Girish Chandra Ghosh: A Bohemian Devotee of Sri Ramakrishna

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Girish Chandra Ghosh: A Bohemian Devotee of Sri Ramakrishna Chetanananda

Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844 1912) was the father of Bengali theatre, Calcutta s own Goethe, as brilliant and prolific as Shakespeare. A massively successful playwright, composer, actor and director, he virtually singlehandedly created the modern performing arts in northeastern India. But that s just a small part of his story. On 21 September 1884, a priest from the nearby Kali temple arrived at Girish's Star Theatre to watch his play, Chaitanya Lila. It was Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, one of the greatest saints of the nineteenth century. The meeting of these two giants one a star of the stage, the other a star of spirit would prove portentous. At the feet of the spiritual master, Girish would claim his most celebrated role, as Ramakrishna s beloved and exuberantly unconventional devotee. I am a sinner, Girish told Ramakrishna frankly when the two met; he was a drunkard and a debauchee, but never a hypocrite. Their remarkable relationship is a classic story of redemption, as Ramakrishna s unconditional acceptance and gentle guidance transformed Girish from a committed atheist into a passionate lover of God. Girish Ghosh s genius was rooted in his pervasive experience of death. He lost his parents early in life, and at various times most of his siblings, both his wives, and even some of his young children. Unrelenting tragedy drove the famous writer to alcoholism, but also gave depth and power to his enormous body of work. Ramakrishna helped Girish see beyond his personal tragedies into the beauty and subtle purpose of the Divine Mother s will. Ramakrishna s part in the history of religions is well known: he modeled religious tolerance and respect for all traditions during his life; after his death, his disciple Swami Vivekananda was among the first to bring the wisdom of yoga and Vedanta to the West. Few of his Western admirers realize however, that Ramakrishna was and remains even today the patron saint of the stage in his native Bengal, a testament to his enduring impact on Girish Ghosh and the artists and actors of India. Swami Chetanananda s authoritative biography provides a fascinating introduction to Ramakrishna s most colourful and least orthodox devotee. Details of numerous encounters between master and disciple have been preserved; we actually see Ramakrishna teaching and reshaping this difficult student. Chetanananda also describes Girish Ghosh's contributions to the development of modern Bengali theatre and summarizes some of his most influential plays, revealing Ramakrishna s direct influence. The sparkling arts and vibrant spirituality of nineteenth century Calcutta at that time a cultural centre of British India comes to life in this vivid portrait of that magical era. The readers are grateful to Swami Chetanananda for preparing this exhaustively documented account of Girish Chandra Ghosh for the Englishspeaking world. Till now Ghosh has remained a charming and intriguing shadow figure to those of us who do not read Bengali. Now at last this brilliant artist and humanitarian will receive the worldwide attention he has always deserved. This is an important book for everyone who has been touched by the extraordinary life of Ramakrishna, and for anyone who wonders if a sinner truly can become a saint

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