

## Situating Sri Ramakrishna in Today's Perspective-I

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This paper proposes to understand the widely revered 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali saint-cum-mystic, Sri Ramakrishna's symphonic reconciliation of diverse forms of reason and faith in order to evaluate catholic syncretism and its applicability in the impatient, fluid environment today.

My approach in this study has been analytical. The methodology involves three aspects: i) it does not detail the saint's long stretch of (1855-66) religious experiments, ii) it leaves the hagiographic excesses and, iii) it primarily revolves round his most popular image (1875-86). The study shows that the saint's mystical style stands on a childlike innocence with a simultaneous renunciation of most adult categories even when he returns to the world of mostly middle class educated men. My objective is to find if such stand could act as a new cultural force to the present generation and to see whether such innate simplicity be viewed as the greatest gift of civilization.

During the work many Bengali and English books/journals have been thoroughly read. The chief Bengali books include Sri Ma's *Kathamrita* (five volumes of pocket edition, 2002), Akshaykumar Sen's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Puthi*, Swami Saradananda's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*, Mahendranath Dutta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishner Anudhyan*, Swami Prabhananda's *Sri Ramakrishner Antyalila* (two volumes), etc as the primary sources. In

English, Swami Vivekananda's *Complete Works* (all eight volumes), Swami Nikhilananda & Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *Sri Ramakrishna: The Face of Silence*, Romain Rolland's *The Life of Ramakrishna*, Wilhelm Halbfass' *Tradition And Reflection: Explorations In Indian Thought*, Rabindranth Tagore's *The Religion of Man*, Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian and Identity and Violence*, Bimal Krishna Matilal's *Ethics And Epics* etc form the primary count.

I believe that all problems of existence are basically those of harmony and, hence, have tried to envisage a poise of different contradictory attributes through situating *Ramakrishna* in a bit novel direction.

### I

The Paper entitled 'Situating Sri Ramakrishna in Today's Perspective' incites vivid analysis of essentially three elements in the reverse way. These are: What is a perspective? Who is Sri Ramakrishna and, then, why and how to situate him? Only then the study would seem worth doing.

A perspective is the way of regarding a situation, often inferentially. However, the thought process varies in the representation technique owing to the variations in beliefs and/or experiences. Conflicts in viewing a topic grow with the width of interpersonal interactions. This is where contemporary

cross-cultural human situation indeed calls for an invigorated interpersonal chemistry, where the individual would not dissolve into society but could retain his identity and difference to make his contribution to the social whole. This would help viewing the perspective.

It is often said about Sri Ramakrishna that he himself was a miracle. We would restrict our discussions to the observed records and their unobstructed understanding as far as possible. Born in a poor Brahmin family in 1836 at an ordinary, remote village, Kamarpukur, of West Bengal, Ramakrishna, the then Gadadhar, left his ancestral house almost unschooled and, stepped out for Kolkata under the guardianship of his elder brother, Ramkumar, to earn a living. There he rejected the conventional 'bread-winning education' for good. He then met with a fortunate coincidence to be appointed a priest at the newly built Kāli temple of Dakshineswar, a suburb of Kolkata, in 1855. The employer was the venerable Rani Rasmani of Janbazar of the city. There he went through a eleven-year-long journey of different religious practices (*sādhanā*). Meanwhile, he had to pass through harsh criticism of supposed lunacy and ignominy. The span of 1866-75 was one of a translation from that state to an *Avatāra* (Incarnation) as well as a *Paramahamsa* (the Great Swan) and, beginning of his steady appearance before the elites of the city. For the rest of his mortal life (d.1886) he remained a keen observer of everything including the domestic passions, anxieties, social demands, and identity crises. In spreading the love of God among the educated middle class in the city, he came out as a man of original thoughts and a nonpareil. His self-taught expertise in

communicating with the people brought him as a popular teacher-cum-saviour to the sociopsychologically-plagued mass.

An avid analysis of the textual records helps one find an evolutionary shift of the rural Gadadhar. It essentially comprises six phases. The first phase spans between 1855 and 1861 (when Rasmani dies) and it can be viewed as the transition of priest Gadhadhar into Sri Ramakrishna. The Rani discerned the mystical creativity in him and honoured him accordingly. The second phase lasts till 1866 during which Sri Ramakrishna earned the epithet of Avatarhood from one Bhairavi Brahmani and the epithet of Paramahamsa from another saint, Totapuri (both were his gurus in the doctrines of Tantra and Advaita Vedanta respectively). Then there comes the renowned Brahma leader and versatile Keshab Chandra Sen who, through his journals like *The Indian Mirror*, *The New Dispensation* etc, brought out Sri Ramakrishna in the limelight. Between 1880-81 he almost became a frequenter to many an educated family in the city. The last three phases had their seeds sown between 1882-86, but their proper germination towards the construction of God Sri Ramakrishna picked up the gear posthumously. The first of these three is replete with diarised materials of 'direct and recorded on the same day' class of evidence. It initially came out as *A Leaf from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in 1897 (the writer being the devotee Sri Ma). The same book got started publishing in its Bengali version as 'Kathamrita' from 1902. The second, yet probably the most effective, constructional job was executed by the nearest disciple, Swami Vivekananda. He preached Sri Ramakrishna before the American and the European audience as 'an extraordinary searchlight' and projected him

as the ‘gist’ of Hinduism. Returning to India, he preached Sri Ramakrishna’s catholic ideas and held him as the only God (‘Bhagavan’) to be worshipped.

The colonial subjects heard of a human-God through the lips of the heroic Swami, who later established the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. It was followed by a whirlwind Godness encircling Sri Ramakrishna. The last phase, as I have viewed, is being continuously recreated and sustained by people of various class, sects, social status and countries. They make and remake their Ramakrishna in their own ways. The commonality lies, however, in positing him a panacea.

#### Phase of *sādhana*

This is where the question of situating Sri Ramakrishna arises. But, before that, let us take a rapid glance at his phase of *sādhana* (1855-66), following which he comes back into contact with the outside world and slowly builds up his mission.

Owing to his indifference to monetary gain and personal pleasure, Sri Ramakrishna enjoyed such a freedom that made him dislike routine work in the Kāli temple. The authority gladly accepted his disliking. His God-intoxication, represented by an unquenchable thirst to ‘see’ Kāli as ‘mother’, widened his innate plasticity to a long self-experimentation of various religious practices. Perhaps the first important episode in this series is that, under the guidance of one Bhairavi Brahmani, a Vaishnava devotee of a high order, Sri Ramakrishna practised the most difficult course of Tantrik *sādhana*s and was emphatically declared to be an Incarnation of God (*Avatāra*). His success in the Tantrika practices made him a child. The records say that during these days he could

neither keep on his clothings nor his sacred thread. This also points to a state when one crosses the bar of social distinctions to reach the feeling of being beyond good and evil.

Then he met one great migratory monist, Totapuri, who shared his convictions about the Advaita Vedanta and urged Sri Ramakrishna to meditate in order to realize the Absolute Unity. The disciple, within three days of practice, reached the highest state of *Nirvikalpa Samādhi*, where there is no longer any perception of the subject or of the object, i.e. the subject-object duality is dissolved. Now, Totapuri is said to have honoured him with the title of *Paramahansa*. After passing successfully through the Vaishnava ideal of love for God, the Shākta *sādhana*, the lessons of the Advaita Vedanta, Sri Ramakrishna practised, in turn, some other religions then prevalent in India, such as Islam, Christianity and came to *realize* the Oneness and universality of his Kāli whom he could *see* everywhere, even among the inanimate objects.

#### ‘Why’ and ‘how’

I would now try to answer the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the question. The ‘why’ pertains to the need of the day. Sri Ramakrishna was a man who did acknowledge the diversities of faith and asserted a coherent pattern of existence to them. His life and teachings become highly relevant in today’s stressful living. One special attribute of him was that he neither preached any particular creed or dogma nor did he reject any. He wanted to see everyone follow his/her own path, suited to his/her own temperament, to reach the goal. It tells of acceptance or ‘equity of toleration’. This speaks of the richness of Indian tradition of interreligious tolerance that becomes a persistent theme to the

medieval mystical poets. We know that every re-telling of the tradition is simply a renewal of the same, which is, otherwise, the finite unfolding of an infinite content. Thus we see that in holding a synergic view on 'unity in diversity' (that has become the Indian credo, the Indian sentiment, down the ages) through his interpretation of religious or domestic subjects in a simple dialect, Sri Ramakrishna coming out without parallel in his time. He used to appreciate the otherness of the other's horizon of understanding. It means for him, the otherness of the other person's horizon serves to enrich one's own horizon. It also reminds us of the Indian tradition of toleration of intellectual heterodoxy. That he was a disciple ('*celā*') to everyone<sup>1</sup> was an honest confession of his. It also proves his zeroing the ego. In this context let me share his saying that, greatness demands a precondition of becoming down-to-earth<sup>2</sup>. The records also show that his almost restless dialogic process essentially involved an intense and unending quest for truth. This truth or goal definitely points to the perception of God but, the same quest can be kept enlivened to attain a good, moral life. In fact, the personal life of this saint (although he cannot be called a 'saint' in the formal Christian sense, nor does he remind a wandering *sadhu* of Indian tradition, nor even a hard ascetic; he was very much a family-man with 'unusual' attributes) stands as the *Big Light* with accessibility to all. In it one tries to find the cure-all attributes. If not fully so, one can, at least, perceive a balmy touch to soothe the presently growing socio-religious intolerance in India as well as outside from his life, I suppose.

The next responsibility is to answer the 'how'. It mostly relates to how one sees different subjects/institutions, like religion,

spirituality, culture, interpersonal tolerance/society, family, the self etc vis-à-vis Sri Ramakrishna. If one recalls his warning to his disciples to keep off from inevitable quarrels, in the utterance, 'No soul can be saved without Ramakrishna, therefore all must embrace Ramakrishnaism'<sup>3</sup>, one would feel free to interpret him in one's own way. That is what has been followed in this work. The saint-man once again reduces himself to zero. Now, if a subject or an institution be kept erect against the morally strong, egoless Ramakrishna, it would be easy to study the locus of that subject/institution and draw a graph accordingly. The problem of situating Sri Ramakrishna would then be worked out.

## II

If the self be seen as a bivalve shell, its two valves can be seen to be represented by reason and faith. Both the East and the West share this idea almost equally. The barrier between the two valves is difficult to avoid, but a reconciled coexistence cannot be denied. In India, it is to be noted that, 'heterodoxy has been championed in many different ways'<sup>4</sup> throughout its history, although an 'exaggerated focus on religiosity' contributed, to a great extent, 'an underestimation of the reach of public reasoning'<sup>5</sup>. The colonialism further worsened the scenario by lowering the self-identity. By slowly imbibing the scientific rationale from the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we learned to bring the binary into prominence. We forgot our traditional words *shraddhā* that represents today's 'faith' and *yukti*, which reflects 'reason'. No doubt that, we, after years of sterile period, could break the walls of superstition owing to the advent of the age of Critical Inquiry but, unfortunately, many an educated Indian found enmity between the two faculties. It

resulted into conflict and hesitant psyche. Generations of social reformers, educated middle class, impatient and activist youths, wobbling couples, temple devotees, and more than one prodigy sketched the century's socio-religious wave. While in the material plane, political freedom was gradually felt the dire necessity, in the inner one, people were in search of their identity, the real Indianness. But, being caught in the cultural nimbus of the period, Indians failed to perceive the wholeness of their search and got fragmented as 'I am a Hindu', 'I am a Muslim', 'I am a Brahmin', 'I am a professor', 'I am a reformer' etc, creating, thereby, narrow identities and social distances. There was no immediate remedy that could rightly fit different fragments into a whole. There was no method either. And, since methods necessarily imply repetition and the resultant monotony, none was that much eager to look for one.

Here we find Sri Ramakrishna, the man full of simplicity and depth, and one who had earned the rare gift of *seeing* everything. Since he could *see*, there was no conflict in his representation. He resolved the problem of accepting a subject by placing *reading*, *listening* and *seeing* in positive, comparative and superlative degrees respectively<sup>6</sup>. It tells how an experience is strongly built upon keen observation. This is the art of Indian Critical Inquiry in its true sense. In his spiritual quest as a worshipper in the Kāli temple, Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'Mother, dost Thou really exist?...Art Thou true? ...If so, please reveal Thyself to me...I am just a child of Thine...' In this approach of his, we notice a luminous *shraddhā* with doubt (note first two sentences) and a rational questioning tilt (note the use of 'If') along with a wholesome surrender (note the last sentence). This has been the Indian

tradition of learning where doubt is always kept ignited through *shraddhā*. This particular approach takes us to the *Gītā* (IV.34) where Sri Krishna depicts the Indian Critical Inquiry model by uttering the phrase '*pranipātena pariprashnena sevayā*', i.e. one can achieve the real *jnānam* (knowledge) only through modestly put, repeated ontological queries before a wise man (*guru*) whom the disciple or the student must serve with *shraddhā*. This *jnānam* enables one to reveal the true self. In other words, it helps us to *see*. It stands as the Indian way of learning and builds its tradition. Remaining in tune with this, Sri Ramakrishna, on several occasions, further added that one's learning continues till one is alive. This is definitely a refined approach towards preparing us for all the functions that life demands of us and it acts as a directive force towards a positive *Lebensgefühl*. In such ongoing process his suggestion was, however, to remain firm on a specific objective and to get immersed in it to discover the jewel in the depth of the *sea*; mere superficial floating was of no use (*Kathamrita*-Vol:III, p.1063). He himself did never hesitate to *plunge* into the syrup (*rasa of Ishvara*) and his quintessential stand of this kind is reflected in other aspects of his life too. This sort of perception and focussed experimentation in creating a comprehensive worldview from almost an illiterate brahmin urges one to logically situate him in the frame of modernity, I suppose.

As far as holy books or scriptures are concerned, Sri Ramakrishna never hesitates to mention their limitations. Thus his suggestion was not to 'squeeze' the almanac to get drops of water, nor did he suggest 'squeezing' of scriptures to get God or the Truth<sup>7</sup>. It was *seeing*, upon which he kept erect his bold conclusions. And, unschooled

as he was, he rarely cited scriptures to corroborate his sayings; rather he used to lay stress on one's own experience. This is where he offers liberty to everyone and encourages independent thinking. Did he import any idea from the West? No. He was rather a silent voice against the British imperialism through his innate qualities. To him, different faiths/religions were but different paths (fragments) to reach the same goal (the whole), the Absolute. People must continue until they have reached the end without believing that their path was the *only* path. This sort of unorthodox idea honouring plasticity of human thought takes us closer to Sri Ramakrishna, who succeeds in persuading us the relation between the fragments and the whole. It is he who, from his experience, can easily say that both Form and Formless are equally true<sup>8</sup>. He thus inspired everyone to know the Truth by one's own endeavour. His life shows that he never criticized anyone nor did he see evil anywhere. His unconditional love embraced everyone. The essence of all these attitudes, beliefs and statements are highly catholic. In this hour of today's clashing societies, where religious categorization is often pampered politically, and seeds of intolerance and war sown in such an orientation as to deny the plurality of one's identity, can't we instil Sri Ramakrishna's catholicity and implement the same for a good, moral living? To end this paragraph let us review his firm stand beyond superstition in his suggestion of squeezing the 'almanac'. In case of marriages through negotiation even today we often cannot afford to ignore the horoscopic judgement, although the potency it possesses to correctly forecast a marital relation is shrouded in ambiguity. Can't we recall the 'almanac' episode here to slam the door of undue worry? This modern outlook of

his could be brought into practical utility to obviously reach the threshold of free human choice.

Let us now talk on Sri Ramakrishna's worldview. When the subject of worldview comes, he does not wholeheartedly accept Shankara, who regards the world of many as *māyā* (illusory). Sri Ramakrishna's use of *māyā*, however, stands for divine craft or power or domination by which God has kept everything 'covered', allowing none to know the Truth<sup>9</sup>. There is a subtle difference between the two views. While Shankara's *māyā* follows the Upanishadic direction, in Sri Ramakrishna, it focuses the Rig-vedic tradition. It implies the latter's stand in the most ancient Indian ethos, while Shankara shows a shift to Advaitic *bhāvavāda* (that projects the world as neither having the ontological reality of Brahman nor being totally non-existent, ie indefinable). Shankara views the world as transient, but Sri Ramakrishna maintains that it is absurd to pretend that the world is 'unreal' so long as we form part of it<sup>10</sup>. Else he could not have said that so long there is this body one has to take full care of it<sup>11</sup>. It implies that he does not urge one to remain a mere 'spectator' in the so-called cosmic play. His stand reflects a new kind of dissent from within and helps us to rethink whether he could firmly be placed in the Advaitin category. It also shows that, although he was a man of strong ascetic discipline, he did not support the materialistic denial, unlike our past ascetics. Once this fun-loving man told: 'Why would I be monotonous?'<sup>12</sup>. He was well aware that monotony breeds mediocrity and he always tried to keep himself out of this prison. He actually had a respectful liking for diversified tastes to reach God or worldly men. In fact, his daily living (including his eating habits) bears testimony

to this. His child-like wonder was possibly the main inspiration behind his going for varied tastes. We can thus smell an adaptive flexibility in his utterance that is indeed a significant indicator of modernity.

On another occasion he told that he had fully enjoyed the material world. He explained this by sharing his days of riding palanquins, wearing costly silk or rug, using golden waist chain, partaking of coloured sweets, taking tobacco in a silver hookah and the like<sup>13</sup>. But he did never develop even a bit of attachment or addiction. All these he did to simply gain experience of mundane transience. Ramakrishna, in this description, goes against the classical tradition of *vairāgya*, 'passionlessness', and establishes his uniqueness. To be sure, he 'was of the opinion that one should not disregard the social world; yet he stated that one should always understand that, ultimately, there was nothing which could or had to be done for it'<sup>14</sup>. In fact, he was a householder ascetic having a fixed income as a temple priest who enjoyed meeting the Calcutta *bhadralok* (the educated middle class) with his childlike curiosity. Hence it was not possible for him to outrightly deny the hard reality of everyday life. Rather he had a strong empathy for the financially and religiously wobbly middle

class people and maintained his worldview that was almost free from metaphysical intricacies. With his clairvoyance he could easily resolve the moral dilemmas. His personal life also shows that unlike many of our past ascetics (the Buddha or Chaitanyadeva or the like), he never considered his wife a hindrance to his *sādhana*; he rather worshipped her in the consciousness of Kālī. The conjugal respect of this couple stands as a lesson for today's badly busy, highly pretentious, indifferently looking or non-understanding counterparts. In his own time, Sri Ramakrishna's unassuming presentation of love for his wife, inter alia his close watch of domestic responsibilities, did, no doubt, have some positive impact on the *bhadralok* society floating in the *babu* culture of the day. At least a few couple of the society gave a second thought to maintain a normal relation or, they might have had found a fountain wherefrom they could irrigate mutual tolerance. In fact, it cannot be denied that nurturing of such conjugal respect and loyalty appears to be an essential prerequisite for a strong family covalency of all ages. A reflection of this is seen in the extended family of Sri Ramakrishna today.■

(To be continued)

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