

The Ramakrishna Ideal and the Ramakrishna Mission

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Introduction

Human life is full of events. At the time they happen to us, they appear meaningless, disconnected and random. Occasionally, when we pause in our lives and look back at past events, we discern a pattern, a sequence and a connection among apparently disconnected events. What is true of individuals is true of organizations also. Take, for instance, the Ramakrishna Mission. It was founded on 1st May 1897 and is now celebrating its centenary. It has its set ideals and goals and has exerted a remarkable influence on the spiritual and secular history of India during the last hundred years. But what was the motivation which led Swami Vivekananda to conceive this idea? What were the events in his life responsible for his decision to found this institution? It is my intention here to examine in brief the succession of happenings in Swamiji's life which culminated in the coming into existence of the Ramakrishna Mission.

First Event

The first significant event occurred sometime in the year 1884. Sri Ramakrishna was then about 48 years old and Narendra a young 21. The latter had by then become a close disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and used to visit him very often at the Dakshineswar Temple. Sri Ramakrishna's room used to be full of his devotees, young and old. It was

always a 'mart of joy'. High philosophical ideas, interspersed with stories and parables and occasionally enlivened by mirth and laughter, used to be discussed for the enlightenment of the audience. Sri Ramakrishna's words were not reproductions from books and learned treatises, but came from his own experience and as such would be listened to with rapt attention.

The incident I am going to narrate happened in 1884. One day, the conversation in Sri Ramakrishna's room drifted to the Vaishnava religion. After explaining in brief the meaning of this religion with reference to Sri Chaitanya, Sri Ramakrishna said: 'This religion enjoins upon its followers the practice of three things: relish for the name of God, compassion for all living creatures, and the service of Vaishnavas, the devotees of the Lord. The real meaning of these precepts is this: God is not different from His name; therefore one should always repeat His name. God and his devotee, Krishna and the Vaishnava, are not separate from one another; therefore one should show respect to all saints and devotees. Realizing that this world belongs to Sri Krishna, one should show compassion to all creatures.'¹ At this stage, he went into samadhi. After sometime, when he came back to a semi-conscious state, he was heard muttering to himself: 'Compassion for creatures! Compassion for creatures! You fool! An insignificant worm crawling on earth, you to show compassion to others! Who are you to show compassion? No, it cannot

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be. No compassion for others, but rather the service of man, recognizing him to be a veritable manifestation of God.²

These words were heard by everyone present there, but made a marked impression on only one—Narendra. While leaving Dakshineswar, he said to his *gurubhais*: 'What a wonderful light I have discovered in those words of the Master! How beautifully he has reconciled the ideal of Bhakti with the knowledge of the Vedanta, generally interpreted as dry, austere and incompatible with human sentiments!... By realizing Him in and through all beings and by serving Him in them, the devotee acquires real devotion... If it be the will of God, the day will soon come when I shall proclaim this grand truth to the world at large. I shall make it the common property of all, the wise and the fool, the rich and the poor, the Brahmin and the Pariah.'³

Second Event

The second significant event we need to consider also occurred in the same year, 1884. It was on the 25th of February of that year that Narendra's father, Vishwanath Dutta died of a sudden heart attack. Narendra realised that his father had left behind only unpaid debts and that they were bankrupt. He had to undergo the unnerving experience of his own relatives filing cases against him in the court claiming his ancestral home. These experiences had a shattering effect on him and for the first time in his life he understood what is meant by poverty, hunger and human cruelty. At the same time, he was also blessed by the love of his Master, the only one who had full faith in Narendra in his darkest hours.

But for this experience, it is doubtful whether Narendra would have become the Swami Vivekananda, who wrote in a letter to Mary Hale from Almora on 9 July 1897: 'And may I be born again and again and suffer thousands of miseries, so that I may

worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls—and, above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the especial object of my worship.'⁴

Third Event

The third significant event relevant to our study was Swami Vivekananda's *Bharat parikrama*, between July 1890 and December 1892 during which he had a first-hand knowledge of India, its people, its customs and manners, its rich and poor, its superstitious practices, etc. With these impressions he arrived at Kanyakumari most probably on 24th December 1892.

Swamiji worshipped the Mother in the temple and decided to meditate on the Sripadashila, a piece of rock in the ocean a short distance away. There he passed three days and nights in deep meditation, ruminating on all the impressions he had gathered during the last two and a half years. In a letter written to Swami Ramakrishnananda from Chicago on the 19th of March 1894, he narrated what passed through his mind during his meditation: '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 Master say, "An empty stomach is no good for religion?" That those poor people are leading the life of brutes, is simply due to ignorance. We have for all ages been sucking their blood and trampling them underfoot.'⁵

In the same letter, Swamiji also suggests how to remedy the situation: 'Suppose some disinterested sannyasis, 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 Chandala (outcast), through oral teaching,

and by means of maps, cameras, globes and such other accessories—can't that bring forth good in time? ... The long and short of it is—if the mountain does not come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain.⁶

It was these thoughts which ultimately led Swamiji to resolve to go to America to seek help. From that moment, his life was dedicated to the service of India, particularly to her millions of oppressed starving outcasts.

Fourth Event

Swamiji's short welcome address at the World Parliament of Religions of Chicago on 11 September 1893 catapulted him to instant fame and glory. This did not, however, distract or divert his mind from his main objective, viz., service of the poor in India. It was a recurrent thought in his mind as to how to go about achieving this objective. During this period, he was housed with the Lyons at 262, Michigan Avenue in Chicago.

The Lyons had a grand-daughter called Cornelia Conger, who became very much attached to Swamiji. In her memoirs, she narrates an interesting incident to show how Swamiji's mind was fully occupied with thoughts of India. She writes: 'Once he said to my grandmother that he had had the greatest temptation of his life in America. She liked to tease him a bit and said, "Who is she, Swami?" He burst out laughing and said, "Oh, it is not a lady, it is Organization!" He explained how the followers of Ramakrishna had all gone out alone and when they reached a village, would just quietly sit under a tree and wait for those in trouble to come to consult them. But in the States he saw how much could be accomplished by organizing work. Yet he was doubtful about just what type of organization would be acceptable to the Indian character and he gave a great deal of thought on how to adapt what seemed good to him in our Western world to the best advantage of his own people.'⁷

Swamiji's fascination for the idea of organized work is reflected in a letter he wrote to Haridas Viharidas Desai in November 1894: 'The secret of success of the westerners is the power of organization and combination. That is only possible with mutual trust and cooperation and help.'⁸ During 1893-94, he wrote a number of letters to Swami Ramakrishnananda in Calcutta and Alasinga Perumal in Madras, asking them to gird up their loins and get started with 'Service of man seeing God in him'. These letters indicate to us the thought processes running through the mind of Swamiji, which found their culmination in the establishment of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission on 1st May 1897 in Calcutta.

Sri Ramakrishna Mission

On his return from the United States in 1897, Swamiji convened a meeting of all monastic and lay disciples of Sri Ramakrishna at 3.00 pm on Saturday the 1st of May 1897 at the house of Balaram Bose. Speaking about the establishment of an organization, he said: 'This Association will bear the name of him in whose name we have become sannyasis; him, taking whom as your ideal you are leading the householder life in the field of activity—this *samsara*; him, whose holy name, and the influence of whose unique life and teachings, have within twelve years of his demise spread in such an unthought of way both in the East and the West. Let this Sangha therefore be named the Ramakrishna Mission. We are but the servants of the Master. May you all help in this work!'⁹

Even though this proposal was enthusiastically supported by all and several resolutions passed at a subsequent meeting on 5th May, there were a few murmurs here and there. Swami Yogananda was worried that Swamiji had become too westernized, and wondered whether this was what Sri Ramakrishna meant at all by service of people.

Swamiji was able to convince his brother-monk through arguments. But a more serious objection was raised by Swami Adbhutnanda (Latu Maharaj), who said that what Swamiji was trying to do had no relation at all to what Sri Ramakrishna had meant. What started as light banter ended up in Swamiji getting excited and storming out saying, 'Who cares for your Ramakrishna? Who cares for your Bhakti and Mukti? Who cares what the scriptures say? I will go to hell cheerfully a thousand times, if I can rouse my countrymen, immersed in Tamas, and make them stand on their own feet and be men, inspired with the spirit of Karma Yoga. I am not a follower of Ramakrishna or any one; I am a follower of him only who carries out my plans! I am not a servant of Ramakrishna or any one, but of him only who serves and helps others, without caring for his own Mukti.'¹⁰

The atmosphere was surcharged. The people assembled were stunned. There was apprehension about Swamiji's health and a feeling of regret for having allowed things to build up to this stage. After sometime, Swamiji came back and broke the silence by saying, 'I have work to do! I am a slave of Ramakrishna, who left his work to be done by me, and will not give me rest till I have finished it! And, oh, how shall I speak of him! Oh, his love for me!'¹¹

That was the end of all resistance to Swamiji's plans for the Ramakrishna Mission. The movement set into motion on that historic day of 1 May 1897 has grown from strength to strength during the last hundred years and has now become a giant tidal wave sweeping across the globe, bringing the nectar of spirituality to millions of parched throats around the world.

Concluding Remarks

Today, when we are all gathered here as devotees of Sri Ramakrishna to celebrate this

event, we need to pay our homage to Swamiji for having given us this haven of peace. At the same time we need to do some introspection. The emblem of the Ramakrishna Order, as designed by Swamiji, depicts the four Yogas—Jnana, Bhakti, Raja and Karma Yogas. Thanks to the efforts of many organizations, almost all of our scriptures are available to us in translations. Jnana marga has now become accessible to all. The proliferation of temples and ashrams around the country have kept the lamp of Bhakti Yoga burning bright. Schools of Raja Yoga are springing up in all cities and towns and even abroad. But what has been totally neglected is Karma Yoga. There are not many institutions or people in the country left practising this yoga, as Swamiji wanted all Indians to do. Sri Ramakrishna Mission is one such rare institution, where Karma Yoga has become a way of life.

So, what is the responsibility of people like us who have taken initiation from this Order and have become devotees of Sri Ramakrishna? *Atmano mokshartham*, we can visit the Mission and meditate or do japa in the temple. But *jagaddhitaya* demands that we take an active role in the sustenance and growth of this organization. All we need is the will, and the way will be shown to us by Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ma Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda.



References

1. *Life of Swami Vivekananda by his Eastern and Western Disciples*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Sixth Edition, Second Reprint, 1995, Vol 1, p 138
2. *Ibid*, Vol 1, p 138-39
3. *Ibid*, Vol 1, p 139-40
4. *Ibid*, Vol 2, p 269
5. *Ibid*, Vol 1, p 536
6. *Ibid*, Vol 1, p 537
7. *Ibid*, Vol 1, p 444-45
8. *Ibid*, Vol 1, p 554
9. *Ibid*, Vol 2, p 247
10. *Ibid*, Vol 2, p 252
11. *Ibid*, Vol 2, p 253

Who says religion is declining?

Religious books, journals, cassettes and articles worth Rs. 2.01 lacs were sold at a single show room of the Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, in a single day on 18 Feb 1999, Sri Ramakrishna's birthday.