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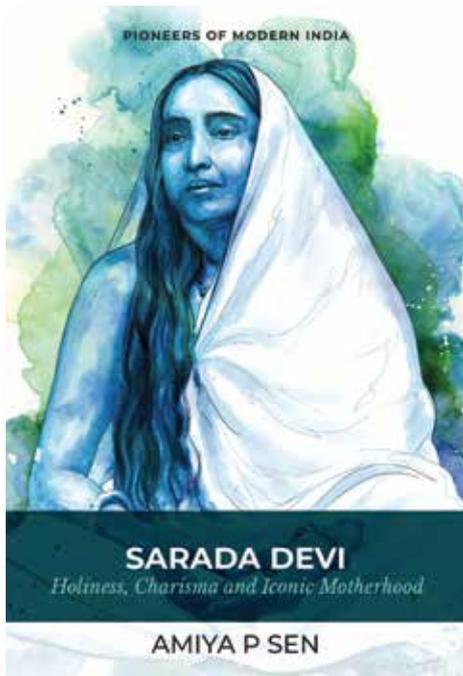
PIONEERS  
OF  
MODERN INDIA

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*Devoutly religious, a spiritual enigma, Sarada Devi was a cultic leader in her own right—or was she?—is often the debate. This short biography opens a dialogue on such debates and discussions about Sarada Devi.*

*The book presents how Sarada Devi, while remaining well within the confines of patriarchal society and despite severe economic and physical hardships, played the roles of the caregiver in her family and a spiritual guide for her followers with equal perseverance.*

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## Sarada Devi

### *Holiness, Charisma and Iconic Motherhood*

Amiya P Sen

#### Mother to one and all

This is a short and accessible biography of Sarada Devi (1853–1920), the widow of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and a cultic leader in her own right. It is the work of a historian of modern Bengal and meant to serve as a corrective to the hagiographic slant that has hitherto permeated writings on the subject.

This book is about understanding religious charisma associated with an unschooled but dynamic woman who had ample courage, common sense and conviction, deftly combining in her person the roles of a social counsellor, a spiritual preceptor and a popular cultic leader. Though an orthodox Brahmin widow, Sarada Devi revealed an extraordinary openness and liberality in her everyday relationships, not hesitating to share food with her Western disciples or socialize with men and women from the marginalized castes and classes. Though never a mother herself, she played a tender motherly role towards many that eventually contributed to ascriptions of Divine Motherhood in her person. She was also a feminist who encouraged women to be free and self-reliant.

Sarada Devi has been the inspiration behind the Sarada Math and Mission that, quite uniquely, combines the world of feminine spirituality and active social work for Indian women. This work is a study in the social and historical processes that made this possible.



**Amiya P Sen** retired as Professor of Modern Indian history from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He has also served Delhi University and Visvabharati, Santiniketan. He has been Agatha Harrison Fellow at the University of Oxford, Zimmer Chair at Heidelberg and Fellow at the IAS, Shimla, and the NMML, New Delhi. Currently, he is also Honorary Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, Oxford. Prof. Sen's research interests lie primarily in the areas of intellectual and cultural history of modern Bengal. To date, he has authored and edited fifteen books and served as Guest Editor for the MDPI international online journal, *Religions*.

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*I found nothing supernatural in her. Unlike her husband, Ramakrishna, she did not go into the rapturous state of samadhi every now and then; nor would she deliver some mystical or imperceptible discourses before her devotees in that state. To me it seemed she was no more than an ideal Hindu woman, chaste and immaculately pure, and a typically affectionate mother.*

**SWAMI ISHANANANDA**

*The venom in sinful seekers that we ourselves could not digest, we promptly transferred to the care of the Holy Mother... It was she who represented unbridled grace and limitless compassion... I never found Sri Ramakrishna himself to extend his grace so readily or freely... He would accept a disciple only after subjecting him to the most rigorous tests.*

**SWAMI PREMANANDA**

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