

# Swami Prabhananda



**Ramakrishna Math**

Belur Math

Howrah 711202

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## SWAMI PRABHANANDA

In 1956 a young student of the Calcutta University was waiting to get his postgraduate degree in psychology, with Advanced Industrial Psychology as his specialisation. Professor (Dr.) Purnendu Kumar Basu, a reputed teacher of psychology of his time was teaching these postgraduate students then. The young student's diligence and sharp intellect made him Dr. Purnendu's favourite student. On his part the student too held his professor in high esteem. Later in the Souvenir commemorating Dr. Basu's centenary, this bright young man recalled, "Just a few days before our postgraduate exam results, Dr. Basu called me and said that he wanted me to do research in Psychology and that he had already arranged for a research scholarship. He also asked me to collect the forms from the office and to submit my completed forms for the scholarship. He was quite surprised as I hesitated at his proposal. In my mind I was then wondering how soon I would be able to complete my studies and join the Ramakrishna Order since any delay would put me beyond the joining age. I then requested him to kindly give me 7 days' time to think about this at which he felt disgusted. I too was in a dilemma. Meanwhile the exam results were out and I stood first in the University's combined psychology group. My true guide then was Swami Premeshanandaji Maharaj and I was also obliged to Swami Lokeshwaranandaji. Anyway, after 7 days I went to Dr. Basu and after prostrations to him, told him that I would not be pursuing the research work". It was this young student that later metamorphosed into the Revered Swami Prabhanandaji Maharaj, a Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Sangha...who gave up worldly research pursuits to dive deep into research in the spiritual world.

Swami Prabhanandaji was born to Shri Sailendra Nath and Smt. Shefalika Chowdhury on 17 October 1931, in Akhaura (Tippera district), Bangladesh. His father worked for the Assam-Bengal Railways and was head of the telegraph section at Lumding station (Assam). Owing to his adherence to truth, his father served a 6-month prison-term in the course of his employment. His mother Shefalika was a pious lady with keen interest in religious and other matters as well. During her time she was a well-known speaker on religious subjects in her locality. She was Secretary of the Lumding wing of the *All-India Women Samiti*. Her studious nature stayed with her even during her advanced age. An elderly sadhu reminisces that when he met this noble aged lady once with Prabhanandaji Maharaj, the studious mother enquired of her equally studious son, what new books had been published. Of the 3

sons and 4 daughters born to this couple, Maharaj was the eldest and was named Vivekananda (or Barun). When Barun was in his mother's womb, owing to socio-political disturbances in their locality, they had to stay elsewhere for some time. Once things normalised they were back at their home. Just a few days after Barun's birth, a Muslim fakir came to their house, wanting to bless the baby. When the mother brought the infant in her arms, the fakir while fanning the child conveyed through the lines of a song that *this child could not be kept at home for long*. Barun's mother went inside the house to get some offering for the fakir-guest (as per the prevailing custom), but when she returned, the fakir was nowhere to be found. It is difficult to say whether this was an act of Providence and what it signified.

Maharaj would himself talk about his childhood sometimes: "I was almost always a sick child. When I was about 6-7 years, I suffered from a severe bout of blood dysentery. The doctors had given up all hope of my recovery. They put my sick body beside the *tulsi*-shrine (*munch*) in the house and waited for the inevitable. However, my father's mother (*Thakur-maa*) took me back inside the house saying if he has to die let him die inside the house itself. Slowly I started recovering. Owing to prolonged suffering my body had become emaciated and my head seemed to be relatively larger. I was unable to even stand on my own feet. Gradually I was able to stand again and learnt to walk".

Maharaj was a bright student even from his early days. However, owing to the Second World War and the Indian freedom struggle going on then, he had to change schools quite often. He was in the London Missionary Society School in Berhampore for his 5th and 6th standard studies. He then went to the Chandpur Jubilee High School (now in Bangladesh) for studying in classes 7 through 10. But he had to enrol in the Tinsukia Bangeeya Vidyalaya to give his matriculation exam. In 1948 he stood 11th in this exam in the province of Assam. He then passed with merit in 1950, the ISC exam from Krishnanath College in Berhampore. He studied here along with another well-known monk of the Order, late Swami Asaktanandaji (Vishnu) Maharaj, who later was Secretary of the Narendrapur centre for many years. It was around this time that both these friends became acquainted with Revered Swami Premeshanandaji Maharaj who was staying at the Sargachhi centre.

Maharaj himself said about the first meeting with Swami Premeshanandaji: "On the day I first met him, he kept staring at me. When I asked him what he was seeing, he said I am looking at your two eyes". Premeshanandaji liked him a lot. Whenever Barun went to the

Sargachhi ashrama, Maharaj would take him to his room and tell him various tales. Very often he would himself accompany him to the railway station on the way back. And Barun Maharaj looked up to Premeshanandaji as his mentor. In those days the Sargachhi centre was sustained by begging food (dry doles) from door to door (*mushti bhiksha*). Barun and some others would take small containers and leave them in the neighbouring houses. The householders would on their part put a fistful (*mushti*) of rice in these vessels. Later, these would be brought to the ashrama and the inmates survived mostly on this food. One day when Barun was engaged in this work, a friend of his grandfather who was passing by in a rickshaw noticed this and said to him, "Are you not the grandson of so-and-so? How have you come to this condition?" Young Barun did not pay much heed to these words and went about his work. One day Barun's mother came to this grandfather's house in Berhampore after a long time. Barun said to his mother that he had to go to the ashrama for work and that he would talk with her later. His surprised mother said to him, "What is this! I have come all the way to see you and talk with you after such a long time. Why not stay back today and go to the ashrama tomorrow?" The son said that that would not be possible and he must go that day itself. At this his mother said to him, "To whom will you go in the ashrama? Does anyone there love you more than I do?" "Yes there is a swami there who loves me much more than you" said Barun. Unable to bear this retort his mother sorrowfully said, "Look at what he says! I am the mother who gave him birth, but he says there is someone in the ashrama who loves him more than I do!" Such was the spiritual bond that bound Barun with Premeshanandaji Mj.

It was during this period of his student life that Barun had the chance to listen to a lecture delivered in Bengali by the famous scientist, Dr. Satyendra Nath Bose, a lecture which deeply impressed him. He also listened once to Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's speech in Berhampore. He would say later about this Netaji speech, "He spoke with such power, with so much vitality, that one would instantly feel a rush of energy". He once saw Mahatma Gandhi who was on his way to Noakhali (in Bangladesh). As a student of Calcutta University he heard Dr. Shyamaprasad Mukherjee speak. This lecture also left an indelible impression on him.

It was through Premeshanandaji again that he came in contact with another stalwart of the Ramakrishna Sangha – Swami Lokeshwaranandaji (Kanai) Maharaj. In 1950 Barun got admission in

the Vidyasagar College for the Honours course in Mathematics. He had to forgo admission to Presidency College then, just because he was short of ₹ 18 to pay the fees. Swami Lokeshwaranandaji was at that time head of the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home at Pathuriaghata in Kolkata. Barun was fortunate to be under his tutelage for some time here. During this period he was repeatedly hospitalised for various ailments – gall bladder operation, appendix operation, glaucoma and the like. Despite losing about nine months during this phase, he completed his graduation in 1953 and started his postgraduate studies in Psychology in 1954. After getting his B.Sc., he worked for a few days as an Industrial Organizer with the West Bengal Govt. In 1958 he passed the Calcutta University postgraduate exam with flying colours, topping the merit list.

Meanwhile on 21st May in 1955 he was blessed with *mantra diksha* by Revered Swami Shankaranandaji Maharaj, the then President of the Ramakrishna Sangha. The call of the spirit was getting stronger now. Barun and a few friends were by then slowly responding to Swamiji's call of *atmano mokshartham, jagaddhitaya cha* through Renunciation & Service.

During the last part of 1957 Barun visited his home in Lumding. With his mother's blessings he returned to Calcutta and formally joined the Order on 20th February 1958 at Narendrapur. He stayed there for almost a decade from 1958 to 1967.

In 1962, on 8th May (*Shankar Jayanti*), Revered Swami Vishuddhanandaji blessed him with *brahmacharya* vows, giving him the name Girishchaitanya. Subsequently on 22nd February 1966, Revered Swami Vireshwaranandaji Maharaj blessed him with *sannyasa diksha* and gave him the name Prabhananda.

At that time, in North Calcutta the Rambagan-slum was notorious, being under the control of anti-socials. Jivan Krishna Manik, a noble and upright resident of this area, had interacted with Swami Lokeshwaranandaji to work here for the uplift of the slum residents. Lokeshwaranandaji entrusted this task to the young friends, Barun and Vishnuprasad. By then Vishnuprasad had joined the Students' Home. With the help of several other bright youngsters, work for the transformation of the slum began in right earnest in 1952. After college classes, the young workers worked till even 11 pm at times. The inspiration from Lokeshwaranandaji and Barun's indefatigable energy served as a catalyst for the work. The group's untiring efforts soon began to bear fruit as conditions in the slum slowly improved. It was

not smooth going all along, however. One night when Barun was conducting the night class in the slum, someone from behind tried to strike him with a sword. By God's grace he came out of this unscathed. In the midst of this *seva* activity the boys also circulated a hand-written magazine called *Udayaachal*. Sketches drawn by the students also found a place in this magazine, and once a picture drawn by Barun was included there.

In the middle of 1956 the Students' Home was gradually shifted from humble Pathuriaghata to sprawling Narendrapur. Along with studies, social uplift work also continued. In 1957 was started the Institute of Social Education & Recreation (ISER) at Narendrapur for running welfare projects in rural Bengal and in urban slums. Barun was made its director. In 1958 Barun had joined the Narendrapur centre as a brahmachari. Rural uplift work began in right earnest by opening 20 adult-education-centres in the districts of undivided 24-Parganas and Midnapore. Over a period of time, training to small groups of local boys and girls in dairy, poultry and apiary was started. Through his initiative *Samajshiksha*, the first and only Bengali monthly catering to *rural uplift*, was started. Owing to Barun Maharaj's efforts a number of booklets were regularly published in simple language to educate people: A Muslim Saint, Ma Sarada—Mother of all, Sri Ramakrishna—the peoples' teacher (*Lokashikshak Sri Ramakrishna*), A Christian Saint, are some of them.

Pathuriaghata and Narendrapur constituted a unique chapter in Prabhananda's life. From here he witnessed first-hand the horrible after-effects of partition, dreams being shattered even after the country got freedom, as also the rosy dawn that beckoned. His sharp intellect, uncluttered thinking and capacity for untiring work (despite his frail health) stood him in good stead in his efforts to practise the *Shiva jnane jiva seva* prescribed by Swamiji for nation-building.

Barun Maharaj was quite far-sighted in his plans for rural uplift. He organised a *mela* for rural products. Cultural programmes were also a part of this *mela*. People from far and near villages would participate in this Narendrapur *mela*. Maharaj wanted to slowly introduce these rural folk to scientific thought processes on the one hand and on the other he wanted them to realise and reap the benefits of conjoint effort. Maharaj had a variety of experiences during his Loka Siksha Parishad days. He would sometimes talk about these to his *sevaks* and others. We give here one interesting event as narrated by Maharaj himself: "A lot of travelling was involved as part of Loka Siksha Parishad work. Once I

went to Midnapore for relief work. There were no good roads for travelling then. We had to cross a river to go to the other side. Once I took a bus to this side of the river and then went to Muradpur on the other side by boat. By the time I returned by boat after finishing that day's work, it was quite late in the night. There was no bus to Calcutta at that hour and seeing that a tea shop was open, I asked if they could accommodate me for the night. But they did not help in any way since they did not know me. The bus to Calcutta was at 5 am. I was wondering what to do since I was dog-tired after a full day's work. I lay down on a sand dump and tried to sleep. After some time I felt something strange pressing my back. I got up to see that a dog was leaning on my back and sleeping. I went to another place to get some sleep. The dog too came to sleep leaning on me again. This way I changed places several times with the same effect until at last the bus to Calcutta arrived in the morning and I returned."

It was in this fashion then that Maharaj marched ahead on the *seva* highway undaunted by obstacles and challenges. In fact, the Loka Siksha Parishad of today is built on the foundation laid by Lokeshwaranandaji and Prabhanandaji. The latter gave the Parishad the force of an institution and a clear long term vision for its activities.

It was on this foundation that subsequently, under the leadership of the well-known Shri Shibsankar Chakraborty and the efforts of other inspired, dedicated individuals, the activities of the Loka Siksha Parishad grew by leaps and bounds.

In the meantime the Training Centre for brahmacharins was started at Belur Math. After completing his prescribed two year stint at the Training Centre, brahmachari Barun became brahmachari Girishchaintanya. On 1st July 1962, he assumed charge as headmaster of the Narendrapur Vidyalaya. It seems strange that despite his total immersion in rural development work, he was now being entrusted with the task of school administration. The school taught in both Bengali medium and English medium. At the outset everyone was a little sceptical about the capability of this lean, young, (but) bright-eyed headmaster. They soon realised that he was a disciplinarian and was firm in his dealings. As days went by, they found in him scholarship and empathy in equal measure. Soon he became everyone's *Barun-da*. One of his students remembers that Barun-da hardly uttered a harsh word, but his penetrating eyes and their steady gaze would convey all that was needed. He would not get carried away by emotion but always



preferred reasoning and logic while taking decisions. One of his students says that Barun-da spoke good English and also had a special liking for English.

We get many examples about his far-sightedness and long-term planning as a headmaster. The formation of the various school departments, the exam system, the hobby club, the indoor and outdoor sports facilities, are all the result of his thought process. He kept keen watch on the work of the teaching staff. He would enquire whether teachers gave regular homework to the students or not and also enquired whether they looked into how the homework was actually done. He was especially alert to the needs of poor students and to those who were weak in studies. He would arrange for special coaching for weak students. He would silently visit the hostels during study hours lending a helping hand wherever needed.

His goal was to instil in the students the idea of *Total Development* at the very outset. One of his students still remembers that he introduced among them the habit of maintaining a diary. The name of the diary was **My Plan**. One the first page would be written under *My Pledge*: "I shall pay attention to every aspect of my growth - physical, intellectual, emotional, social, moral and spiritual". At the end of each day one was to write down the day's happenings. The diary contained some guidelines for physical and mental development. There was a set of questions to be answered at the end of every week for self-introspection. It was not very long before students started reaping the sweet fruits of this exercise.

Whenever an opportunity presented itself, he invariably extended a helping hand to his students. On the last day of his school, a student was standing at the Narendrapur gate with all his belongings, eager to go home. Maharaj was leaving for Calcutta by car. Noticing the boy, he stopped at the gate, took the boy in the car and dropped him at a convenient place in Calcutta saying **stay well** (*bhaalo theko*). This affectionate gesture from his serious headmaster left an everlasting impression on the boy. His seriousness notwithstanding, Maharaj also had a keen sense of humour. The school's science students would go on educational tours. Feeling let down, some students of the Humanities section went to Barun-da's office and blurted out, "Barun-da, we the students of Humanities section want to go on an *Editorial* tour. We see that others are going". Maharaj, not wanting to miss the fun, asked what an *Editorial* tour was. The students realised their mistake and then Maharaj said to them, "I also feel like going to Germany on a study

tour. But who will send me?" Finally however, that year the class-10 students of the Humanities section were taken on a study tour.

Students, teachers and non-teaching staff, all remember Barun-da with gratitude. Maharaj continued as headmaster at Narendrapur until 5 November 1967.

After his stint at Narendrapur, Prabhanandaji Maharaj assumed charge as Principal of the Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha's Vidyamandir on 4th April 1968. Those were difficult days marked by political agitations and social unrest. Even the serene atmosphere at Vidyamandir was seriously disturbed by these developments. But Maharaj faced all these with typical stoicism. Two of his students of those days who are both senior sadhus of the Sangha today, recall an incident: A group of agitated students had surrounded Maharaj with some unreasonable demands. Maharaj was however unyielding. Since things were taking an ugly turn, the government sent some security personnel for Maharaj's protection. However, as soon as these people entered the campus, Maharaj shouted at the top of his voice asking them not to take a single step further. All were surprised to see Maharaj in such a mood that day. Later, through the mediation of a few teachers, the issue was partially resolved. Many such incidents of those days are narrated by people who worked with him. Another day he heard the sound of a bomb exploding on the road between Belur Math and the Vidyamandir. He came running and, climbing on the boundary wall, observed what was happening outside.

Many teachers remember with reverence that Maharaj always consulted them in the course of running the institution. He introduced the concept of Teachers' Committee and other Sub-committees which enabled teachers' participation in various activities of the Vidyamandir, a tradition that continues to this day. Students recall with loving gratitude his concern for them even today. Once, two rural students who enrolled for the Pre-University course were ill-treated by some seniors. When Maharaj learnt of this, he took the concerned seniors to task and through his affectionate concern made the new-comers feel at-home in their new environment. When students went home during long holidays, they would often get postcards from Maharaj, enquiring about their well-being and studies. Students fondly remember such affectionate gestures.

After Vidyamandir, from 1 January 1972 Maharaj spent a short period of just over three years at Seva Pratishthan, the hospital centre of the Ramakrishna Mission.

In May 1975 he was sent to head the Purulia Vidyapith. Keeping the all-round development of its students in mind, Swami Hiranmayanandaji Maharaj had started the Purulia Vidyapith in 1957 serving as its founder-secretary. Swami Prabhanandaji served the Vidyapith from 1975 up to 1980. Here also his keen insight and sharp intellect helped him to spread education on the one hand, and on the other, enabled him to introduce new techniques in many departments of the Vidyapith, most of which are yielding fruitful results to this day. Here too he was as attentive to day-to-day activities of the school as to the mental development of its students. He assigned important tasks to many devoted teachers and encouraged them in turn to contribute their best to the Vidyapith's development. He would send teachers on study-visits to various famous schools spread across the country—New Delhi, Chennai, Ranchi, the Doon school, and the like—so that the Vidyapith could benefit from their systems and techniques.

He started a Museum in the campus where were contrasted Indian culture and traditions with current developments. The then Governor of the state inaugurated this museum in 1980. Specimens of the handwriting of renowned personalities, extraordinary drawings & paintings, varieties of musical instruments and many ancient sculptures are housed here. From the many dilapidated and broken Jain, Buddhist and Hindu temples in the interiors of Purulia and Bankura, many pieces of sculpture, some dating back 1,200 years, have thus been saved from the hands of thieves and dacoits.

One of his outstanding contributions here was the complete transformation of the hobby-club. As a result, on the decided day every week, students could enjoy doing research and study on their favourite topics in science or literature – history, geography, museology, Indology and the like. At the year end, there would be a display of models of the innovations the students had come out with. Students would thus be encouraged to participate at the district, state and national level exhibitions and competitions and win prizes also. About the activities of the Hobby Club, three publications titled *Hobby Projects* were brought out. On a larger compass, Maharaj would guide students how to rise in life and become successful.

During his time he organized many seminars at Purulia Vidyapith inviting well-known teachers. Renowned teacher Himangshu Bimal Mazumdar also visited the Vidyapith in this context. The institution and its students have both benefitted immensely from the ideas on

education given by such brilliant invitees. Many of today's celebrations at the Vidyapith like Rabindra Jayanti, Teachers' Day, Science Day, Narayana Seva, Vanotsav, etc all owe their origin to Maharaj's initiative. It was he who introduced basket-ball to the Vidyapith. He would test the candidate thoroughly during teachers' interviews. One teacher recalls this: "During my interview one of the teachers in the interview committee asked me to quote 4 lines from a poem by Wordsworth. While quoting the 4 lines I had omitted one word from a line. Maharaj noticed this and he spelt out the word that I had missed. Even though Maharaj was not a student of English literature, he was quick enough to point out and correct my mistake".

Even though he was thus fully engaged in developing the Vidyapith, he was equally alert to the needs of the hapless villagers in the surrounding areas owing to lack of rains. Keeping locals' needs, in mind he started a charitable allopathic dispensary on the Vidyapith campus. In 1979 with the help of the Loka Siksha Parishad of Narendrapur and the Nehru Youth Centre in Purulia, he started a rural youth centre called *Kalyan* in Purulia district. The buildings within the campus to house the Post Office at Vivekanandanagar and the local branch of Punjab National Bank (then United Bank of India) were his contribution. In Purulia town he organized devotees into a *Sarada Sangha* and through this, began the regular reading of the Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita.

The inmates of the Purulia Vidyapith led a peaceful existence during his tenure. Just as he did not waste time and energy himself, he expected other monastic members also to be alert to this. Regardless of what time his night work would finish, he would invariably be in the shrine at 4 am. He was very particular that sadhus and brahmacharins practised *sadhana* early morning daily. Once when a brahmachari was late in coming to the shrine, Maharaj called him to the office asked him about this. On being told that he could not get up on time because he did not have an alarm clock, Maharaj immediately gave him the clock which was on his table and said to him to come on time henceforth. He would also chant the Gita and other scriptures with the monastic brothers. One could hear from him many stories of the Math & Mission and also learn details about many senior sadhus of the Order. Those who stayed in the Vidyapith bear testimony to his forbearance and sense control. No one ever heard him say that the food was tasteless. He was always very strict about maintaining time. If he had asked the driver to get the car at a particular time, he too would invariably be ready by then.

His concern was not restricted to only monastic inmates but extended to workers and others as well. One of the young teachers of those days still remembers this: He had joined the Vidyapith in 1975 but found that it was difficult to continue there. After just 7 days he resigned from his job and sent the letter to Maharaj. Without wasting any time, Maharaj summoned him to his office and spoke with him affectionately. The teacher was comforted for the time being and continued in his job. But after a month he decided to quit the job once again. He went to say goodbye to Maharaj who, however, did not object to his going away. He simply said to him: "Are you really going? You will have to return. When you feel like coming back let me know". The young man went home but felt restless all the time. At the same time he started feeling a strong attraction towards the Vidyapith. He then sent his *Vijaya pranams* to Maharaj and also conveyed to him that he was not happy at home. He was waiting for the reply; all his letters to Maharaj would invariably be replied. And the reply did come, "You come here". The teacher returned to the Vidyapith and happily served there for thirty five long years.

Maharaj had to leave Vidyapith owing to failing health, particularly because he could not stand the breeze of the Arjun-tree flowers (and Vidyapith has a number of huge Arjuna trees in its campus). He was to leave the Vidyapith after the evening aarti. A number of teachers and workers had assembled to say good bye. Just as Maharaj came out of his room, there occurred a power outage. One of the assembled people asked Maharaj, "Is this any indication of dark days descending on the Vidyapith?" To which Maharaj immediately replied' "No, no, not at all. The Vidyapith will always stay on a high pedestal". True to his words, the Vidyapith has gone from strength to strength over the years.

In 1980 the second All-India Convention of the Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission was organized at Belur Math. Swami Lokeshwaranandaji was the Secretary of the Convention Committee. Swami Prabhanandaji was also one of the members of this committee and was hence staying at the Institute of Culture and attending to the convention work. Under Prabhanandaji's supervision the book **Rebuild India**, consisting of extracts from Swamiji's Complete Works, was published as a part of the Convention. After the Convention, he supervised the publication of the *Proceedings of the Convention* – a book of almost 400 pages. While he was staying at the Institute of Culture, on the 18th April 1983, he was elected a trustee of the Ramakrishna Math

and a member of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission. He shifted to the headquarters office of the Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission at Belur Math as one of the Assistant Secretaries on 18th February 1984. He continued in this post for 12 years until 1st April 1995.

Apart from his work in the administration of the Sangha, during this period he interacted with the novices joining the Order and also with the brahmacharins of the Probationers' Training Centre at Belur Math. One such brahmachari who was posted to work at the headquarters (he is a senior sadhu now) fondly remembers the affectionate concern that Maharaj had towards newcomers like him. It was winter time. Despite his hectic schedule, Maharaj had noticed that the brahmachari did not have much winter clothes for protection. He soon arranged for a woollen shawl to be given to him. The sadhu still has the shawl with him as a priceless possession.

Maharaj was keen that the newcomers regularly read the biographies of Thakur, Ma and Swamiji as also other Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature apart from Vedanta scriptures. Often he would enquire what book one was reading. The intention was that one must study these texts regularly.

It was during his tenure that computers were introduced in the headquarters office beginning with the accounts section. The sadhu who was in charge of the accounts section then, remembers the misgivings that many people had regarding this and wondered how useful these computers would be. Maharaj, however, with his usual far-sightedness knew that computerization was the need of the day and despite all the explicit and implicit reservations, went ahead with his plans.

Maharaj had this unique trait of facing all problems head-on. Once, on the day before the public celebration at Belur Math (generally on the 1st Sunday following Sri Ramakrishna's birth *tithi*) owing to a severe storm, the main *pandal* on the eastern lawn of Belur Math was damaged and some portions of the ground were quite wet. The Belur Math manager-swami accordingly asked the supervisor-sadhu to shift the venue to Sri Ramakrishna's-temple-*nat-mandir*. After some time Prabhanandaji went to inspect the *pandal*. After inspecting the damage, he told the Math manager to make some repairs to the *pandal* wherever needed and to spread sand on the wet areas, saying that after this was done programmes could easily be conducted in the *pandal* itself. Impressed with this suggestion and also thus getting Prabhanandaji's

support, the manager Maharaj arranged for a team of workers, volunteers, sadhus and brahmacharins to start the repair work. All were happy to note that by mid-morning the ground was in good shape and the programmes could be smoothly conducted.

Maharaj once came to know that a young sannyasin was visiting schools and colleges in rural and interior areas spreading Swamiji's teachings among students. He was quite impressed with this and encouraged the young swami and asked him to inspire youngsters to keep contact with our centres.

Maharaj held the Sangha's work in very high esteem. He would never bother about his bodily comfort or condition in this context. One of the swamis working at the headquarters recalls one incident: Maharaj was suffering from high fever that day with a body temperature of over 100 degrees F. However, he was at his table that day silently going about his work. The swami had gone to get Maharaj's signature on a letter. After getting his signature, sensing that Maharaj was not well he ventured to ask Maharaj if he was feeling all right. To this Maharaj simply replied, "I'm okay, I'm okay. Go and do your work".

Another swami who worked at the headquarters at that time recalls this incident, "One day Maharaj said to me, "I have to go to Calcutta in the evening for some work. You also come with me". They went to meet a lawyer in Calcutta. After the work with the lawyer was over Maharaj and the swami left his office to return. Maharaj then said to the swami, "I brought you with me because I knew that it would be late evening by the time we return. It is not good for a sadhu to be outside alone after dusk". Despite being such a senior sadhu, Maharaj was alert to principles of monastic life and did not want to be out alone after dusk.

In 1984, floods in the river Manu in Tripura caused extensive damage in Kailashahar, Dharmanagar, Kamalpur and other areas. Maharaj himself accompanied the relief team of sadhus and brahmacharins in Kailashahar and Agartala. He introduced this team to the chief minister, finance minister, district magistrate, and other top government officials so that the relief work would not suffer. As a result of this step, the relief operations here could be conducted smoothly for almost a month. Even during his subsequent tenure as General Secretary of the Sangha, his enthusiasm for relief work impressed many.

Maharaj was very keen about *bhava prachar* work also. Once he took with him an expert *pujari-sadhu* and an expert accounts-*sadhu* to the Uttar Purvanchal Bhava Prachar Conference. He wanted the ashramas

connected with that parishad to learn puja properly and also to maintain accounting records correctly.

During this phase of his life he could give practical shape to a project very close to his heart...constructing and equipping the Ramakrishna Archives and Museum at Belur Math. He possessed an enquiring mind all along and this stood him in good stead in this particular context. When news spread that a Museum was to be constructed, many people rushed to hand over articles in their possession to Maharaj. But it was never easy to convince Maharaj about the authenticity or necessity of a thing. He had a sharp eye for detail and a very good memory along with the capacity to analyse things. He could thus discern which items to accept and which to discard. In this connection, he utilised the expert services of Dr. Saroj Ghosh, the Director of National Council of Science Museums. In addition, he established contact with various experts in this field in different parts of the country.

Belur Math has preserved many relics of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. All through his life Maharaj strove to collect such relics from our centres in India and abroad and also from the householder devotees. He sent the swami in charge of the Archives at Belur Math to the National Archives in New Delhi to study and learn first-hand the preservation techniques to be applied... such was his dedication and far-sightedness. There was an oil-painting of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi kept in her bedroom adjacent to the shrine in Jayrambati. The Holy Mother was worshipped in this painting daily in the shrine at Jayrambati, until the present marble statue was made ready for worship. It was also this same painting that was worshipped on the day the Jayrambati temple was consecrated in 1923. During her lifetime Mother herself had worshipped this painting. Owing to constant exposure to smoke over a long period, the painting had become almost unrecognisable. Through the efforts of Prabhanandaji Maharaj the painting was restored to its original state. It is now kept in the Museum at Belur Math. In this manner Maharaj was engaged throughout his life in tirelessly collecting authentic items for the Museum and Archives.

Many are unaware of the tremendous effort he put in to make the Museum and Archives project see the light of day. Quite often meetings regarding the Museum had to be held at Balaram Mandir in Baghbazar (Calcutta) since it would be easier for the concerned experts to come there. Maharaj would cross the Ganga by boat, walk to the bus-stand in the scorching afternoon sun and take a bus to Balaram Mandir. Not many



know of these details and assume that Maharaj would use the Math's vehicles for this work. The return trip also would be made the same way.

The Museum project required an office of its own during the construction phase. The furniture required for this (old tables, chairs, desks and the like) was collected from the Ramakrishna-temple basement. A dinghy room behind the bookstall at Belur Math was the makeshift office. There was hardly any ventilation in this room but who cared! Maharaj would come to this ramshackle office around 7 am after his breakfast, dust the furniture himself and start his work since others would only come after some time.

We will now look into an incident which shows how much concern Maharaj had for preserving old photographs/pictures. Once, some fungus layers were noticed inside the frame on Holy Mother's picture in the Baghbazar shrine. Learning of this Maharaj consulted his friend, Dr. Saroj Ghosh, referred to above. Dr. Ghosh agreed to send an expert worker one day to clean the picture. On the appointed day Maharaj, the then-head of Udbodhan centre, another swami who accompanied Maharaj from Belur Math and the expert worker sent by Dr. Ghosh went into the shrine at Baghbazar after the shrine-closure in the afternoon. The three swamis spent their time inside the shrine as the worker did the delicate task of removing the fungus. By Mother's grace the work could be completed just before the shrine re-opening time when all four of them came out.

Once, Maharaj went with a brahmachari of the Belgaum (now Belagavi) ashrama and Shri M.S. Nanjundiah (an acquaintance helping Maharaj in Musuem work) to the studio of photographer G.G. Welling. The photographers had sent word that they had the camera which was used to photograph Swamiji during his Belgaum visit and some other items which they wished to hand over to the Ramakrishna Order. When Maharaj and the others went to the studio the hosts brought out several items along with the covered camera. When Maharaj saw the covered camera he immediately whispered to the brahmachari that there was no camera inside the cover. When the photographer was requested to open the camera cover, he said that it was a sacred item and since the cover had never been opened. On insisting that the cover be opened, it was found that there was indeed no camera inside! Later when the brahmachari asked Maharaj how he could make out that there was no camera, Maharaj said that the cover of the camera was sagging inwards which showed that the cover was empty. This shows what a sharp eye Maharaj had for everything.

Until the very end, the Museum was dear to Maharaj. He would often ask the museum-in-charge detailed questions about the Museum and the items in the Museum. When Maharaj was staying in Belur Math during the covid pandemic, he conveyed to the museum-in-charge that he wished to make a tour of the entire Museum. Accordingly he was taken to every part of the Museum over a period of three days accompanied by the in-charge (an elderly swami himself).

One is left wondering how through his uncompromising dedication, perseverance and scientific temper, Maharaj completed this Ramakrishna Museum and Archives project. The Museum was first housed in the old headquarters office opposite Sri Ramakrishna's temple. Subsequently, after the present Museum building was constructed, the contents were shifted here. People from different parts of the world come here and carry with them nostalgic memories of the Ramakrishna Movement.

After Swami Lokeshwaranandaji Maharaj passed away, Swami Prabhanandaji assumed charge as Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, on 28th January 1999.

The Bedi Bhavan adjacent to the Institute of Culture was lying unused and its land was under illegal occupation. Through the efforts of Swami Lokeshwaranandaji, one third portion of the plot of land was purchased. However, owing to legal technicalities the extension work could not be started. Prabhanandaji succeeded in resolving the legal issues and finally the ownership vested in the Institute of Culture. On 15th May 2002, Revered Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj, President of the Order, laid the foundation stone of the new annexe building. In a short span of three years, the construction work was completed, and on 20th May 2005 the annexe building was formally inaugurated.

Before Prabhanandaji became the Secretary of Gol Park centre, a unit of the *Centre for Indological Studies* called Swami Vivekananda Archives was started in 1995. Here, relics of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna's monastic & householder disciples, and items used by them are preserved and displayed. Through Prabhanandaji's efforts the Research wing was abuzz with activity and gained importance. The International Research wing, the Indology wing and the Vivekananda Archives were combined into the Centre for Indological Studies and Research. This centre facilitates studies in various streams like International Understanding for Human Unity, Indology, Spoken Sanskrit, etc. The first subject was immediately approved by the UNESCO. Indology was

always a favourite topic with Maharaj and at his instance was published *Bharatatattva*—Course in Indology. Maharaj was always inclined towards basic research. He accordingly encouraged a lady scholar in her research. When this lady returned from the USA after finishing her research as a Fulbright scholar, Maharaj was the General Secretary of the Order. Maharaj asked her not only about her field of studies but also wanted to know how our affiliated centres were functioning in the USA and the response of devotees there to the Vedanta Movement.

Under the inspired supervision of Prabhanandaji conferences and seminars were regularly held on a variety of topics where experts in various fields would come to teach and discuss their subjects. In the nine years between February 1999 and April 2007 while he was at Gol Park, Maharaj organized 6 international seminars and 3 at the national level. Of these, the 4-day seminar titled *Language, Thought Reality: Science Religion and Philosophy* held in the year 2000 was remarkable. In 2001, there was a 3-day international seminar on *Lord Mahavir and the 21st Century*. In each of the years 2002, 2004 and 2006 an international seminar on *Consciousness* was held. One eminent professor who worked closely with Maharaj, especially during the seminars on consciousness, says of him, “His erudition, meticulous attention to organizational details, respect for others and readiness to help those in need would attract everyone. I was assigned several responsibilities and given due advice and ample inspiration. I was called upon to help him—in a small manner though—in organizing several International Conferences by the Institute on topics of great relevance like Consciousness, Value Education and the like and, for me, these events provided a unique opportunity to interact with some outstanding scholars from different parts of the country as also from abroad... I can never forget his smiling face and his inspiration for a good and noble work and his appreciation of the virtues and qualities in others. He was indeed a rare individual, worthy of emulation by many”.

During this period Maharaj seems to have been particularly fascinated by consciousness and he would discuss this topic regularly with visiting professors and scholars. Perhaps he would approach the subject from differing viewpoints and that could be the reason for conducting three seminars on Consciousness. Again, he would sometimes invite the same speaker to the seminar of the following year hoping perhaps that the speaker too would have benefitted from his or her research on the subject since the earlier seminar. Almost all these seminars were conducted as a part of the research wing’s activities.

Some of the topics discussed have been brought out in book form by the publication section of the Institute. It is noteworthy that during his stewardship three books on Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi were published: (a) *Mother's letters – A Compilation of letters dictated by Sri Sarada Devi*, (b) *Sarada Anudhyan* and (c) *Sri Maa Bhaashita*.

During Youth *Sammelans* and *Bhakta Sammelans* he would speak for a short while to encourage the speakers, assembled youth and devotees. The scholars of the Institute, teachers, monastic brothers, guests, employees, all felt very close to him. Maharaj started the *Medicclaim* scheme for the employees of the Institute. His conduct was such that people would easily understand what to do and what to avoid. It was not in his nature to advise anyone. He would often quote what Swami Saradanandaji Maharaj would say, "I cannot sit with a cane in my hands like a school headmaster".

He introduced in Gol Park the practice of conducting a Symposium to which he would invite young sadhus to come and speak. Over a period of a month or two, one symposium each would be held on the lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna's monastic disciples and the householder disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. There would be 6 speakers and each speaker was to speak for 10 minutes (he also experimented with a 20-minutes-and-3-speaker pattern for some time) and Maharaj would at the end speak for 2 or 3 minutes to summarise the proceedings. He would, in a very few words, appreciate a good lecture. His idea through this was to help and encourage young sadhus to practise speaking in public and also to cultivate the habit of studying and writing.

Following in the footsteps of Swami Lokeshwaranandaji, Maharaj also would take classes on the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*. A significant incident in his life regarding the *Kathamrita* can be narrated here. When Maharaj came to attend the Probationers' Training Centre at Belur Math, he and a few other brahmacharins were exempted from attending some classes since they had already studied those subjects in detail. During this interval, Maharaj and a few others would go to Swami Shashwatanandaji Maharaj (a disciple of Swami Shivanandaji Maharaj and one of the Assistant Secretaries at the headquarters at Belur Math) who would read and explain the *Kathamrita* to them. Prabhanandaji said that one day Swami Shashwatanandaji made such a wonderful statement during the explanation that for 7 days Maharaj felt a current of joy coursing through him. The impact of this was so

profound that whenever Maharaj would visit Belur Math, he would recall this incident.

Maharaj was hard-working and efficient as Secretary of the Institute. He was aware of all that was happening in every section of the Institute. Whenever any problem was brought to him, he would first of all give a patient hearing. If he found that something which was said was not acceptable, he would explain why it was not acceptable. As we have seen, he rearranged the research section to his satisfaction. Similarly in the School of Languages also he introduced or modified curriculum and exam patterns after visiting or consulting reputed institutions in Calcutta.

Maharaj was indeed a guardian to all under his care and not simply head of this huge institution. A friend of Shri Shankari Prasad Basu (who has done a lot of research on Swamiji and was closely associated with the Archives at Gol Park), Shri Sunil Behari Ghosh, was in critical condition suffering from an incurable disease. His children were all staying abroad and he was all alone in Calcutta. He was in urgent need of surgery. Prabhanandaji learnt that preparations were afoot to admit Sunil Babu into a private nursing home near his residence. Maharaj called Sunil Ghosh to his office and got a first-hand report of his ailment. He then arranged for his treatment and surgery at the Ramakrishna Mission's Seva Pratishthan hospital and even decided which doctor would perform the surgery. Subsequently he would regularly enquire of the progress being made by the patient and he personally went to Seva Pratishthan to see Sunil Ghosh.

Swami Lokeshwaranandaji published the 5th and 6th volumes of the Gol Park publication (the 8-volume) Cultural Heritage of India. Prabhanandaji entrusted the task of editing the 7th volume to the reputed scholar Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan of New Delhi. Soon, through his sustained efforts all the volumes of the Cultural Heritage could be published.

Within a couple of years of his coming to the Institute at Gol Park, Maharaj started *Vivekananda Anushilan* unit in addition to the existing Vivekananda Study Circle. The object was to encourage and help youth and students to study Vivekananda literature in depth. Through his efforts a meditation process based on the Ideas & Ideals of the Ramakrishna Movement had also been initiated. These practical tips for guided meditation are today circulated among the youth who attend Youth Cell gatherings in various branches of the Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission. Under *Vivekananda Anushilan*,

participants met twice a month for 2-hour sessions. The classes included study and discussions on Swamiji and concluded with the meditation session. Most of the attendees were well-grounded, in the sense that they all conducted smaller study circles in their localities and also carried on *seva* activities. Swami Prabhanandaji thus played and continues to play a significant role in guiding such dedicated youngsters to imbibe the traditions of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

All his achievements notwithstanding, Maharaj was very simple at heart. He ate very sparingly but was especially fond of coconut sweets (*naarkel sundesh*). If some devotee brought this particular sweet, he would first eat one of them and then send the rest to the other monastic brothers with a subtle hint: all of you eat these, but if possible, keep a piece or two for me! He told a devotee once that he wished to eat something given by the devotee. Very happy at this, the devotee cooked several vegetarian items and brought them to Maharaj. However, he just took a morsel of these and sent them for the others to enjoy. He said to the devotee, "I actually wanted you to bring that *naarkel sundesh*".

A well-known professor of psychology who was also a practising psychologist narrates her experiences with Maharaj. She said that Maharaj loved to discuss new topics with her. Sometimes the discussion would be around the xerox copy of some reference article. When this lady wanted to be blessed with *mantra diksha*, Maharaj asked her point-blank, "Are you sure the *diksha* will not affect your self-introspection?"

One afternoon Maharaj was seriously ill and was vomiting blood for quite some time. The doctors somehow stopped the blood-vomiting. All felt that Maharaj was intensely suffering and needed rest. After some time an intimate devotee entered his room to see how his condition was. He saw that Maharaj was lying on his bed and reading a book with full concentration. He asked Maharaj, "You were so sick some time earlier and now you are studying?" Maharaj replied very softly, "Oh, they are all youngsters and get scared easily. I am not a doctor true, but I have read a lot about sickness and medicines". He then explained to the devotee the possible reasons for the blood-vomiting, saying that it was nothing serious. The devotee was stunned at Maharaj's nonchalant attitude.

Maharaj was a very methodical worker and an expert at time management. Thus he was able to easily manage the onerous task of running a complex institution like the Institute of Culture and also find time for visiting Belur Math regularly, either for work relating to the

Museum or to the editing of Swamiji's Complete Works. And in the midst of all this he attended to his own personal studies and writing.

Maharaj returned to the Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission headquarters at Belur Math as General Secretary of the Order on 2nd May 2007. All the experience he had gained in the Order to date stood him in good stead in discharging his new responsibilities.

The Foundation Day of the Ramakrishna Mission was being commemorated all along at Balaram Mandir (earlier called Balaram Bose's house) on the 1st of May every year. During Maharaj's tenure as General Secretary, a small function began to be organized at Belur Math on this day in the afternoon, every year.

Maharaj was always keen that the brahmacharins in the Probationers' Training centre at Belur Math imbibe correctly the ideals of the Sangha and also be aware of our traditions. Towards this end he would request many senior sadhus to visit the Training Centre and address the brahmacharins.

Maharaj contributed profoundly and was deeply involved in the planning and execution of the 3-year-programmes organized to commemorate Swami Vivekananda's 150th birth anniversary. He was keen that all our efforts would not end in simply organizing functions and celebrations, but would also yield long-term benefit to the public. Thus it was that 4 unique *seva-streams* were taken up as part of the celebrations: (i) Gadadhar Abhyudaya Prakalpa, (ii) Sarada Palliseva Prakalpa, (iii) Vivekananda Swasthya Pariseva Prakalpa and (iv) Akhandananda Seva Prakalpa. These service activities covered the whole country. Along with his own complete involvement, he inspired younger sadhus also to participate. Thus it was that one day a young sadhu was immersed in this work well beyond the time for noon-prasad. Seeing this, Maharaj got some food for his younger monastic brother from his own plate and offered it to him.

Swami Suviranandaji, General Secretary of the Sangha, who was then one of the Assistant General Secretaries, remembers, "When we met Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh with these *prakalpa* plans, he called the concerned official from the adjoining office and asked him to ensure that the Ramakrishna Mission got all the help that was needed to bring these projects to fruition".

As General Secretary of the Order Maharaj had great concern for the smooth functioning of branch centres of the Math & Mission. When he visited any centre for work he never bothered about his comfort and convenience but always ensured that the centre's work could be

completed satisfactorily. In this connection a senior swami narrated this incident: In 2010 Maharaj had gone to visit the centres in Shillong, Cherrapunjee and Shella in the North-east. He was given a small room in Shella for his stay. After finishing the programme at Shella, they were scheduled to leave for Cherrapunjee the next morning. However, heavy rains started the next morning. To reach the motorable road, one had to ascend steeply over steps cut into the rock. The party was wondering what to do since there was no telephone connection also in those days. They were surprised when Maharaj borrowed a raincoat from a local labourer and slowly started the steep climb. The others in the team found it hard to believe that Maharaj would take this difficult and risky decision. After some time, however, the party reached the road and then started for Cherrapunjee by car. In the vehicle Maharaj, sensing the mood of the companions, narrated another incident: A few years earlier he and some others were travelling by this road from Shella to Cherrapunjee. Suddenly, two huge boulders rolled down and blocked their road in a manner that they could neither go forward nor return backward. There was no option left except praying to Sri Ramakrishna. Surprisingly, after some time a rock-disposal truck appeared out of nowhere and cleared the road for them. After narrating this incident Maharaj paused for a while and then said, "Don't you people feel that today's adventure was nothing compared to the one that I narrated?" The others did not know what to say.

On 6th May 2012 Maharaj was appointed a Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission. He gave *mantra diksha* to the first batch of aspirants at Ramakrishna Math, Baghbazar (Udbodhan) on 29th June 2012. This also turned out to be the place where he would give *mantra diksha* for the last time on 25th June 2022. His loving nature and impressive personality attracted all people to him – young & old, students & workers, monks & householders. His concern for the well-being of others manifested even more tangibly after he became Vice-President. Many were the days when students from neighbouring Vidyamandir could be found sitting at his feet in Belur Math. Some of these have taken *mantra diksha* from him and a few have joined the Order aspiring to be sadhus.

We narrate here a touching incident. Maharaj learnt that it was the birthday of one of the students who had taken *diksha* from him. He asked the boy to come to him that day. When the student came to him he said, "Tell me what gift I should give you. Whatever you ask me today I will give you". Overcome by emotion the boy placed his head on



Maharaj's lap and said, "Please bless me that I will get your protection throughout my life and that your hand will be on my head always!" At this Maharaj replied, "I bless you from the bottom of my heart!"

Beginning with Baghbazar, Maharaj gave *mantra diksha* at Kamarpukur, Jayrambati, and at many branches of the Math & Mission all over the country. He also gave *diksha* at other places like Nimpith (South 24 Parganas-WB), Jorhat (Assam), Dimapur (Nagaland), Putunda (Bardhaman-WB), Chandannagar (Hooghly-WB). Outside the country he gave *diksha* at Jessore and Chattogram in Bangladesh and Kathmandu in Nepal. In all 40,409 people were initiated by Maharaj. Surprisingly, he had said to his *sevaks*, "I shall stop after giving the *mantra* to 40,000 people". Apart from the above, Maharaj visited Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Canada, the USA, Europe, Russia, Fiji, Australia, South America and South Africa at different times to talk on Vedanta and to spread the message of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

Before the day of the initiation, Maharaj would meticulously study the application forms filled in by the candidates. He would see how many were men, how many women, the youngest in age who wanted *diksha*, the educational qualification of the person, and above all the reason for what the person wanted to take *mantra diksha*. On the *diksha* day, he would first of all offer *arghyas* to Thakur, Maa and Swamiji in the shrine and again in the *diksha* room. He would say to the candidates, "I have told them about you; again after the *diksha* is over I will pray to them so that they will take over all your responsibility". At the end of the day's *diksha* he would again offer *arghyas* as before and then return to his room. When he visited a centre to give *diksha* on several days at a stretch, on the last day he would give a brief talk to the devotees especially pointing out what Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi said about leading a God-centred life.

Maharaj had the rare good fortune to mix with many senior sadhus of the Order. The blessings he got from them and his own austerities helped him to ascend the spiritual ladder. And he in turn passed this on to future generations through *mantra diksha* and instructions. When in the rare mood, during his last days he would tell his *sevaks* about some of the memorable events of his life. A few are given here. "Seeing that I was frequently falling sick, Swami Hiranmayanandaji gave me a little dust of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's lotus feet (*pada raja*) saying 'if you have the faith, make a *maaduli* (pendant) containing this and wear it on your person always. Through Mother's grace everything is possible'. I am still wearing this around my neck and am fine".

1. Swami Shantanandaji (Holy Mother's disciple) also liked me a lot. I have spent a long time with him. He was then staying in our Ranchi Morabadi ashrama. He would hear the *anahata dhvani* (mystical sound of OM). He thought that everybody heard this as a matter of course. He asked me whether I too heard the sound. I said no Maharaj I do not hear it. He said, you try and you too will hear...Once I said to him that I wanted to go to the Himalayas to practise *tapasya*. He was very happy at this and said: do go and do *tapasya*, you too will then hear the *anahata dhvani*. But drink milk daily to get strength. Unless the body is fit one cannot do *tapasya*. Saying this he gave me a 10-rupee note.

2. Later I had a lot of discussions with Swami Yatishwaranandaji (disciple of Swami Brahmanandaji) also. He too liked me a lot and has told me many of his experiences in life. He also told me many important details for leading a sadhu's life. Once he talked with me late into the night and putting a chocolate in my hand asked me to eat it in his room. What I learnt from him has been the foundation of my monastic life.

3. I wandered a lot for holy company (*sadhu sanga*). I had the opportunity to meet many very senior sadhus of the Order. I went to see Holy Mother's disciple, Swami Atulananda who was then staying at Barlowganj. His was a very austere life.

4. I was then a brahmachari at Narendrapur centre. I had to go to Belur Math to hand over a letter to the then General Secretary Swami Vireshwaranandaji Maharaj. It was very late by the time I reached Belur Math; it was also very hot and humid that day. I was sweating profusely. I went to Maharaj and after prostrating to him handed over the letter to him. The headquarters was then in the building opposite Thakur's temple. He asked me to sit down and sent someone to bring some ice from the temple. The Math's only fridge was then in the temple. When the ice was brought from the temple, he poured some water from the earthen jug into two glasses and mixed something else in it. Handing one glass to me he said, 'you are sweating a lot, drink this'. I was struck dumb wondering how despite being the General Secretary he was doing all this for a very junior brahmachari like me.

5. In later days he took me with him to various places. Once, I think I went to Chennai with him for some function. Vireshwaranandaji Maharaj gave a lecture there. After the talk, a sadhu came and asked Maharaj for a copy of the speech. Maharaj said that he did not have any copy. Then he called me and said, "Barun they want a copy of what I spoke. But I do not have a copy. You have listened to my talk. You write

down what you heard". I wrote down whatever I could and showed it to Maharaj. He read it and asked me whether I had made any note of the lecture. I said that I did not note down anything but had written down whatever I remembered. He was very happy at this. Such incidents have happened at other times also.

6. Everyone was scared of Swami Shankaranandaji then. However, I was never afraid of him and he too liked me a lot. When I was in the Training Centre I would go to his room and read out the newspaper to him. I would talk so much with him! I was exempted from attending classes. But I had to appear for the exams and I did not do badly after all.

7. Once I took leave and went to the Himalayas and spent a long time in our Almora centre. I also spent a long time in the Shyamla Tal ashrama wanting to do more *sadhana*. I had read in the books that Maa would do one lakh *japa* in a day. Making a few calculations, I could not be convinced how this was possible. But when Mother herself has confirmed this, it could not be otherwise. So I decided to find out for myself whether it was possible to do one lakh *japa* or not. I had my *mantra diksha* from Swami Shankaranandaji who never asked anyone to use a *japa-mala* (rosary) but insisted that we do *japa* keeping count on the fingers. I also keep count on my fingers. To keep track of the number of repetitions, I collected some pebbles. I found that to do a lakh *japa* I needed 18 to 19 hours. Later I saw that it could not be done in less than 16-17 hours. After continuing like this for a few days both my hands were swollen. When Vireshwaranandaji Maharaj learnt of this, he sent me a *rudraksha-mala* of 54 beads and said to me, "Even though Shankaranandaji Maharaj did not give you a *japa-mala* I am telling you to do your *japa* keeping count on this *mala*. If the number of mantra repetitions (*japa*) is more, one cannot do it without a *mala*". Thus it was that I began to use a *japa-mala*.

Needless to say, these are priceless reminiscences. They are not a matter for explanation but for assimilation.

Never did Maharaj speak anything about his spiritual experiences. However, in various contexts some confirmations did come out. A senior sadhu said that when he was writing Swami Brahmanandaji's life-story, he saw Raja Maharaj in a vision. In answer to a question by one of his disciples he had said, "Once I had a unique vision when I went to Kedarnath and Badrinath. On listening to what I told them, some people said to me that it was the vision of Nandi, Shiva's carrier (*vaahun*). Many people can see him."

We have narrated above that Swami Hiranmayanandaji Maharaj asked him to wear a *maaduli* (pendant) on his person containing Mother's *pada-rajya*, and how after using this Prabhanandaji's health got better and better. In this connection, there is an interesting anecdote. Once a swami said to Prabhanandaji Maharaj that of all the books Maharaj had authored, Swami Saradananda's life-story was the best. Prabhanandaji had said to the sadhu, "After wearing that *maaduli* containing Mother's blessing, I was wondering what gift I could give Maa. After thinking deeply about it, I decided to write the book on Saradanandaji... When writing that book I would think about Mother's beneficent, gracious face". When Maharaj was dangerously sick once at Lucknow, Mother had personally rescued him from sinking; it was perhaps this memory that Maharaj was referring to above (about Mother's gracious face).

Prabhanandaji's power of concentration was exceptional. Once he was preparing to write a book on Swami Premanandaji Maharaj. He had already finished reading all the books on Swami Premanandaji. He would personally visit some of the places to study the environs of some incident. Anyway, he was quite engrossed in his reading that day. One of his *sevaks* entered his room and going up to him softly addressed him. There was no response. He called him again but the same effect again. Finally, after addressing him 3-4 times Maharaj responded with, "Had you come to see me?" His *sevaks* say that there have been several such instances.

He was very particular about his daily *japa-dhyana*; no one has ever seen him miss his routine. Sitting erect he would do his *japa* for 2 hours. Even when he was lying down or sleeping, one could see him keeping count on his fingers.

His daily routine began at 3.30 am when he would get up and go to the shrine. He would continue his *japa* till 5.15 am, then come back to his room and finish his bath. He would then walk to all the temples to offer *pranams*; sometimes he would go the Old Math (Nilambar Babu's House) to do *pranams* at Ma's shrine. By 6.20am he would be back in his room. At 6.30 am he would call Dr. Bakshi and check if all was well. Then he would attend to some more phone calls even as he pored over his books and finished his breakfast. (When he was an Assistant Secretary at Belur Math, he usually had his breakfast at 6.30 am with Swami Prameyanandaji on the first floor of the Monks' Quarters). As noted earlier, he ate very little. After a little study, he would leave for the office around 8.15 am. Despite this tight routine he would go to

Arogya Bhavan once a week to see old sadhus and again once weekly to Seva Pratishthan to see how admitted sadhus were recovering. He would regularly enquire about ailing sadhus wherever he might be. Amidst all this would continue work related to the Archives and Museum.

His life was dedicated to the Sangha in letter and spirit. None ever heard him complain about life in the Sangha. In one Monks' Conference he had said in a firm voice, "Remember, there is no difference between Thakur, Maa, Swamiji and this Sangha. The best *sadhana* in this *yuga* is to serve this 4-fold manifestation". He was extremely respectful towards the Sangha President and all senior sadhus of the Order. When he was Vice-President, the Bodhan puja was going on in Belur Math on *Sashti*. Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, President of the Sangha, was sitting on a chair in the shrine. Another chair had been kept near his chair for Prabhanandaji. However, after his pranams to Mother Durga, Prabhanandaji pulled back his chair almost one row behind President Maharaj's chair and then sat on it. Such was his humility and *shraddha*.

Maharaj never accepted any gifts readily. Once, a devotee wanted to buy a pair of slippers for Maharaj. However, Maharaj said that he did not need them. After a few days this devotee brought several pairs of footwear and came to Maharaj along with an employee of the shop. He said to Maharaj, "These are all imported shoes and very comfortable. Please put them on and see which size fits you". Maharaj again replied that he did not want any shoes and asked the devotee to take them back. When the devotee began to persist, staring at him with wide open eyes Maharaj said, "I do not need any shoes. I will not try wearing these shoes. Thank you". He then got up and went into his room. The devotee silently left the place.

Maharaj was known for speaking out his mind. Once a sadhu came to Maharaj and after narrating to him his various experiences, told Maharaj that his *kundalini* had been awakened and that he wanted Maharaj to endorse this. Maharaj had studied psychology as a college student. He very firmly said to the sadhu that what he needed now was to consult a reputed psychiatrist.

This notwithstanding, Maharaj also possessed a good sense of humour. Pointing at a well-built sadhu-friend, Maharaj said to a senior sadhu, "See Maharaj, it is such people who are now the pride and joy of the Math"!

On another occasion he was talking with a group of his young disciples. Maharaj was saying that once he gave a very inspiring lecture

at a place, listening to which a young man from the audience came to Maharaj and said that he wanted to join the Order. Despite Maharaj's protests the lad would not listen and said to Maharaj, "After listening to such a lecture one cannot stay at home any longer"! And then came Maharaj's comic narration, "When he came and joined, he found that he had to get up very early in the morning, he had to do a lot of work, he had to study, etc., he just fled from here".

The *Amphan* cyclone in Kolkata caused havoc in the city and of course in Belur Math too. Many huge trees in Belur Math were uprooted. The swami in charge of the garden had nicely cut the fallen tree-trunks and had stacked them systematically. Maharaj happened to notice this and asked the swami what he intended to do with this stacked wood. The swami replied that they would be used to cremate sadhus who pass away and for other purposes. Maharaj said to him with a winsome smile, "Please keep some for me also!"

Prabhanandaji's contribution to Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature has been quite significant. He will be thankfully remembered for this for generations, not only in the Ramakrishna Sangha but at the national level as well. Perhaps this is what prompts Swami Suviranandaji Maharaj, General Secretary of the Sangha to say, "If the first era of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature belonged to Swami Saradanandaji, the second era then belongs to Swami Gambhiranandaji and the third era should surely belong to Swami Prabhanandaji". Some of the significant Bengali books authored by him are: *Sri Ramakrishner Antyalila*, *Brahmananda Charit*, *Saradananda Charit*, *Ramakrishna Mather Adikatha*, *Anandarup Sri Ramakrishna*, *Amritarup Sri Ramakrishna*, etc. Among his English books (a) First Meetings with Sri Ramakrishna and (b) Early History of Ramakrishna Movement are testimony to his penetrating intellect and power of analysis. It must also not be forgotten that it was due to his efforts that, under the editorship of Dr. Sarbananda Choudhury, the Institute of Culture published the first Ramakrishna Mission-edition of the *Sangeet Kalpataru* (the Bengali song anthology first compiled and edited by Swamiji when he was Narendra Nath Dutta).

A senior sadhu says about Prabhanandji, "He was fully convinced that monasticism in India had been given a new orientation by Ramakrishna-Vivekananda linking the age-old scriptural traditions of the country to the needs of the present day. Thus in his life we can see a sweet harmony of Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Raja yogas".

Though Maharaj was not physically strong none can question his mental strength. It appears that indigestion, backache and pain in the

knee joints were his lifelong companions. Ayurvedic medicines would give him temporary relief but after some time the pain would return to haunt him. After many sadhus and doctors requested him, he agreed to knee-operation in 2016 in Kolkata. He suffered a cerebral stroke in 2017 which resulted in frequent illnesses. *Diksha* programmes were suspended for the time being. After treatment and rest he returned to normal health. From the beginning of 2022 he was frequently down with fever, pneumonia and various infections. He was admitted to the Seva Pratishthan hospital for treatment. His health fluctuated from good to bad regularly. He could not get sleep at nights. His *sevak* suggested to him that he would sing Mother's songs to him, listening to which he could drift into sleep. He would often get up saying Jai Maa, Jai Maa. He once got up saying, "Maa, Maa, where did Mother go!"

After some time he was down with fever again and was admitted to Seva Pratishthan. Just as he was settling down on the cot in the hospital, he suddenly said, "This time the mind has to be separated from the body". As his condition worsened he had to be shifted to the ICU and was put on a ventilator. His last words before the ventilator was put on him were, "What should I do? Jai Thakur. Jai Maa". His condition worsened with every passing day. A medical board consisting of various experts was constituted to monitor Maharaj's progress. Advice from outside specialists and experts was also taken regularly. He was brought back from the ICU to the room allotted to him as he showed signs of improvement. Slowly, however, owing to various old-age related problems his condition was getting worse. His kidneys were not functioning properly now. Dialysis was performed once. On the 1st of April he was free from fever and all other ailments. His lungs were clear, there was no longer any bleeding. But his pulse rate and blood pressure were gradually dropping. Devotees started coming for *darshan* and *pranams* as usual at 5.30 pm. The *pranam* session continued till 6.40 pm. Maharaj attained Mahasamadhi at 6.50 pm on the 1st of April 2023.

From the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission at Belur Math, the General Secretary Swami Suvirananda said, "Swami Prabhanandaji's thirst for knowledge and love for research are known to all. He was respected everywhere for his outstanding intellect, profound scholarship, *seva*-attitude and for living a life of dispassion and austerity".

Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi wrote in his condolence message, "His demise is a personal loss to me. During my interaction with him, his simplicity, humility and spiritual knowledge always left

a deep impression. I consider it my good fortune to have received his blessings. When I visited the Belur Math in 2020, Swami Prabhananda Ji Maharaj had affectionately gifted me a blanket, a gesture I will never forget.”

“The Chief Minister of West Bengal said in her condolence message that she was deeply sad to know of his passing away. Shri Mohan Bhagavat, *Sarsanghachalak* of the RSS and Shri Dattatreya Hosabale, General Secretary of the RSS, sent condolence messages. The news of his passing away was conveyed to all electronic and print media.

His body was brought to Belur Math that same night and kept for *darshan* in the *Sanskriti Bhavan*. Devotees, well-wishers and admirers visited Belur Math non-stop the following day from 6 am to 8 pm to pay their last respects to the departed Vice-President. Sadhus and brahmacharins chanted the Bhagavad Gita or sang bhajans uninterrupted from the moment the body was brought to Belur Math until 8 pm the next day. After the food-offering to Sri Ramakrishna was complete on the night of 2nd April, Maharaj’s body was carried by sadhus and brahmacharins on a cot decorated with flowers and garlands and was placed in the Math court yard between the Old Shrine and Swamiji’s room. After a tour of the Belur Math temples as per the prevailing tradition, the body was finally laid to rest on the pyre. The body was consigned to flames by lighting the pyre amidst the soft chanting of *Hari Om Ramakrishna*. Countless devotees still thronged the Math campus; slowly with heavy hearts they started returning home.

Maharaj had once said to a person bent on doing *samaj-seva*, “Learn to love Swamiji intensely. You will see all your problems evaporating”. Recalling his days when as a young student he was engrossed in serving the inmates of the Rambagan-slum he said, “In the eyes of these suffering people one sees clear as daylight their hopes, dreams and aspirations. In a civilized society one must try heart and soul to eliminate the word *slum* from the vocabulary by uplifting these people”. His disciples would often hear from his lips the words, “Be sincere to yourself and to Sri Ramakrishna”.

To a newly ordained sannyasin who approached Maharaj with some specific questions he replied, “**Hold on to Thakur and Maa all through your life. Pray every day for their grace. You will see that they will surely respond to your prayer**”.

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