

A Bird's-Eye View of the Ramakrishna Mission – I

SWAMI SUNIRMALANANDA

The story begins with a great sacrifice. Unable to utter a single falsehood, Kshudiram Chattopadhyaya loses his house, property, village—everything. He sacrifices everything for the sake of truth—and the family stands on the street, homeless, penniless. The old Indian ideal of *satyameva jayate*—‘Truth alone triumphs’—is thus glorified. And Truth protects. So he has a new village, a new home. Sri Ramakrishna is born as his son in such a wonderful family.

Ramakrishna sought the Truth in all its forms since his childhood, and in his later life declared that truthfulness is the austerity of this age. Through his intense spiritual practices, he uncovered the truths of all religions one by one until he gave to the world these three fundamental principles:

1. Divinity, power, sovereignty, and infinite capacity are all hidden within us.

2. Forgetful of this inherent potentiality, we are suffering constantly and seeking solace in the mirage called the external world. Our only goal is to bring forth this inherent power to enjoy everlasting peace, blessedness, and freedom from suffering.

3. In order to manifest this inner glory, we may choose any religious path or perform any spiritual practice, for all paths lead to the same goal.

The glorious life

Sri Ramakrishna's life may be divided into two parts for the sake of a humble study. The

first part was like that of the human spiritual seeker, but guiding all the intensity of ‘human aspiration for the Divine of 5000 years’ for the attainment of God, as Swami Vivekananda pointed out, and attaining perfection through all the paths in very quick succession. To the amazement of his spiritual instructors like Totapuri, Bhairavi Brahmani, and others, Sri Ramakrishna had instant success in an astounding short time in all the paths.

The other part of Sri Ramakrishna's life was spent in being the divine Master, showering blessings, bestowing experiences, teaching unceasingly, training intimate disciples, forming the great monastic order, and instructing aspirants. To each type of spiritual aspirant, there used to be a particular type of instruction. The instruction given to Shambhu Mullick, who was *rājasīc* by nature and had wished to spend all his time in charitable activities, was different from that given to Narendra, who had wished to spend all his time in *nirvikalpa samādhi*. This does not mean, as it is usually assumed, that Sri Ramakrishna was against service activities. Much to the contrary, it was Sri Ramakrishna who ‘initiated’ the Ramakrishna Mission's service activities, as we shall see presently. Through his intense austerities and prayers, Sri Ramakrishna worshipped and prayed to the Divine Mother in human form, Sri Sarada Devi, to manifest Her divine glory on earth. Finally, he initiated a new form of monastic Order in January 1886, giving ochre robes to his intimate

disciples and instructing the foremost of them, Narendranath, who was to be the leader, about the future course of action.

Soon after Sri Ramakrishna's passing in 1886, the following disciples out of his 16 direct disciples initially started to live in the dilapidated Baranagore monastery: Advaitananda (Gopal Senior), Shivananda (Tarak), Abhedananda (Kali), Premananda (Baburam), Ramakrishnananda (Shashi) and Saradananda (Sharat), with Vivekananda (Narendra) staying for long periods until moving finally. The Ramakrishna Math was formally started with the assumption of the vows of *sannyāsa*, initially by eleven of Sri Ramakrishna's beloved disciples at Antpur on 24 December 1886. Later on, the other five disciples assumed monastic vows. Thus the Ramakrishna Math, the monastery part, had been founded. [According to Swami Gambhirananda, however, 'the bond of brotherhood was forged here (at Antpur) indissolubly. See *History of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission*, p. 39]

Meditation, studies, discussions on spiritual topics, *ārati*—everything continued with the fullest fervour. The new monks went on pilgrimages—made religious places holier by their spiritual power, and returned after some time.

Vision of the great prophet

Something powerful happened meanwhile. During his pilgrimage all over India, Swami Vivekananda travelled mostly on foot and saw India as it was. Buried in ignorance and superstition, with books in shelves speaking about the highest philosophy of oneness and divinity of the Self, India had become really indolent and enslaved. Some reformers were trying to awaken the masses by brushing away some dust particles that had collected over the buried masses, as it were, by condemning

the caste system, organizing widow marriages, etc. But the problem lay elsewhere. India, in particular, and the world, in general, needed a visionary of universal proportions to understand the problem, discover and show the solutions, bring light, knowledge, and wisdom. Vivekananda saw and understood the situation of the then India, and later of other countries, perfectly well. By his guru's grace, he found the solution to the problem too.

At Cape Comorin, sitting in Mother Kumari's temple, sitting on the last bit of Indian rock—I hit upon a plan: We are so many Sannyasins wandering about, and teaching the people metaphysics—it is all madness. Did not our Gurudeva used to say, 'An empty stomach is no good for religion?' . . . Suppose some disinterested Sannyasins, bent on doing good to others, go from village to village, disseminating education and seeking in various ways to better the condition of all down to the Chandāla, through oral teaching and by means of maps, cameras, globes and such other accessories—can't that bring forth good in time? . . . We have to give back to the nation its lost individuality, and *raise the masses* . . . Again, the force to raise them must come from inside, that is, from the orthodox Hindus . . . Religion, therefore, is not to blame, but men.¹

Religion was not to blame, but we human beings. With this powerful message to the world in mind, Swami Vivekananda, the keys of whose *nirvikalpa samādhi* were with his Master, went to the West in 1893, and gave glorious talks at the Parliament of Religions. Sister Nivedita later explained:

Of the Swami's address before the Parliament of Religions, it may be said that when he began to speak it was of 'the religious ideas of the Hindus', but when he ended, Hinduism had been created. The moment was ripe with this potentiality. . . It is this which adds its crowning significance to our

Master's life, for here he becomes the meeting-point, not only of East and West, but also of past and future. If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realisation. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.²

Swami Vivekananda's long stay of five years in the United States and visits to UK and France were very productive. The seeds of the universal religion had been sown then. The first Vedanta Society was founded in New York as early as in 1894.

Back in India, between 1890 and 1900, the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna wandered from place to place, suffered for want of shelter, clothing, food, and so on, and yet continued with their mission of spreading the universal message of Sri Ramakrishna. Seeing their situation, Holy Mother, whose influence and power behind the Ramakrishna Movement can never be exaggerated, prayed thus:

O Lord, you came, disported yourself with these few and then went away. Should everything end with that? If so, where was the need for your coming down in the midst of so much misery? I have seen in Varanasi and Vrindaban many holy men who get their food by begging and shift from the shade of one tree to that of another. There is no dearth of holy men of that type. I cannot bear to see the plight of my sons, who go forth in your name, roaming about begging their food. My prayer is that those who leave the world in your name may never be in want of bare subsistence. They will all live together holding to your ideas and ideals; and people afflicted with the sorrows of the world will resort to them and be solaced by hearing about you. That is why you came. My heart aches to see them wandering.

After the triumphant return

Returning from the West in 1897, Swami Vivekananda immediately set to work. And the year 1897 could be mentioned specially as being one of the few important years in the Order's history. Vivekananda started giving concrete shape to his plans and founded the Ramakrishna Mission on the 1st of May, 1897. This was the most momentous step in the history of the Ramakrishna Order. We should pause here to mention something important. Just as it was Sri Ramakrishna himself, who founded the Ramakrishna Math by formally distributing ochre clothes to 12 of his direct disciples, it was he himself too, who symbolically initiated all the service activities of the Ramakrishna Mission. We shall point out how Sri Ramakrishna symbolically started several activities:

➤ For instance, he arranged for a store of clothes, utensils, and food items. When monks and wandering devotees came to visit Dakshineswar, he would distribute these items to them. He also arranged for help to Ganga Sagar visitors.

➤ Initiating the educational services symbolically, Sri Ramakrishna taught Latu Maharaj how to read and write.

➤ Initiating service to the lowest of the low, Sri Ramakrishna himself cleaned the grotty place of Rasik.

➤ His suffering at the sight of the misery of the poor in Deoghar is too well known to mention.

Thus, Sri Ramakrishna himself had initiated the Ramakrishna Mission and it was formally declared open by Swamiji in 1897. Swami Akhandananda initiated the practical aspect of spirituality through service at Sargachi the same year. Swami Ramakrishnananda founded a centre in Madras, thus beginning a new epoch of spirituality in the southern parts of India. The other

disciples continued with their intense spiritual practices on the one hand, and preaching activities on the other.

The evolution of literature

The Brahmavadin from Madras (now Chennai) gave impetus to the spreading of Sri Ramakrishna's message in several places of India and even the United States. *Prabuddha Bharata* was already in circulation from Madras, and was shifted within a year's time to Mayavati, Himalayas. This may appear an easy task now, but in those days, with absolutely nothing to support and with no machines to help, rolling a huge printing machine uphill in the inaccessible Himalayan mountains, and publishing a periodical from there, was not an easy task. *Udbodhan* from Kolkata started functioning under the able hands of Swami Trigunatita during the same period. What was more, Mahendra Nath Gupta independently contributed in an extraordinary way to the Ramakrishna Sangha by publishing in English the first-ever volume of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Both Holy Mother and Swamiji were thrilled. He continued to publish in Bengali, the five-volume treasure, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*. *Sri Ramakrishna Punthi* in Bengali contributed no less towards the spreading of the message. Swami Vivekananda's works on Yoga started to be published during this period. Swamiji's *Raja Yoga* was the first translation of *Yoga Sutras* into English, and all the yoga schools of the world should be indebted to him for bringing yoga to the West. Still on the theme of literature, Swami Vivekananda's books began to be translated into the vernaculars very early: his *Karma Yoga* was translated in to Kannada, for instance, in 1902. The hymn of hymns, *Khandana bhava bandhana*, was composed by Swami Vivekananda and sung in 1898. Not only that, Western savants showed keen

interest in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and thus the *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* came into existence. A little later, several important books came out, written, translated or edited by none other than the illumined disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. *Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*, the *Works of Swami Vivekananda*, literature from Madras penned by Swami Ramakrishnananda, books by Akhandananda and Vijnanananda—all were so important for the future of humanity.

Several other important activities took place during this time. Within a year, there was the holiest of holies, Belur Math, ready for use, and the monastery shifted from its second residence, Alambazar, to this place in 1899. Swami Vijnananandaji stepped up the work of preserving Belur Math and making it habitable with the assistance of Swami Advaitananda. Thus began the work of the Ramakrishna Mission—service to humanity with the realization of the Infinite as the end. Vivekananda gave the Sangha this wonderful motto: *ātmano mokshārtham, jagaddhitāya cha*, 'for the liberation of the self, and for the good of the world.' Each civilization, each country and each culture needs a different type of help. And the Math and the Mission were ready to do what the society needs at a particular period of time. On 4 May 1909, the Ramakrishna Mission with a memorandum of Association and a body of rules, regulations and bye-laws, was registered under Act XXI of 1860 of the Governor General of India.

A bird's-eye view of events

In this manner, a new form of monasticism, where monks themselves organize, work and conduct services at all levels, had been founded, of course, with the help of admirers and devotees. Without the help of householder devotees the stupendous work of the Mission would not have happened. During the initial period, the Ramakrishna

Mission had three principal objectives: missionary, charitable and educational activities. So far as missionary activities are concerned, the monks spread out everywhere and with their own inspiring examples brought about a great awakening in the elite and the masses. Who can forget the struggle Swami Akhandananda underwent to convince the kings and the masses about the need of education in Gujarat? Who can forget the struggles of the other direct disciples in awakening the masses? Who can forget the struggles that all the monastic and non-monastic admirers of Ramakrishna Vedanta underwent during the First World War and its aftermath?

The number of events that took place since the Ramakrishna Mission came into existence are too enormous to narrate. We shall only mention some important ones. The passings of Swami Vivekananda, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Brahmananda, and the other direct disciples were severe blows on the fledgling institution. Along with these terrible sufferings, there were other problems. The political situation during the period was so pernicious that the active and educated young people were under constant surveillance by the ever-subversive police. Swami Saradananda, the first Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, nominated by Swamiji himself, had to struggle hard to keep things going since the day one. Problems knocked at his door almost every hour. One of them could be mentioned. The ruling British Government misunderstood the Ramakrishna Mission's intentions and a statement from the person in power created some sadness. Things were, however rectified by the patient Saradanandaji, and the British Government apologized. But, during all this turmoil, how hard it was to keep cool, and how cool Saradanandaji was! Not that there were no problems within the organization itself. Monks, dedicated to austerity,

contemplation, and absolute indifference to the world had to deal with mundane things and sometimes there used to be some confusion. But all problems used to get resolved by the grace of Sri Ramakrishna. Within about 25 years of the inception of the Ramakrishna Math, by 1915, there were as many as 6 Math centres, 7 Mission centres, and 4 centres outside British India.

Service activities

From inception to 1925: The service activities of the Ramakrishna Mission may be classified into seven categories for the sake of convenience: medical service, educational service, relief and rehabilitation, rural service, tribal service, youth service, and cultural and spiritual service. When it came to the monastics working or performing physical activities for the good of others, they were ridiculed by the Orthodoxy accustomed to the traditional type of monasticism. In the first-ever general report of the Mission, it was noted: 'In some quarters at least it is believed that monasticism cannot be any important factor in the growth of the collective life in India. Side by side with such a wrong notion, we find people seeking to utilize the monastic spirit as a means to some material collective end.' Swami Vivekananda remarks: 'Every enterprise has to pass through three stages—ridicule, opposition and then acceptance.' Swami Saradanandaji elaborated on this very idea during his inaugural speech of the first convention in 1926.

The initiation of medical services needs special mention here. Both Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother underwent enormous amount of physical suffering, for lack of proper treatment. And the disciples followed suit. Further, the first-ever disciple to give up his body, Swami Yogananda, suffered for lack of treatment. The founding of the medical services of the Ramakrishna Mission

could be traced to none other than Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother themselves. Sri Ramakrishna used to be deeply moved and extremely concerned when anyone would be ill and would try his utmost to serve the person. Holy Mother had severe health problems in 1875 and through her grace, the Divine Mother Simha-vāhini was awakened. This is very significant in view of the fact that the world of medicine underwent several transformations since this year. The Public Health Act of 1875, passed by the British Government, had been a result of decades of struggle to bring health to many.

Swami Vivekananda was saved several times by Providence. Having had to walk a hundred miles from Haridwar to seek a doctor when he was ill, Vivekananda knew the suffering endured by pilgrims and monks in those regions. So he asked his disciple Swami Kalyanananda to go there and start serving the diseased and other pilgrims. Kalyanananda, who started the service with virtually nothing at hand, was ridiculed as 'Bhangi sadhu' initially. The attitude of ridicule soon changed to one of reverence when one of the most important religious leaders of the time accepted him and his brother monk, Swami Nischayananda, with open arms. From two huts initially, today there stands a huge hospital called Sevashrama. Sevashramas, or service centres, were founded in this manner in Allahabad, Vrindavan and Benaras within a short time. Other forms of medical service during the initial period included dispensaries and distribution of medicines. Belur Math itself inaugurated a small dispensary by 1920 and several other centres started working along these lines. Far away, in the Kumaon regions of the Himalayas, where stood the wonderful centre of Advaita Vedanta, Mayavati, also there is a dispensary. By 1925, it had treated thousands of poor patients. Medical institutions came up soon in other parts of the nation like in Lucknow.

The educational service of the Ramakrishna Mission started under very difficult conditions. Sri Ramakrishna himself, despite all his divine moods and *samādhis*, started this service by trying to teach the alphabet to Latu Maharaj. Holy Mother knew the difficulty of learning, as she was forbidden to read. That was the system of those days. Almost all the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna strove hard to promote education. Rajputana and Gujarat should never forget Swami Akhandanandaji's efforts to bring education to the poor. His struggles to convince the elite about the need of schools were extraordinary. Sister Nivedita started a school in 1898 for girls who were deprived of even basic education. She took part in various altruistic activities. She worked to improve the lives of Indian women of all castes. Swami Nirvedananda, Sister Nivedita, and of course many others, should be specially mentioned for initiating educational activities of the Order. In 1914, Swami Nirvedananda founded the school which has grown into a huge institution today. Tol system was still prevalent in India until India won freedom. Until about 1925, the Ramakrishna Order had tol schools to teach Vedanta, Sanskrit, and other sciences. *Vidyāpithas* or schools were started in smaller centres like the one in Bankura to teach poor children. These schools proved highly successful.

Relief and rehabilitation service too can be traced to Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. The famous incident of Sri Ramakrishna's visit to Deoghar, where he saw the suffering of the poor, and urged Mathuranath, the son-in-law of Rani Rasmani, to immediately feed and clothe them is significant. Ramakrishna refused to leave the place until relief material came from Calcutta. Again, when Holy Mother saw a mendicant monk without shelter, she herself, who was so poor, arranged for him a shelter and provided food and other things

and enquired daily about his well-being. Furthermore, one of the dearest of Vivekananda's brother-disciples, Swami Akhandananda, initiated the dream-work of the rejuvenation of India, with Swamiji's blessings. In the remote regions of Sargachi, where human beings lived miserable lives, Akhandananda brought to them a ray of hope. The foundations of relief services by the Ramakrishna Sangha began with services to the plague victims in Calcutta, and what an impressive work was done during that period! By the year 1925, the Ramakrishna Mission had conducted several relief services—flood, famine, and so on. The famous floods of the River Kaveri in 1920s may be mentioned. With their very frugal resources, the powerful and dedicated monks of the Order served about 9,000 people in Coimbatore, 9,000 in other parts of Tamil Nadu, and about 600 in Kerala.

By 1925, the Ramakrishna Math had 20 full-fledged centres in different parts of India, and five centres in the West. The Mission had more than 10 centres, making the number 35 in all. There were several other branches, which were loosely connected to the Order, and awaiting formalization.

1925-1950: We have already mentioned that the first Ramakrishna Mission Convention was held in Belur Math in April 1926. This was in several ways a turning-point in the Mission's history. Powerful words from the President, Swami Shivananda, and Secretary, Swami Saradananda, made it clear to the assembled monks, devotees and admirers, and to the rest of the world thereby, that the objective of the Mission was to bring about a thorough change in world thought and concerted efforts of everyone were imperative to consolidate the Golden Age which had dawned already. Relative to the progress made despite political enslavement, the future was envisaged as supremely glorious by the seers present at the great Convention.

This vision was in line with Vivekananda's thought—a vision not just limited to India but to the whole world. His responsibility of putting the Order on firm footing over, Swami Saradananda left the world in 1927. This Convention also brought to light the capabilities of the second generation of monks, which made the elders happy indeed.

The next 25 years of the Mission saw further developments on the one hand, and complex problems on the other. Spiritual giants of the second generation now assumed leading roles and guided the ever-expanding activities of the Math and the Mission. To add to the difficult situation, the Second World War, India's struggle for independence, and her liberation from foreign hold created a very heavy atmosphere. The Sangha needed to be strong enough to face the challenges. Strengthening the Mission and the Math meant also strengthening their rules and regulations. Monks who were totally dedicated to *sādhanā* also worked untiringly to make Swamiji's dream of a new India and a new world order a reality. However, one or two mischievous elements like 'brahmachari' Ganendra (for he was no brahmachari), posing as members of the holy Sangha, created not a little difficulty to the authorities during the 1930s and so a new set of rules came into existence since then.

Apart from expansion, training of the newcomers to spiritual life and service activities now received more attention than ever before. Vivekananda had always laid stress on the study of the Vedas, Upanishads, and other scriptures. Thus a Study Circle, a precursor to the present-day training centre in Belur Math, was founded in the distant South. Further, a third dimension was being added to the Math and the Mission centres when adoration (*pujā*), meditation, *japa*, studies, running free dispensaries, and schools and undertaking relief work were all put together. Thus four

yogas came to be integrated.

Intensifying the medical activities during this period we are studying, the Order founded several dispensaries and charitable units in different places in India. The helpless poor got immense benefit from such services. Of all the important activities of this period, the 7-bed 'hospital' called Shishu Mangal ('Child Welfare'), founded by Swami Dayananda, needs special mention. Started in 1932 in view of the pitiable condition of the poor of Calcutta, this institution has never looked back and is rejuvenating itself every moment. Yet another important milestone in the medical field was the founding of the Sanatorium for tuberculous patients in 1937 at Ranchi.

Work amongst the tribals, especially the Khasis, was initiated during this period, when Swami Prabhananda (the first) did yeoman's service to enkindle the spirit of the age-old Khasi culture and amalgamate it with the *sanātana dharma*.

Education was also given priority by the Mission during these 25 years. We must mention the institution started by T. S. Avinashilingam, a disciple of Swami Shivananda, and also an institution of widows in Madras, which later became a girls' school and was merged with the Ramakrishna Mission. This period also saw expansion in the educational field in several parts of the country. A grand institution, called Temple of Knowledge (Vidyamandira), came into being just next to Belur Math which was to influence the educational culture of Bengal enormously in the future. By the year 1940, the Mission had 9 high schools, 3 residential high schools with 3,304 boys and 1,142 girls, 3 industrial schools, 7 vocational and agricultural sections attached to other schools, 10 middle

schools with 1,534 boys and 629 girls, 68 upper and lower primary schools with 3,186 boys and 2,264 girls, 31 night schools with 1,170 students and 2 Sanskrit schools with 89 students.

About the relief services during these 25 years now. These were turbulent times indeed. In the wake of the struggle for freedom, and the aftermath of partition, thousands upon thousands died in the Indian subcontinent due to starvation alone, not to speak of the other ill effects of war. The government then, afraid that it must be responsible to feed those thousands dying of starvation, did not declare it to be famine, but called it a distress situation. So the Ramakrishna Mission came forward to feed them in 1943. For two long years this feeding continued. This relief activity, of course, continued in one form or other until about 1950. It was an enormous work, and the biggest ever relief conducted by the Mission until then. What was the amount spent? For today the amount may appear small, but each rupee then was worth a dollar of today. So, Rs 11,66,500 for food, plus Rs 25,00,000 for other items—this was the expenditure. A shipload, about 1,250 tons of rice, came from the centre in Karachi, which was closing soon. Almost 1,200 villages were covered by the 75 feeding centres the Mission had opened. Then, immediately after Independence there were shocking riots. The Mission cared for 21,000 destitute people during this period, and also took special care of 1,200 orphans who were literally 'picked up from the streets'. The Mission also conducted a big relief work when Bihar was in floods during the 1930s, when Bengal was seriously affected, and when there were problems in the south. ■

(To be continued)

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