

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD

by
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Swami Ananyananda, President Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati and Editor, the Prabuddha Bharata, in the article reproduced here, reviews the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and the impact of his life and teachings on the modern world.

“Sri Ramakrishna’s one endeavour in life was not merely to take man nearer to God, but bring God also nearer to man.”

Referring to Sri Ramakrishna and the significance of his life and message, Swami Vivekananda, his chief disciple, says: ‘The life of Sri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight, under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion... He showed by his life what the rishis and avatars really wanted to teach. The books were theories: he was the realization. This man had in fifty-one years lived the five thousand years of national spiritual life, and so raised himself to be an object-lesson for future generations.’

In his foreword to *The Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, Mahatma Gandhi writes. ‘The story of Ramakrishna Paramahansa’s life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face. No one can read the story of his life without being convinced that God alone is real and that all else is an illusion.’

The utterances of these two great personalities of renascent India focus our attention on the central theme of the life and message of Sri Ramakrishna, namely, that he was a man of God, a God-man, and the primary objective of his life was to awaken the religious spirit dormant in man,

to bring God nearer to man, in other words, to raise man to the consciousness of God. In the following paragraphs, we shall discuss more elaborately his extraordinary life and his unique message, and try to show their direct relevance to our contemporary world.

Sri Ramakrishna's teachings were essentially spiritual, if anything. He lived, and had his being in God. He himself used to say that what he spoke was not of his own volition, but that words were 'pushed' to his lips by the Divine Mother. He was a simple child of the Divine Mother, living in Her consciousness, and acted as She bid him.

It is a recurrent phenomenon in the religious history of nations that whenever they are caught up in the voyage of life by storms of materialistic forces, and are forced to drift aimlessly along, having lost their track, a path-finder appears on the scene, rescues them from imminent danger, and serves as their beacon-light, showing them the right course and directing them along the path of progress and perfection in tune with their cultural and spiritual heritage.

In the case of India, this phenomenon has become so characteristic that her national mind unquestioningly believes in its recurrence whenever and wherever there is need for such a one. Through countless centuries of her colourful history, time and again, such beacon-lights, men of God, have appeared on her sacred soil to lead the nation on the path of godliness and righteousness. This belief has become so deep-rooted in the consciousness of her people that whenever a morbid and despondent situation arises, seriously affecting the spiritual life of the nation, they look up to the Divine Dispenser, recalling His unfailing promise, and look forward in all earnest-

ness to the advent of a deliverer, who would lift them out of the morass into which they have fallen. And such divine help has always come in the past, and will always come in the future as well.

India, in the mid-nineteenth century, stood in need of a thorough spiritual renaissance. It was a dire need. The nation was adrift, having lost sight of its spiritual moorings. The glare and the glamour of the Western materialistic way of life were becoming too strong to be resisted. The spiritual conscience of the nation became dormant and torpid; and agnosticism and skepticism began to spread their dreadful tentacles on the national mind like an octopus. The precious spiritual heritage of the nation was receding to the background, with no effective say in the conduct of the people. A blind imitation of the ways quite alien to Indian spirit and culture was noticeable all over the land. In such a context, there was an urgent necessity, a national desideratum, for one who would embody in himself the highest and the noblest in the spiritual traditions of the country and lead her along the path of divine life and spiritual awareness.

This historic need was fulfilled in the personality of Sri Ramakrishna, who directed the course of our national life into healthy channels and restored the soul of India in its pristine purity to its proper place and position. In his own life of strenuous spiritual struggles and rare and extraordinary realizations, he rediscovered the ancient values of our hoary heritage and reinstated them in the heart of India. Gathering up in himself the spiritual forces of the land accumulated for centuries in a vast sweep, and living an uncommon life in unbroken divine consciousness, Sri Ramakrishna appeared on the crest of a mighty wave that

swept over this extensive country, carrying away all the dirt and squalor, and watering her fertile soil with fresh waters of spirituality, so that a healthy and bounteous crop of men and women of character, deeply spiritual and divinely inspired, may grow on this sacred land of ours.

About the advent of Sri Ramakrishna on the Indian scene and its appropriateness to the demands of the time, both in the national and the international context, Swami Vivekananda, who carried his message to the different parts of the world, says: 'The time was ripe for one to be born, the embodiment of both this head and heart; the time was ripe for one to be born, who in one body would have the brilliant intellect of Shankara and the wonderfully expansive, infinite heart of Chaitanya; one who would see in every sect the same spirit working, the same God; one who would see God in every being, one whose heart would weep for the poor, for the weak, for the outcast, for the downtrodden, for every one in the world, inside India or outside India; and, at the same time, whose grand, brilliant intellect would conceive of such noble thoughts as would harmonize all conflicting sects, not only in India, but outside India, and bring a marvelous harmony, the universal religion of head and heart into existence. Such a man was born... The time was ripe; it was necessary that such a man should be born, and he came.'

In these words of Swami Vivekananda, we get a clear idea of the significance of the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna in relation not only to the new awakening that has dawned on the national consciousness of India, but also to the new spirit of fellowship, amity, and understanding, as well as the spirit of confraternity among the various religious groups and sects that are growing

among the different segments of humanity on the basis of their spiritual oneness.

During the last eight decades or so, the message of Sri Ramakrishna has made its way to the different corners of the globe, silently, in the typically Indian way, and the aura of his divine personality has attracted the minds of hundreds and thousands of men and women not only in India, but in other countries as well, bringing about a thorough spiritual transformation in their individual lives. Sri Ramakrishna is being literally worshipped by them today as a God-man, as the goal of their spiritual aspirations.

Christopher Isherwood, in his book *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, refers to Sri Ramakrishna as a 'phenomenon', and significantly adds further: 'A phenomenon is often something extraordinary and mysterious. Ramakrishna was extraordinary and mysterious; most of all to those who were best fitted to understand him. A phenomenon is always a fact, an object of experience.'

Yes, Sri Ramakrishna was extraordinary and mysterious - extraordinary in the sense that his life, from beginning to end, throughout presents characteristics, moods, and attitudes quite out of the ordinary; and mysterious in the sense that his entire life was deeply spiritual and divinely inspired. Not merely in his day-to-day activities was he extraordinary, but even as a spiritual sadhaka, when he undertook diverse forms of spiritual disciplines; and later, as a teacher of men who sought his guidance, he was unique. There is the touch of the extraordinary character even in his message, as Swami Vivekananda points out: 'Other teachers taught special religions which bear their names, but this great teacher of the nineteenth century made no claim for himself.'

He left every religion undisturbed, because he had realized that, in reality, they are all part and parcel of One Eternal Religion!'

That Sri Ramakrishna was marked out for a divine mission on earth was discernible even from his early life. In the many episodes of his life both in infancy and in boyhood at his village home, as well as in his life at Dakshineswar, where he was God-intoxicated - into the details of which we refrain from entering - we notice an uncommon characteristic throughout. A mere mention can be made, however, in passing, of some of them: the antecedents of his birth, his birth itself, his proclivity to things connected with the daily worship in the household, his keen interest in the devotional stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata; his spiritual ecstatic experience at the sight of a flight of a flock of milk-white cranes against the background of black cloud, at the age of six; a similar experience at the age of eight, when he was accompanying a group of women devotees from his village to the shrine of Vishalakshi; his getting identified with Shiva on the Shivaratri night, when he was persuaded to play the role of Shiva - these indicate the mental and spiritual make-up of Sri Ramakrishna, which flowered into full bloom at Dakshineswar. There, as the priest of Mother Kali, what an extraordinary life he lived! He had the vision of the Divine Mother, who was a living reality to him, not a mere image of black stone. He had established a personal relationship with Her as Her child. He would converse with Her and seek Her guidance whenever he was in doubt, or needed a practical solution for a problem that confronted him.

The vision of the Divine Mother was followed, in quick succession, with success in each and every mood or attitude that

he adopted. A series of diverse sadhanas followed, and he reached the goal of each of these in extraordinarily short periods. Thus he undertook the Shakta, Vaishnava, and other forms of sadhanas, under able teachers who came to him unsought; he also underwent the formal ritual of sannyasa, though married, under the tutelage of Totapuri. He also practised the religion of Christ and that of the Prophet Mohammed. At the end of it all, he proclaimed: Yato mat, tato path - 'as many views, so many paths'.

Though he took formal sannyasa according to the scriptures, he did not wear the ochre clothes in later life; nor did he give up, his married wife - again, an extraordinary element in his life. As the culmination of his spiritual sadhanas, he literally worshipped his own wife, invoking the divine presence in her, and offered the fruit of his sadhanas at her feet, with his rosary, together with flowers, and prostrated himself before her, singing the glory of the Divine Mother - an event unheard of before in the life of any saint or God-man in the religious history of mankind. He saw God in everything. He perceived the divine presence in every being. His realization and proclamation of the fundamental unity of all religions is a message relevant to our contemporary world, torn by religious conflicts and dissensions and separated by high walls of sectarian dogmas. Its implications are far-reaching, inasmuch as it touches not only the religious realm, but other spheres as well. Humanity, in its essence, is one, as it has the same divine basis all over. As all religions are basically one, all men, through whom the divergent religions find expressions, are basically one, too. It is, therefore, foolish and unwise to fight in the name of one religion against another.

Unity in diversity is the plan of nature. Nature wants to

enjoy manifoldness, and so she has done away with monotonous uniformity. This variety springs from unity, which is one and universal. While diversity is in a state of flux, unity remains unchanged, like the unchanging white screen on which an ever-changing motion picture depicts diverse emotions and characters in multi-coloured forms and several situations. This is the profound significance of Sri Ramakrishna's message of the synthesis of all religions. This message is already finding its way into the hearts of men the world over, leading to a mutual understanding and appreciation of not only religious and spiritual values, but also social and cultural ideas and ideals among the different sections of humanity, and ushering in an era of respect, trust, fellowship, and co-operation in the common endeavour to uplift themselves.

Sri Ramakrishna said: 'If you wish to find God, serve man, knowing him to be the veritable manifestation of God.' This teaching of his has an immense spiritual force on the social plane. By his Advaitic realization of the unity of all existence, he came to feel the presence of the Divine in all things and beings, and so, to him, there was nothing that was not worship and adoration. One day, at Dakshineswar, when some people were talking of 'compassion to creatures', he at once fell into a deep spiritual mood. Coming back to a semi-conscious state afterwards, he said to himself: 'Compassion to creatures! Compassion to creatures! Thou fool, thou to show compassion to others? Who art thou to show compassion? No. It cannot be. It is not compassion for others, but rather service to man, recognizing him to be the veritable manifestation of God - jive shivajane seva.'

Significant words are these. Referring to these words

of the Master, Swami Vivekananda (then Narendranath), who was present there on the occasion, said: 'What a strange light have I discovered in those words of the Master! They throw an altogether new light upon the path of devotion. By realizing Him in and through all beings and serving Him through humanity, the devotee acquires real devotion. The embodied being cannot remain even for a minute without doing any work. All his activities should be directed to the service of man, the manifestation of God upon earth, and this will accelerate his progress towards the goal. However, if it be the will of God, the day will soon come when I shall proclaim this grand truth before the world at large. I shall make it the common property of all, the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor, the Brahmin and the Pariah.'

Ever since these words were uttered, we know how the power of Ramakrishna- Vivekananda has been directly and indirectly influencing our national life, leading our country by a new path of self-realization and setting up before the world an ideal as to how all the activities of a nation, of a society, of a family, or of an individual can be completely spiritualized.

From the foregoing discussion, three features emerge prominently from the life and message of Sri Ramakrishna. They are: first, as Mahatma Gandhi points out - to, which reference has been made at the very outset - Sri Ramakrishna's life was the complete antithesis of the modern materialistic attitude to life. To him, God alone was real. Only on that background, everything else had value or meaning. In his own characteristic way, he would say that any number of zeros put side by side have no value by themselves. If the numeral 1 precedes the

zeros, they get their value! Similarly, everything in this world is like a zero, and God is the numeral 1. If that 1 is not there, the zeros are of no consequence. Which means that we should hold on to God in one hand and do our duties in the world with the other, in a spirit of devotion and dedication.

Secondly, his message of the unity and synthesis of all religions has an immediate relevance to our present-day world, where there is still a large measure of religious exclusiveness, bigotry, and intolerance. His message, if earnestly followed, will open up new avenues of religious fellowship and co-operation among the existing faiths, and bring about an atmosphere of peace and goodwill among their adherents, where the long-cherished ideal of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man will flourish.

Thirdly, his message of 'service to man in the worship of God' has immense possibilities. Not only the one served is raised to the position of the divine, but the one who serves is also elevated because of his subjective attitude. In that atmosphere, there will be no distinction between the sacred and the secular. Every deed done by man is transformed into an act of worship, a spiritual sadhana. Man's life on earth becomes worth living; otherwise, it is wasted and worn out. If spirituality is the goal, perform each and every act as worship of the Divine.

Amidst the encircling gloom cast by the materialistic ideologies and forces, Sri Ramakrishna rises as a beacon to shed light on our path and lead us to our spiritual goal. That was the mission of his life. His one endeavour in life was not merely to take men nearer to God, but bring God also nearer to man. If the life of Ramakrishna has any message

to our contemporary world, it is this that man should turn away from his material pursuits, by changing his attitude to his own life and work, and set out on the spiritual path and seek God who is the source of all happiness, joy, and peace.



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