

The Story of Ramakrishna Mission

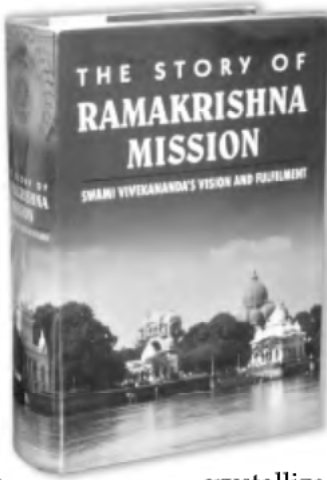
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THE STORY OF RAMAKRISHNA MISSION. 'Swami Vivekananda's Vision and Fulfillment' Published by the Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, First Edition, November 2006, Hardback, pp.xviii+1200. Price Rs.350.

It was the month of January 1886. Sri Ramakrishna was then undergoing treatment for his throat cancer at the Cossipore Garden House located in north Kolkata. His disciples, both lay and future sannyasins, were serving him with their heart and soul. There were moments of sorrow at the suffering of the physical body of Thakur (as Sri Ramakrishna was affectionately addressed), but there were also moments of bliss that they had the opportunity to serve their Master. It was during this time that one of his elderly disciples, Bodo Gopal, the only future monastic who was older in age than Thakur, gifted him with a set of ochre robes. He wanted Thakur to distribute these among deserving sannyasins. Thakur looked at his young disciples and felt that he could not find better sannyasins than his own young group. He distributed these robes among some of them and asked them to go out and beg for food (bhiksha). When they returned with the bhiksha, he shared it with them and exclaimed that he had never tasted food so sweet. Thus was planted the seed of the future Ramakrishna Order.

On the 15th of August 1886, the last day in his mortal body, Thakur called Narendra

and gave him some advice in private, urging him to see that after his Mahasamadhi his young disciples should not be allowed to go back to the mundane world, but should stay together to continue their *sadhana*. With the help of a few householders, Narendra and the other young men rented a dilapidated house in Baranagore. This came to be known as the Baranagore Math.



In December 1892, Swamiji found himself in Kanyakumari sitting on the 'last bit of rock of Mother India' and had an idea which he later came to communicate to his fellow monk, Swami Ramakrishnananda, in a letter from the United States. He wanted that all the sannyasin disciples of Thakur should dedicate themselves to the service of the poor of India. Later, during his first stay in the United States, he crystallized some of his ideas, and in a series of letters he tried to motivate his fellow monks.

But it was only after his return to Kolkata in 1897 that it was possible for him to put these ideas into action. The Ramakrishna Order thus came into formal existence in the house of Balaram Bose on the 1 May 1897.

Thus one can see that Ramakrishna Order did not spring all of a sudden from

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vacuum. It had a gestation period of a little more than a decade. It was the brainchild of a genius like Swami Vivekananda. Its motivator was Sri Ramakrishna himself.

How does one reckon the date of the origin of the Order? Some say that Thakur planted it in Narendra's mind, when the latter talked to him about '*Shivajnane Jiva Seva*' (service of God in man). Some others feel that January 1892 should be considered as the commencement of the Order. The young men themselves felt that the Order was founded in September 1886 in Baranagore. Otherwise, they would not have named that dilapidated building as Baranagore Math. Whatever the merits of the case may be, the world recognizes the 1st of May 1897 as the founding date of the Order, because it was on that date the Order became an organised body. Swamiji had recognised the value of having an organized structure for the Order because of his observations in the United States. The famous incident in Chicago when Swamiji told Mrs. Lyon that he had fallen in love with the 'American way of organising things' is an indication for Swamiji's action later in Kolkata.

The Story of Ramakrishna Mission itself contains 65 articles written by highly distinguished authors. It is divided into four Parts. The first Part, entitled 'Sources of Inspiration', traces the sources which ultimately led to the establishment of Sri Ramakrishna Order. The second Part, called 'Historical Perspectives', gives a wonderful description of the growth of the organization from its grassroots to a worldwide Movement.

The third Part, 'Contribution of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission', talks of the remarkable services rendered by the Mission in various fields of social life. The last Part, 'Ideological Perspectives', describes the philosophical contributions of the Math and

the Mission and how it has influenced various other schools of thought.

This overview should be adequate to give the prospective reader an idea of the sweep of this monumental work.

There is no denying the fact that the original idea for the establishment of the Order was due to the genius of Swami Vivekananda. But, one should not ignore the contributions of his fellow-monks to this venture. The articles of the first Part highlight these contributions. The lay devotees of Thakur were equally forthcoming with their own contributions. But, the greatest inspiration came from the Holy Mother herself. Seeing the miserable condition in which the young disciples were living at the Baranagore Math, she sent out several heartfelt prayers to Thakur to help them in their spiritual pursuits, by providing them with a suitable shelter. That is why she is addressed as the *Sangha Janani* ('the Mother of the Order').

Just as any other organization, Ramakrishna Order also had to face several hurdles in its initial period. Some of them were mere irritants, but some others were serious enough to cause grave concern. However, relying on its inner strength, the organization was able to override these obstacles and retain its purity. It goes to the credit of the several monks and lay people who assisted the Math and the Mission in this stupendous task that they emerged unscathed through the ordeals.

Some of the articles of the second Part refer to some of these initial difficulties. But once they were surmounted, the Order has been progressing steadily ever since. This does not imply complacency on the part of the organization, but a wise administrative policy to see that such things are nipped in the bud.

Most of the articles in the second Part are about the expansion of the Order

worldwide. This makes a fascinating reading, especially the thrilling reports from several centres of highly inspired individuals dedicating their whole lives to the furtherance of the cause. When one goes through these articles one is struck by the worldwide acceptance of the ideals of the Order by people belonging to different religions and cultures.

India has been the home, since time immemorial, of many Ashramas or hermitages, where several spiritual aspirants did their sadhana for their personal salvation, completely cut off from the mundane activities. There is not much information whether they were able to bring about any improvement in the general quality of life of the laity, except for a few stray cases here and there. It goes to the credit of Ramakrishna Order, especially its Mission, that it was perhaps the first organization to attempt to improve the lives of the common people.

The articles of the third Part provide a glimpse into the activities of the Mission in this direction. Swami Vivekananda had himself announced, following his Guru, that Vedanta is not for empty stomachs. His extensive travel through the length and breadth of the country had brought this lesson of his Guru closer home. No wonder it became the focal point of the Mission to take up social and educational activities in right earnest. These activities include running schools, colleges, hostels, libraries, vocational training institutes, centres of non-formal education and so on. Mission's well-organised network for providing help during moments of distress caused by natural calamities has won admiration from everyone.

Perhaps the most tangible contribution of the Mission to social life is the translation and publication of scriptural literature, to bring them within easy reach of the common

man. This was the dream of Swami Vivekananda which has been fulfilled in ample measure.

The last part of the book rounds up this report of achievements by touching upon several fields in which the Order has made many contributions and continues to do so. The articles deal with the activities of the Order of great interest to the laity. Again, one is amazed in how many ways the Order has influenced monks, lay people and thinkers all over the world, and continues to do so.

It is an extraordinary experience reading through the book. It gives the reader an idea of how an organization can function if it is truly wedded to its ideals without compromising them in any way.

What is the reason for the remarkable stability of Ramakrishna Order, when so many other organizations around it are rising and falling like nine pins? This was the question posed by the reviewer once to Swami Ranganathanandaji, the 13th President of the Order. His answer was very revealing: 'In our Order there is no hierarchy. All the monks are brothers, all children of the Holy Mother and the disciples of Thakur. Even the latest initiated is the younger brother of the President Maharaj. It is this which has knit all of us into a family.' No wonder the Order is able to keep its cool amidst the turmoil all around it! In the true tradition of the Sangha Janani, the Order enfolds in its embrace all who come to it with sincerity, irrespective of their backgrounds.

Swami Vivekananda once predicted that this Movement will last at least for 1500 years. Let us fervently pray to the Divine Trinity that may this period be extended. And even if the Order may not exist in its present form after 1500 years, it would have achieved its purpose of establishing the value of a spiritual life in the minds of generations to come. □