

Role of the Ramakrishna Mission in Fostering Freedom and Human Dignity

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The Ramakrishna Mission has always stood for freedom and human dignity in the most comprehensive and deepest sense of the terms and the root of this fact lies in the following three factors.

First, it is based on the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna who was a born lover of freedom. He had a sharp intellect, strong common sense, a keen power of observation, a pure and simple heart and, of course, an unflinching devotion to God. To make any judgement about any matter, he always preferred to depend on these inner qualities of his, instead of anything else. That is why since his childhood it was found that he would sometimes behave in the most unconventional ways. As for example, he rejected formal education, brushing it aside as a mere bread-earning education and not aiming at real knowledge. Similarly, at the time of being invested with sacred thread, which is a mandatory ceremony for the Hindu Brahmin boys, he went against all social and scriptural norms and took his first alms after the specific rites from one low-caste woman and not from his parents or any Brahmin relative. When others tried to dissuade him from departing so radically from the convention, he said: 'I gave her word to this effect; she loves me like her own son. How can I go back on my word and still remain a Brahmin?' Thus we find that since his childhood, Ramakrishna grew up as one who preferred to live in freedom.

Secondly, this insistence on listening to the voice of conscience was present in Swami Vivekananda also, Ramakrishna's foremost disciple. '*Viveka*' means *conscience*. The very meaning of his name is: One whose conscience is fully awakened. He has given Ramakrishna's ideas a concrete shape by forming the twin organisations—the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission. He used to say: 'Freedom is the song of the soul' and 'Freedom is the first condition of growth'. He lived in freedom and advocated freedom for everyone, everywhere at every level. That is why he could be a great inspiration behind India's freedom movement also, though India achieved independence 45 years after his passing away. He would say to those around him, 'Be free! A free body, a free soul! That is what I have felt all my life.' 'If you dare declare that you are free, free you are this moment.'

Thirdly and more importantly, the Ramakrishna Mission is based on Vedanta, which forms the quintessence of Hinduism and which includes and accepts the basic tenets of every religion. The Ramakrishna Mission is based on Vedanta as experienced by Ramakrishna and interpreted by Vivekananda in the light of Ramakrishna's Vedantic experiences. Swami Vivekananda once said to his disciple Nivedita that Sri Ramakrishna's unique life was the unique method by which Vedanta could be interpreted for the use and good of modern man.

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Now, Vedanta, in the very first place, talks of *mukti* or freedom as the ultimate spiritual goal—not even of heaven or of God. It does not deny the existence of heaven or Personal God, but does not posit them as the ultimate goal. The ultimate spiritual goal, according to Vedanta, is freedom of the soul from the snares of body, mind, intellect and ego. And on the other hand, Vedanta talks of *oneness* of all beings, because every being is potentially divine and, on the basis of that divine identity, all are one and equal to each other.

The Ramakrishna Mission is based on these two basic postulates of Vedanta, this freedom of the embodied soul from the cage of the body-mind complex and the Divine oneness of all.

Not just equality, but oneness

Swam Vivekananda once said: Vedanta does not proclaim equality but oneness. Even equality is a smaller and imperfect expression, because the basic truth ever is oneness and the idea of equality presupposes the idea of plurality. If I say these 200 people are equal, I have to first consider this plural expression 200 and then the fact of equality.

Then again, it is true that life will be ever marked by variances. All will not be the same. Some will be tall and some short; some more intelligent than others and some less. Then, it may be also like this—that there are two students, both are intelligent but one's aptitude is for one branch of studies and the other's aptitude may be for some other branch. This is the evident fact of life—these varieties. The correct expression from the Vedantic point of view therefore will be this: One single entity is present before me as 200 persons, which is why they are equal and hence they must be treated equally.

The Ramakrishna Mission through all its activities recognizes and practises these basic truths of freedom and oneness of beings.

Somehow each human being carries deep within him or her the memory of their lost freedom, as it were, and an urge for getting back that lost freedom works behind all their activities. This we say, borrowing Vivekananda's idea. He says, a thief is stealing and a monk is meditating. Both are driven by their love of freedom. The thief wants to free himself from the bondage of poverty, that is why he steals. But he has chosen a wrong path. His action will not bring him freedom. It will cause him more bondage and sufferings and his attainment of real freedom will be delayed. But as the monk has chosen the right path, he will advance steadily towards freedom.

So, from the Vedantic point of view, human sufferings are actually the outcome of bondage at various levels and the Ramakrishna Mission's services seek to provide people with facilities that enable them to win back their freedom. The Mission serves people at physical, mental, emotional, intellectual, moral and, above all, spiritual levels. It runs schools, colleges and a university. It runs dispensaries and hospitals. It provides food, shelter and medical care to the poor and the afflicted, specially at the time of natural calamities and distress. It also provides value education to the youth and spiritual knowledge to anyone who seeks it, through its publications and discourses. Thus the Ramakrishna Mission through its multifarious services offers people with facilities to gain freedom from their immediate states of bondage. But along with our material services to fulfil their immediate needs, we always keep people aware of moral and spiritual values, so that, like the thief we have alluded to, they do not

opt for any wrong path and get delayed on the way to the ultimate freedom.

Along with that, we teach people the practice of self-restraint and love, so that their attempts to achieve freedom do not put any hindrance to the freedom of others and they can have the heart to feel that if I am enjoying my freedom and legitimate rights as a human being, I should see to it that others also can enjoy the same.

However, this love and empathy come spontaneously from the Vedantic truth of Oneness. Whether I know it or not, I accept it or not, the truth is this that anybody suffering anywhere is actually *me* who is suffering, anybody happy anywhere means I am happy. But just as Oneness is the eternal truth at the core, inequality or variance is also true at the surface level of life. In fact, that is the sign of life. All will never become equal in beauty, talents, or other qualities of head, heart and physique.

Then, the question arises: How to reconcile these variances on the surface with the unity at the core in a just manner? The solution Vivekananda has offered and which the Ramakrishna Mission follows is this: There should not be any special privilege for anyone because of these variances. Everybody should be given equal opportunity to prove his or her worth in education, job and elsewhere. Equality must be maintained in granting privileges. Swamiji says: 'Vedanta does away with all sorts of privileges. Therefore, absolutely there should not be any privilege for anybody.' If there should be any special privilege, it should be for those who are lagging behind, but only temporarily, till they rise to the level of the mainstream people to be at par with all. The Ramakrishna Mission remains committed to this principle in all its service activities and we have reasons to believe that by

following this principle we serve the cause of human rights at their very roots.

Religious harmony

Another characteristic of the Ramakrishna Mission is its belief in religious harmony. We sincerely believe that all religions are valid paths of reaching the same spiritual truth. This truth was first realised by Ramakrishna and first preached to the world at large by Swami Vivekananda—at the 1893 Chicago Parliament of Religions. PoWR (Parliament of the World's Religions) authorities have rightly mentioned this in their website: Now it is accepted by all, that 1893 Parliament marks the beginning of interreligious dialogue. If it is so, it is the contribution of both America and India. America offered the appropriate forum by arranging the first Parliament of Religions and Vivekananda of India made its most use. And the outcome is: World's religions are now steadily leaning towards interfaith harmony. When Vivekananda declared at the Parliament of Religions, 'We believe not only in Universal Toleration, but we accept all religions as true,' he was actually upholding freedom from what he described as 'sectarianism, bigotry and their horrible descendant fanaticism.' If I say, God's grace and emancipating power is reserved only for my religion, we put limit to God's infinite power, as if we make God Himself captive. Vivekananda pointed out this fragmented view of God and religions to be wrong and presented before all a better view of universal toleration and acceptance. His oratory buttressed by the depth of his spirituality made his message convincing. America was a land of freedom. It is ever fond of freedom. Freedom was lacking only in the field of religion. So a free approach to religion, which he offered and which the

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American newspapers described to be ‘as wide as the sky’ was readily accepted here.

An example can be cited here. Even before Vivekananda reached India though he had then left America, a news was published in a New York paper which was reproduced in *The Indian Mirror*. Some hundred educated men and women who were practising Vedanta were interviewed. They said: ‘We now realise that there have been many Christs before. They are all outcome of the eternal principles of Vedanta.’ They were asked immediately: ‘Don’t you think by this you are moving away from Christ and Christianity?’ They said: ‘Not at all. We

feel that we now understand the Prophet of Nazareth and Christianity better than before.’

I will conclude by quoting from Sister Nivedita a few lines on Sri Ramakrishna’s universal love: ‘In this man’s love there was no limitation anywhere. His longing was for the salvation of every soul in a whole world. A universe from which one, most insignificant, was missing, could not have seemed perfect in his eyes. Love such as this carries all hearts together.’

This all-inclusive love is the motivation behind all the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission. ■

* This article is based on the lecture Swami Balabhadrananda, Assistant Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, delivered at the Parliament of the World’s Religions (PoWR) on 18 August, 2023, held at McCormick Place, Chicago. The theme of the five-day-long Parliament was, ‘A Call to Conscience: Defending Freedom and Human Rights’.

Brahma

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson