any particular article, he would read them aloud to those with him. He read with such concentration that often he would not even notice someone standing nearby.

Once, Maharaj asked a monk to accompany him on his tour to a few ashramas lasting for some days. The monk in question had little time to think over this and accepted the invitation with joy. Moreover, he had some work in an ashrama in the area they were to visit. His plan was to stay back for a day to attend to his work after Maharaj left. When Maharaj came to know of this he said, “I too will stay back for a day and return with you. You have spared so much time for me although you are my junior. Should I not extend my stay for one day for your sake, being much senior to you?”

We shall narrate some incidents now to show the loving and feeling heart that Maharaj possessed. A woman was overcome with grief on losing her daughter. She had attempted suicide a few times. A senior swami of Belur Math sent the lady to Maharaj at Cossipore. Maharaj listened patiently to her tale of woe and later blessed her with *mantra-diksha*. On her subsequent visits, he talked to her about the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. Gradually the bereaved mother regained her composure and returned to normalcy.

During the days of the pandemic restrictions, a devotee obtained special permission to offer *pranam* to Thakur at the Cossipore temple and also visit Maharaj. Partaking of *prasad* by devotees was suspended during these pandemic days. Being aware of this the devotee could not express his desire to eat *prasad* to anyone. He was about to leave the ashrama after offering his *pranam* to Maharaj when suddenly Maharaj himself called him back and said, “Hello,

will you not take *prasad*? Have *prasad* here today”. The devotee was awe-struck and his eyes were moist with tears on such showering of grace.

A devotee described in a letter to Maharaj various problems that he was facing in life. Maharaj replied in a simple but firm manner, “My opinion is that the more you think about this, the more your peace of mind will be disturbed. It affects your spiritual and secular life. Render your *seva* regularly and repeat the name of God (*Mahamantra*) as much as you can. Remember, Sri Ramakrishna is the embodiment of Truth eternal. Have faith in Him and stick to the truth. I shall be pleased if you repeat the name of God and work in the way shown by Swamiji”. This shows the depth of Maharaj’s unshakeable faith! What a simple yet priceless solution he prescribed! God-centeredness was the core of his personality. He found the solution to every tricky situation in life in God-centeredness.

As we have stated earlier, Maharaj was not much used to giving lectures or discourses. Once, at a youth convention at Cossipore, he addressed a gathering of youngsters without any prior preparation. It seemed that some divine power descended upon him that day and he delivered a masterful extempore speech. He was speaking on Swamiji’s message to the youth and repeatedly impressed upon them to firmly believe in the potential divinity of the Self. His words seemed to be divinely charged.

This was how a life centred in the Divine was being lived. Maharaj used to be quite healthy except for occasional cold and cough. He continued his spiritual ministration in a regular and routine manner. Since the onset of the corona pandemic from March 2020, Maharaj mostly remained within the Cossipore Math. Though he was apparently doing well, perhaps, an internal preparation was going on since then. One day, he called his *sevaks* and distributed a number of the things that he was using. All wondered at this but no one could understand if this indeed was an indication of preparing for the final departure.

A senior swami and head of a branch centre brought with him a brahmacharin who was an initiated disciple of Maharaj, and who had recently joined there as a novice. They came to pay their respects to Maharaj who was very happy to see them and asked them to have noon-*prasad*. Considering the pandemic restrictions, the senior swami pleaded with Maharaj to postpone having *prasad* to some other time. He was afraid that their presence might put Maharaj's health at risk. Hence they quickly returned to their ashrama. But he was disturbed about having come away abruptly and informed Maharaj's *sevak* that they would soon visit Cossipore again and have noon-*prasad* there as desired by Maharaj. Accordingly after a few days he came to Cossipore along with a few more brahmacharins and took *prasad*. Maharaj was very pleased that day and his countenance beamed with joy when they arrived and offered *pranam*.

Towards the end of September 2020, one morning when Maharaj was strolling in the ashrama after his bath as per his usual routine, it was observed that he had some difficulty in breathing. Even after repeated enquiries Maharaj did not speak about his difficulty. The *sevaks* convinced him to go to Seva Pratishtan hospital for a check-up.

After examination doctors found that he was suffering from severe multiple infections. With proper care and treatment he felt better after 10-15 days and was discharged from the hospital. But his *sevaks* observed that Maharaj was still not his normal self, he could not eat properly and he seemed to find it difficult to follow his usual routine. He was again taken to Seva Pratishtan and diagnosis revealed irregular sodium-potassium levels in his blood. A new complication also surfaced now: whenever he drank any fluid it would enter his air-pipe resulting in severe cough. He could eat semi-solid foods without difficulty. The doctors inserted Ryle's Tube through the nostrils for drinking water and other fluids. Maharaj occasionally remarked, "You have started feeding me through the ear! How long do you want to keep it this way? Can't I eat through my mouth?"

The *sevaks* used to comfort him saying, “Maharaj, you are unable to drink comfortably now. Hence this arrangement has been made so that you don’t have any difficulty in drinking fluids”. As this Ryle’s Tube needed replacement every three weeks which was painful for the patient, doctors suggested insertion of PEG (Percutaneous Endoscopic Gastrostomy) Tube through the abdomen for better medical management. On 12th March 2021, surgery was performed to fix the PEG Tube. When Dr. Pradip Chakraborty, a medicine specialist visited Revered Maharaj in the morning, Maharaj himself said to the doctor, “Today is the day of my surgery. I shall go the OT after a while”. The doctor in turn comforted him saying, “Yes Maharaj, this is a minor procedure”. The surgery was led by Dr. Achintya Das at 11.00 a.m. It was an uneventful procedure carried out in about 45 minutes. Doctors conveyed that the procedure was successfully done and Maharaj was shifted back to his cot. He did not have any apparent difficulty until then. At about 3.00 p.m., he had a bout of cough.

A little later he coughed again but this time there was some blood with the phlegm. Doctors were immediately called. Maharaj said, “I feel nausea”. At 4.00 p.m. he had another bout of vomiting. He said to the *sevaks*, “I am feeling severe pain, make me sit up”. The site of the pain was, however, not clear – sometimes he was pointing to his chest, sometimes to some other part of his body. A little later he asked a *sevak* to massage his feet. Doctors were initially unable to understand his complaints. ECG was performed but did not reveal any anomaly. Suddenly the blood pressure started dropping very fast. Maharaj was rushed to the ICU and put on ventilation. The doctors and the entire medical team extended best possible care but Maharaj did not respond to the treatment.

At 7.10 p.m. Revered Maharaj left the mortal coil for his eternal abode. He was 91 years old at the time of his *Mahasamadhi*. The sad news spread immediately through television and other electronic media.

His sacred body was brought to Ramakrishna Math, Cossipore *Udyanbati* by about 10.00 p.m. to allow devotees, volunteers, admirers, sannyasins and brahmacharins, to pay their last respects throughout the night. The next day the body was brought to the Cultural Hall (*Sanskriti Bhavan*) at Belur Math at about 8.30 a.m. A large number of devotees, matajis, sannyasins and brahmacharins paid their last respects to Revered Maharaj throughout the day. At 9.15 p.m., the sannyasins and brahmacharins carried the body lying on a florally-adorned cot in a procession through Belur Math – passing first the front of the Ramakrishna temple, then through the Math courtyard, to Swami Brahmanandaji’s temple and to Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi’s temple. After the customary rituals at the Holy Mother’s *Ghat* his body was carried via Swamiji’s temple to Most Revered President Maharaj’s quarters and then to the *Samadhi-ghat*. Monks first circled the body on the pyre with sacred fire-strands and at last the mortal body was consigned to flames. In the stillness of the silent night, sannyasins and brahmacharins sang in chorus: *Oi je dekhaa jaay aanandadhaam ...* An exemplary life dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna which started its journey on the sacred soil of Belur Math sixty seven years ago returned to its blessed and immortal ***Abode of Joy*** transcending all shackles.

The life of Revered Vagishanandaji Maharaj is a luminous example of a God-centred life. There was no ostentation or extravagance in his life. But his selfless love and empathy endeared everyone who came to him. His life shows how *Shiva Jnanay Jiva Seva* (Service to man is worship of God) can be practised in a silent manner. His life will serve as a beacon to many generations of spiritual seekers.

Revered Maharaj stands tall in the spiritual tradition of Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda. In him we find the manifestation of profound spiritual truths effulgent in their own glory.
