

## *The Story of Shyampukur Bati*

Swami Narasimhananda

**A**S CALCUTTA GREW, relegating older parts of the city to its backwaters and history, a small group of devotees for decades tenaciously clung and cared for a small nondescript and decrepit house in Shyampukur. This was the place where the ailing Sri Ramakrishna was brought for his treatment. As the Ramakrishna movement spreads all over the world, Shyampukur Bati, or Shyampukur House, has now become a tirtha, sacred place, as well as part of an important stage of the avatara's lila. The devoted attention and struggles for its continued existence will also be counted as the continuing lila of Sri Ramakrishna.

### **The House**

Girish [Ghosh] had such abundant faith in the Master, was suddenly struck by this idea: 'The Master does not need to worship the Divine

Mother for his own sake. If his pure love has inspired him to perform the worship, why would he sit there quietly, doing nothing? That does not seem right. Were these arrangements made for the devotees to worship the Divine Mother in the Master's living form and be blessed? It must be so.' He was overwhelmed with joy at that thought and immediately took flowers and sandal paste from a tray and offered them at the feet of the Master, saying, 'Victory to the Mother.'<sup>1</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna went into samadhi, his face luminous and smiling, his hands assumed the gestures of the Kali image indicating that the Divine Mother Kali was revealing herself within him. It was around 7.30 p.m. on the Kali Puja day on Friday, 6 November 1885. The place was Shyampukur Bati.

Sri Ramakrishna was brought here on Friday, 2 October 1885<sup>2</sup> by his devotees to facilitate a

better treatment for his cancer. It was a rented house belonging to Gokul Bhattacharya, at 55 Shyampukur Street. Sri Ramakrishna stayed in this house for seventy days till 11 December 1885, when he was moved to a larger accommodation at Kashipur.<sup>3</sup> In this house he showered his grace upon many. It was in Shyampukur Bati that the famous actress Binodini Dasi came dressed as a gentleman to gain entry into Sri Ramakrishna's room and be blessed by him.

Shyampukur is a locality in present Kolkata. It is an assembly constituency of the state of West Bengal. Swami Prabhananda explains the origin of the name in his *Sri Ramakrishner Annyalila*: 'A renowned person of wealth of eighteenth century, Shobharam Basak renamed the locality Charles Bazaar as Shyambazar in honour of the priest of the ancient temple of Shyam, Shyam Rai or Gobinda. There was a *pukur*, pond, near the temple of Shyam. That led to the name Shyampukur.'<sup>4</sup>

Shyampukur is in the heart of what was Sutanuti. It was mentioned in the earliest list of police stations of Calcutta prepared in 1785. The British, after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, settled down to an organized administration in Calcutta. One of the developments was the police station that also provided civic facilities. The Police Commissioner doubled as Municipal Chairman till 1888. Shyampukur was one of the twenty-five Police Section Houses in 1888.<sup>5</sup>

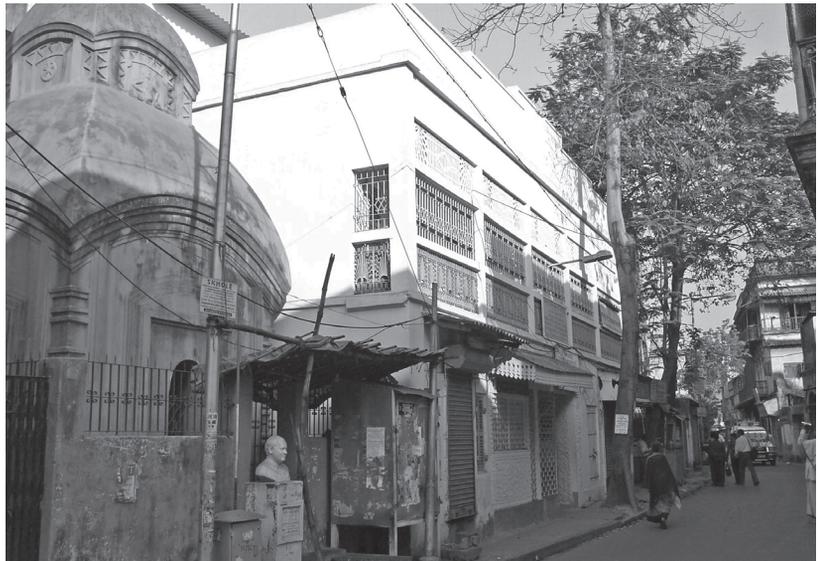
'The earliest list of

thanas, for both police and municipal administration, was prepared in 1785.'<sup>6</sup> The thirty-one names listed include Shyampukur.

This area was the citadel of the Bengali aristocracy. Baghbazar may be a corruption of *bank-bazar*, bazaar on a *bank* or bend of the canal; but it is commonly related to the riverside garden (*bagh*) owned by Captain Charles Perrin in the early eighteenth century. The bazaar was set up nearby on the property of Purnachandra Dey. The garden was sold by Perrin to the Company, which resold it in 1752 to J Z Holwell, the celebrated Zamindar or Collector, for Rs 2,500 (16).

Even before his stay at Shyampukur Bati, Sri Ramakrishna used to visit many houses in this area. Notable among them were the homes of Captain Vishwanath Upadhyay at 25 Shyampukur Street, Prankrishna Mukhopadhyay at 40 Ramdhan Mitra Lane, and Kalipada Ghosh at 20 Shyampukur Lane. Other devotees of Sri Ramakrishna—Purnachandra Ghosh, Narendranath Mitra, Devendra Ghosh,

Present view of Shyampukur Bati from Shyampukur Street



and Narendra Bandyopadhyay—also lived in this locality. Mahamaya Mitra, Kalipada Ghosh's sister, lived at 28 Shyampukur Street.<sup>7</sup>

Built in 1823, Shyampukur Bati was originally a single-storey building. Another storey was added to one part of the house in 1836. Changing hands and altered many times, the house was bought by Gokul Bhattacharya when it was rented for Sri Ramakrishna. Gokul Bhattacharya sold the house in 1902. In 1915 it was bought by Kiran Chandra Bose. In 1938–9, Kiran split the house into two parts—55A and 55B. Eventually the house was divided into four parts—55A, 55B, 55C, and 55D.<sup>8</sup> 55A housed the place where Sri Ramakrishna had stayed, and the small enclosure where Sri Sarada Devi stayed fell in 55B. Kiran's descendants made even more alterations and let its rooms to various people. Their neglect and lack of maintenance made the house a sorry sight. In time 55A fell in the share of Santosh Bose and 55B in that of Maya Bose Ghosh. The Shiva temple that was to the west of this house remains intact today, as do many other landmarks of this locality.

Swami Saradananda has given a graphic description of Shyampukur Bati:

The house rented for the Master is on the north side of Shyampukur Street, which runs from east to west. When one enters the house one finds a vestibule with a narrow passage extending to one's right and left. A few steps ahead lies a courtyard, and to one's right is a staircase to the upper floor. On the eastern side of the courtyard are two to three rooms. After ascending the staircase, one sees to the right a long room extending from north to south, which was used for receiving visitors, and to one's left there is a corridor leading to rooms that extend from east to west. The first door on this corridor leads to a spacious room called the parlour, where the Master lived. To the north and south of the parlour are two verandas, the northern one larger than the southern. To the west of the parlour are two small rooms—one used by devotees who stayed overnight, and the other by the Holy Mother for sleeping. The visitors' room has a narrow veranda to the west. A staircase to the roof is at the eastern end of the corridor leading to the Master's room. At the top of those stairs, near the door to the roof, is a covered terrace of about six feet by six feet in size. The Holy Mother spent her days on that terrace, and there she cooked the special diet needed by the Master.<sup>9</sup>

*Room on the terrace where Holy Mother spent her days*



When Sri Ramakrishna stayed in this house there was no construction on the first floor on the right side of the building to the east.

### ***Worship Resumes and Formation of the Sangha***

Mahendranath Gupta, or M, the author of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, inspired many young men towards monasticism. Among them were Swamis Vishuddhananda, Samshuddhananda, and Jitatmananda

(Vinay Maharaj). They joined the Ramakrishna Order and came to Shyampukur Bati in 1939–40 along with other senior swamis of the Order. They met the erstwhile tenant Sri Goswami and had recounted the event of Mother Kali revealing herself through Sri Ramakrishna. They expressed their wish to worship here the picture of Sri Ramakrishna on Kali Puja. Thus, Sri Ramakrishna has been worshipped here on every Kali Puja since 1940.

Gautam Gupta, the great grandson of Mahendranath Gupta, first visited this house in 1976 a few days before Kali Puja. He met Lakshmi Goswami, daughter of Sri Goswami, whom Swami Vishuddhananda and other swamis met in 1939–40. In 1976 the worship was performed by Swami Tathagatananda. Gautam Gupta and another devotee, Kalyan Ghosh, were also present. In 1977 Gautam offered to shoulder the responsibility of the annual worship. The famous singer Dhananjay Bhattacharya was also present during the Kali Puja of 1977. Some days later Dhananjay sponsored the basic repairs of the building through Bireshwar Banerjee, a contractor. The owner of the building Santosh Bose had no objection to the repairs, as he had no financial capacity himself.

Gautam came in touch with some devotees interested in the renovation of Shyampukur Bati. Among them were Sachin Das, Subrata Chakravarti, Keya Ghosh, Subir Bose, Sukumar Ghosh, Ajay Gunin, Dhiren Ghosh, Kamal Addyi, Debabrata Chakravarti, Banibrata Chakravarti, Nirmalya Bose, Samir Ghosh, Kalyan Bhattacharya, Ranjan Seal, Kalyan Ghosh, and Saroj Das. The initial repairs were carried out in early 1978. On 27 August 1978 an organization named



Room where Sri Ramakrishna stayed, now converted into a shrine

Shyampukur Bati Sri Ramakrishna Smarana Sangha—hereafter referred to as Shyampukur Sangha—was formed to restore and preserve this building. A brief history of Shyampukur Bati in English was published in the *Statesman* and in Bengali in the daily *Jugantar*. Lectures on the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* were held on the second Saturday of every month. Apart from the Kali Puja, the birth anniversaries of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda also began to be observed. In 1978 the Kali Puja worship was conducted under the aegis of the Shyampukur Sangha, and a souvenir detailing its activities was released in 1979 by the erstwhile president of the Ramakrishna Math, Baghbazar, Swami Hiranmayananda.

On 27 August 1980 the Shyampukur Sangha celebrated its foundation day. Swami Lokeshwarananda was the speaker and Dhananjay Bhattacharya sang devotional songs. Gradually many devotees learnt about Shyampukur Bati and started visiting the house. In April 1982 the owner Santosh Bose gave written permission for the renovation and repairs of the building. A few days later he fell ill and passed away. Fortunately, his written permission made it possible

to renovate this building, though finding the resources for the renovation was not easy. Shailen Mukhopadhyay, a devotee, took responsibility for the renovation and contacted many persons, some of whom came forward to help in the work.

Since 1980 there have been religious programmes held in Shyampukur Bati every Tuesday and Friday. On the Kali Puja of 1982 Swami Bhuteshananda, the erstwhile president of the Ramakrishna Math, Yogodyan, Kankurgachi, and vice president of the Ramakrishna Order, installed the photographs of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda in the shrine. The centenary of Sri Ramakrishna's stay in Shyampukur Bati was celebrated in 1985. To match the number of days that Sri Ramakrishna stayed at the house, the celebrations went on for seventy days, from 2 October to 11 December 1985. The celebrations started with Vedic chanting by monks in the morning, and in the afternoon the photograph of Sri Ramakrishna was brought from Balaram Bose's house to Shyampukur Bati. There were programmes from 4 to 8 p.m. on all the seventy days, which included readings from the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, spiritual discourses, and devotional songs sung after the vesper service. Swami Gambhirananda, the then president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, also participated in the celebrations. On 11 December 1985, exactly as it occurred a century ago, two horse carriages were arranged to take Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi to the garden house at Kashipur.

### **Joint Purchase of the House and Inauguration**

Friday, 16 February 1987 is an important date in the history of Shyampukur Bati. On that day Ranajit Bose, the eldest son of Santosh Bose and owner of 55A Shyampukur Street—the part of the house where Sri Ramakrishna stayed—agreed

to the sale of that portion for two lakh rupees. The Shyampukur Sangha had only one hundred and twenty-two rupees in the bank, but funds came unexpectedly from unfamiliar sources. The devotees and members of the Shyampukur Sangha were overwhelmed by this favourable turn of events. An agreement was made between the Shyampukur Sangha and the Ramakrishna Math, that as long as the tenant Lakshmi Goswami was alive the house would be looked after by the Shyampukur Sangha. Only on her passing away the Ramakrishna Math was to take over the house. In May 1988, 55A Shyampukur Street was purchased jointly by the Shyampukur Sangha and the Ramakrishna Math. The house still had some tenants then. The house still had some tenants then. This kind of joint purchase is rare in the history of the Ramakrishna Order. This became possible due to the persistent efforts of the members of the Shyampukur Sangha led by Gautam Gupta. The Ramakrishna Math deputed senior monks as advisors to the managing committee of the Shyampukur Sangha. On 2 October 1988 a homeopathic dispensary for the needy was started in this house, also as a reminder that the famous homeopath Dr Mahendralal Sarkar used to come to the house to treat Sri Ramakrishna.

In 1995 Deepak Ghosh, son of Maya Bose Ghosh and the owner of the portion of the house falling under 55B Shyampukur Street—where Sri Sarada Devi had stayed—was willing to sell it. After painstaking efforts and continuous deliberations the house was jointly purchased by the Shyampukur Sangha and the Ramakrishna Math on 28 October 2003. The tin partition between 55A and 55B Shyampukur Street was removed and a thorough renovation and restoration was started. On 16 December 2003, the 150th birth anniversary of Sri Sarada Devi, the room in which she had stayed was opened to the public. The original building plan of the house was ob-



Darkroom accessories



Main lens of the field camera used for taking the famous picture in which Sri Ramakrishna is seated

tained from the Municipal Corporation to facilitate its proper restoration. The work that started in July 2004 was completed in a year.

On 11 May 2005 the restored house and the shrine of Sri Ramakrishna were inaugurated by Swami Gahanananda, the erstwhile president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. On 26 October 2006 Swami Atmasthananda, the erstwhile vice president of the Ramakrishna Order inaugurated an art gallery-cum-museum on the first floor of the house. This museum houses the main lens of the field camera used for taking the third and most popular photograph of Sri Ramakrishna by Avinashchandra Dawn of Bourne and Shepherd Company. Among the other things displayed are paintings of various incidents that occurred during Sri Ramakrishna's stay here along with some articles used by him, some darkroom accessories used for printing the photo of Sri Ramakrishna mentioned earlier, and a marble-topped wooden cot used by him at the house of Kalipada Ghosh.

Even after the death of the tenant Lakshmi Goswami on

22 June 1995, 55A Shyampukur Street was maintained by the Shyampukur Sangha. On 18 November 2010 Shyampukur Bati was formally handed over to the Ramakrishna Math, which made it a sub-centre of its branch at the Ramakrishna Math, Balaram Mandir, Kolkata. Thus, this sacred place of pilgrimage was preserved, restored, and made open to the public by the Shyampukur Bati Sri Ramakrishna Smarana Sangha.

Devotees experienced Sri Ramakrishna's divinity not just on auspicious days, like Kali Puja, but had other opportunities to see the manifestation of his divinity and to have faith in him. Sri Ramakrishna's stay in Shyampukur also brought together different classes of devotees and bound them forever in his love. Shyampukur Bati became for devotees an entrance to partake of Sri Ramakrishna's and Holy Mother's divinity and love. Devotees who come on pilgrimage to this tirtha even now feel blessed.



(References on page 400)

news for me that he had started his life afresh. I greeted and handed him the book, which he appreciated very much. Sunita's mother came and said with folded hands: 'You have saved us from great disaster.' I replied: 'It was not me but Swami Vivekananda. In every step of life we need his guidance.' Then, I quoted Swamiji: 'Whoever works at a thing with his whole heart receives help from God.' 'Your children have struggled and had patience, that's why the sun has again risen in your lives.'

Sunita led me to where there was a big portrait of Swami Vivekananda, just above the study table. Both brother and sister said they read at least one passage from Swamiji's books every morning before starting their day. Sunita said: 'Ma'am, your words made such a deep impression, and I told Joy about it after coming from college. He too was moved. We started reading Swamiji's works and got inspiration every day. Gradually, I started gaining confidence and joined the NCC, took part in different sports, and fixed up the goal to become an army officer, which I thought was the best option for me. I failed in the entrance test, but Joy encouraged me to reappear. The next time I succeeded. My first posting was at Jammu and Kashmir, and from there I was posted to Namkum, Ranchi, near my native place, where I am now.' I asked her: 'What is your assignment?' She smiled: 'I am looking after Logistics—by now I have learned to "face the brute" very well. Bless me so that I can always continue on the right path.' I was touched by her success story.

We had a nice dinner together with her family. Sunita's parents were very humble. Joy was a nice boy who talked about his plans for the future with great enthusiasm. All of us enjoyed the meeting. On my way back, I kept thinking of how a whole family was transformed by just a spark from Swami Vivekananda's life and teachings.



(Continued from page 389)

### References and Notes

1. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St Louis: Vedanta Society, 2003), 892.
2. Swami Saradananda writes that Sri Ramakrishna moved to Shyampukur Bati in the early part of September 1885—*Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 873. Mahendranath Gupta records in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* that Sri Ramakrishna stayed in Dakshineswar till 24 September 1885. The next entry in the *Gospel* records Sri Ramakrishna's stay at Shyampukur on 18 October 1885—M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 847–8. Swami Saradananda writes that Sri Ramakrishna had stayed in the house of Balaram Bose for about a week—*Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 871. Swami Gambhirananda writes in *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2008), 96, that Sri Ramakrishna stayed in Shyampukur Bati for two and a half months. The date of his departure from Shyampukur Bati is known from the *Gospel*, 931, to be 11 December 1885. Thus, by calculation, the date of Sri Ramakrishna's arrival at Shyampukur Bati comes to 2 October 1885—see also *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, 93, fn. 1.
3. These and other facts in this article have been sourced from Biswarup Mukhopadhyay, *Shyampukur Bati Punaruddhar O Sri Ramakrishna Smarana Sangher Itihas*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Shyampukur Bati Sri Ramakrishna Smarana Sangha, 1411–12 BE), and from <<http://shyampukur-bati.org>> accessed on 12 February 2011.
4. Swami Prabhananda, *Sri Ramakrishner Antyalila*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 1392 BE), 1.24.
5. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shyampukur>> accessed on 11 February 2011.
6. P Thankappan Nair, 'The Growth and Development of Old Calcutta' in *Calcutta: The Living City*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri, 2 vols (Calcutta: Oxford University, 1990), 1.15.
7. See *Sri Ramakrishner Antyalila*, 1.24.
8. See *Sri Ramakrishner Antyalila*, 1.25, fn. 1.
9. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 873.