

# 125 Years of the Ramakrishna Mission in the World of Culture

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In intellectual circles we usually talk about material civilization and culture. Very often we avoid the issue of religion, possibly because its truths are very subtle, and not easily comprehended by all. Indeed, we think erroneously that religion is a make-believe. To many of us 'Dharma' is absurd and as painful as a nightmare. But Swami Vivekananda has removed this misconception and made it scientific in the light of Advaita Vedanta.

Let us first look at one observation of Swamiji. He points out that if our body is true in the waking state (*jāgrat*), mind is true in the dream state (*svapna*) and Ātman is true in the dreamless deep sleep state (*sushupti*), it is our duty to nourish both body and mind, and finally manifest the Ātman or the higher Self. Those who only make necessary arrangements to provide various kinds of food to the body, no doubt are exponents of a high-grade civilization. Nevertheless it is good to remember that such a civilization nurtures the gross body only; it is highly apathetic about nourishing the mind.

Civilized people are certainly educated. By virtue of their knowledge they go beyond the barbaric state and raise their standards of living to a wonderful height with the help of science and technology. This knowledge surely mitigates their suffering and adds joy to their life. Nevertheless, this kind of knowledge is *aparāvidyā*, a lower form of

knowledge that ensures purely physical pleasures. In reality, whatever we see all around are meant to appease our physical and material hunger. Being the bondslaves of greed and desires we think enjoyment is the be-all and end-all of our life. But the aim of *parāvidyā* or highest knowledge is to attain knowledge of the Self or Ātman which is present inside the body and manifests Itself in the state of dreamless sleep. It is thus evident that we ought to develop as much an awareness of the body as of the mind and the Ātman. To know oneself means the attainment of knowledge of all the three realms.

The food that is required to nourish the mind and intellect are literature, poetry, music, drama, fine arts etc. But first of all we need to prove that we have a mind. How do we prove it? The proof is, when we dream, our gross body lies in bed but the mind goes out of our body and creates a new world of its own to enjoy it. Thus in the dream state our mind gets separated from the body. This mind, therefore, has to be fed properly because it desires to taste higher and subtler things.

Take for example the *rāga* Mallār which has about nine or ten varieties. Those who understand Indian classical music can differentiate one variety from the other and appreciate their fine differences. We find the same phenomenon everywhere. Those who understand the differences between *rāgas*,

those who value the arts, are usually persons of refined tastes. They are well-tempered and not aggressive.

Our mind is always vacillating; it wavers between desires and doubts. But intelligence is determinative; it considers the pros and cons of a matter and helps us to make a decision. As a result of this process culture expands and becomes enriched gradually. Thus we find that while civilization is gross body-oriented, culture is the outcome and essence of cogitation. So, with the help of intelligence man wills to have recourse to the ethical injunctions of religion (*Dharma*) to purify his desires for material pleasures (*kāma*) and wealth (*artha*). Thus we find that whereas civilization aims at physical and external progress, culture seeks to attain internal or mental growth that ultimately inspires man to know his real identity. And here religion is of great help.

When one is thus inspired, one plunges into spiritual practices to attain the knowledge of the Self. And when that is attained, the *sādhaka*, the spiritual aspirant, enters into a state called *moksha* or liberation. Thus in one way or the other, the brute man, the cultured man, and the man with divine qualities are more or less familiar with what is described by the Vedas as *caturvarga*, i.e. *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *moksha*. In the 16th chapter of the *Bhagavad-gītā* also, there is an elaborate description of 26 'Daivi sampad' or Divine qualities. The persons having such qualities are said to be fearless, pure in heart, simple, non-violent, truthful, free from anger, self-denying, benevolent, non-covetous, mild and gentle, modest, strong, compassionate, patient, free from vanity and concerned about the well-being of all. There are persons who are born with much of this divine heritage. Side by side, what do we generally find in civilized persons?

In the language of the *Gītā*, they are endowed with six *āsuri* or demonic propensities such as *dambha* (pretentiousness), *darpa* (arrogance), *abhimāna* (overweening pride), *krodha* (anger), *pārushya* (harshness in words and behaviour), and *ajnāna* (ignorance, as a result of which they do not know that they too can rise to a higher state of life by transcending their attachments and identification with the body). It is true, of course, that with the help of these qualities civilization advances towards newer heights. But oftentimes we witness its decline as well. Therefore, as a safeguard against such grim predicament we need to attain humanity first. It is for this reason that we refer to the Divine qualities mentioned in the *Gītā*.

For going up to the highest level of human possibilities we are required to inculcate a consciousness about our inherent divinity. However, for this kind of ascension, first we must be good human beings, and to attain this goal we need to have a rich cultural life. Otherwise the practice of the art of music will turn out to be only a means of earning money; practice of fine arts also loses its sanctity. The path of Self-realization opens up only when we combine the cultural life with our yearning and efforts to know our true identity. This is called *sāadhanā* or austere practice. You see, no phase of life is unimportant. All the phases represent truth, but lower truth. In this context we may recall what Swami Vivekananda said. He pointed out that none of our experiences and states is unnecessary and harmful. However distasteful they may appear from his present outlook, he needed them very much at one time. They were very much necessary for him to reach his present state. Each one of us has to manifest our

divinity in this manner. First we have to accept the gross ideas and be benefited by them and then gradually step by step ascend the subtler and higher states. For this reason Advaita has no quarrel with the most ancient doctrines. Not only that; Dualism (*Dvaita*) and other doctrines which prevailed in the past are not discarded by the Advaitists. They neither treat them with an element of mercy nor look at them patronizingly. They believe that followers of other doctrines will some day reach the same conclusion which the Advaitists uphold.

### Heaven that Swamiji wants to create

In the light of this discussion let us find out what Swami Vivekananda really wanted and what kind of heaven the Ramakrishna Math set up by him in 1886 and the Ramakrishna Mission founded in 1897 want to create and how. Who are the people who will work out his dream? Needless to say, Swamiji expected that his dream would be fulfilled by his followers of the East as well as of the West. And, in one letter written to one of his disciples he has outlined the four major tasks to be done collectively by himself and his followers. What are these tasks?

First, 'The dry, abstract Advaita must become living—poetic—in everyday life... .' Second, '...out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms... .' Third, '...out of bewildering yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology...' Fourthly, '...and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. This is my life's work'. (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. V, pp. 104-5, 1989.)

As we read these lines we may think and wonder, how can a child grasp the truth which we, the aged people, do not

even understand? However, our doubts are groundless since Swamiji himself has said that it is possible. I myself have verified this claim of Swamiji once when I was able to make a boy of seven understand the Advaitic truth. Be that as it may, Swamiji himself had in his lifetime accomplished his mission. From the Puranic tales he brought the best characters like Dhruva, Prahlāda and so on to light. Who are the ideal characters, the finest among men? In Swamiji's view, those who are unselfish are the ideal characters. He said clearly, 'Remember, the wicked are always the same all over the world. The thief and the murderer are the same in Asia and Europe and America. They form a nation by themselves. It is only in the good and the pure and the strong that you find variety.' (*C.W.*, Vol. VI, p. 141.)

This statement of Swamiji contains a profound message for the intelligentsia. Indeed, do we know or remember the names of 98 brothers of Duryodhana? Neither we know, nor do we want to know, for they were all xerox copies of Duryodhana and Duhshāsana. On the contrary, each one of the five Pāndavas had a distinct personality. Therefore they command our respect.

### Man-oriented spiritual practice

If divinity is not coupled with work-efficiency life becomes disorganized. Such unrestrained life always seeks to extol the enjoyment of worldly pleasures. Many such people ask, 'Why does the Ramakrishna Mission not get involved in politics?' or, 'Why has Swami Vivekananda forbidden it?' They feel we cannot give answers to such questions. Some others again suspect that we keep truck with political parties in secret. We have only one answer to such questions. We say: politics is antagonistic;

its aim is to establish oneself in the place of others. But spirituality is unitive; it is all-inclusive and works to create friendly relations with all.

In fact, such childish questions arise in our minds because we are brainwashed by Western ideas—ideas that seem to guide us at every step without any consideration whatsoever. As a result we have become detached from our self-identity, our true being, as it were. Here *Yoga* comes to our help. *Yoga* joins our mind to the Self. As of now, we do not have the right kind of knowledge of *Bhakti-yoga*, *Jnāna-yoga*, *Rāja-yoga* and *Karma-yoga* although we are quite knowledgeable about the external world. This kind of material and academic knowledge is no knowledge at all. This is taught in schools and colleges. But what do these academic institutions actually teach? For centuries they have been teaching only the ‘Properties of Matter’—that actions and reactions are equal and opposite.

I remember a funny incident in this connection. One day when a teacher of physics was teaching this axiom that actions and reactions are equal and opposite, an intelligent student, for some reason or other, was making noise in the class. This made the teacher angry and he slapped the student on the face. As I said, the student was quick-witted and bold. He said, ‘Sir, this is your action; now what kind of reaction do you expect here?’ The teacher, filled with rage, replied: ‘I am teaching the properties of matter. But what material element are you?’ The student promptly asked, ‘Sir, is there nothing in this world except matter? What about man? What do you think is going to be his characteristic?’

Obviously, the teacher kept silent as he did not know the answer. And so are others who, no doubt, are human beings. But unfortunately they have been defining matter

throughout their life without knowing their own properties! For this reason Swamiji has formulated the new Veda that proclaims: Know yourself. Will you spend your entire life just being the gross body, a bundle of flesh and blood only? Should you not probe and explore your mind, intelligence and Ātman?

It is true that the highest type of man revokes and transcends the so-called scientific law of action and reaction. Even though tyrannized, they, at the point of death, pray earnestly for the wrongdoers: ‘O Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing!’

Socrates was poisoned to death. He was told initially by his friends and the judge himself that if he leaves Athens, he wouldn’t have to court death. But Socrates refused to do so as he had the nature of Shiva who knew he was above death—he was not the body hence he was deathless. In every age such great souls manifest their divinity by taking up the burdens of others on their own shoulders. That is how a ‘*nara*’ (an apparently ordinary person) propelled by an inner inspiration struggles to attain the virtues of non-violence, truthfulness, forgiveness and so on, and one day becomes ‘*narottama*’ (the greatest amongst men). Then he gets firmly rooted in the all-pervasive Divinity and becomes *Nārāyana*. This is the true picture of the evolution of man, to rise step by step from *nara* to the state of *Nārāyana*. Swamiji has laid before us this royal road and shown that those who worship the deity inside temple are no doubt religious (*dhārmika*), but they are indeed gods who worship man and serve him with love. This is Swamiji’s new doctrine of inner transformation. Through service as a form of worship, the devotees, the seekers after knowledge and the yogis—all have to attain the state of godliness.

Swami Vivekananda has laid stress on four fundamental truths inherent in Vedanta. What are these truths? First, there exists oneness in life. Secondly, there is divinity of soul. Sri Rāma, Sri Krishna, Christ, Sri Chaitanya, Sri Ramakrishna—everyone manifested their divinity and thereby proved that man has the potential of becoming God. Thirdly, spiritual experience has many levels. Dualism that belongs to the level of body, mind and intelligence is lower truth, but never wrong. The highest truth is of course non-dual. In Advaita all the levels or stages are harmonized. Therefore, everyone who is on the spiritual path is surely moving ahead. Advaita welcomes them all. Fourthly, *karma* or work is necessary for the unfoldment of the Self. Swamiji's *Sevā-yoga* is nothing but a refined form of traditional *Karma-yoga*. It requires every worker to consider his workplace as a temple of worship. *Karma* becomes service or *sevā* when love is added to it. For instance, when the teacher cooks for her children at home, it is no more a humdrum work; it is *sevā*. But when the work is loveless, it becomes dry duty which perhaps the same teacher does in school. Therefore, the ideal attitude should be to view office, court of justice, educational institution, hospital or factory as a temple of worship. At every place work should be performed as a kind of worship because every work is sacred; nothing is secular. Swamiji has given us this plan to purify and divinize our everyday work. The work performed by the Ramakrishna Mission has to be seen in this light. Its activities during the past 125 years have shaped the outlook of our society to a considerable extent. One may ask: But how much has the society been benefited by such activities? Well, the answer has to be given by the society and

not the Ramakrishna Mission. The Mission's job is to go on working and create an awareness of the glories of self-sacrifice. That is all.

Here, I raise another question—how much eager are we really to attain Brahminhood? Before I give an answer, let me ask you: What is the antonym of Brāhmana? Is it *Shudra*? No. It is *kripāna*, because it is said in the *Gītā* (2.49)—‘*Kripanāh phala-hetavah*’—‘Those who work for selfish gains are indeed pitiable.’ A true Brāhmana does not work for personal gains, for he is desireless. For this reason Rabindranath, the great poet, also has said that we have to be twice-born or *dvija*. We have been born from the mother's womb. That is our first birth. But then we have to be reborn in a world of freedom. The poet says, ‘The one birth of man relates to oneself and the other relates to all.’ Why? Because I am in everyone and in everything. That justifies my self-sacrifice and being ethical. When others suffer, it is I who suffer. That is because, as the Upanishad declares ‘*Aham brahma asmi*’—‘I am Brahman.’ As the gospel of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda is saturated with this great Upanishadic truth, it has become a dynamic spiritual discipline for self-liberation. All communities and sects have recognized today the social responsibilities of the sannyasins.

Therefore, there is no doubt that unselfish service is necessary for the realization of the Self. The Ramakrishna Mission has been trying to fulfil that necessity around the world. The variety of its works and the method of their execution are for all to see. Its programme of work covers all aspects of life. It distributes food and dress to the needy, gives education, constructs homes for the homeless, imparts spiritual knowledge and tries to

enrich cultural life. Doing good to the world and liberation of the Self—these two goals are equally important to the Ramakrishna Mission.

### **The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark**

I have already mentioned the importance of culture in our life. Once again I like to stress that its all-round improvement is now extremely and urgently needed because, in spite of having a mind and intellect, if we surrender ourselves to the tyranny of matter it will mean '*mahati vinashthi*' or total ruin as the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* proclaims (4.4.14). To avert this ruination, to save mankind from the jaws of materialism, Swami Vivekananda in his early youth had left his kith and kin virtually on the breadline. He himself said that in order to achieve this goal he and his brother-disciples had to face the ferocious lion of materialism. There was no other way to unfurl the triumphal flag of Consciousness (ie victory of Spirit over matter) throughout the world. Swamiji has changed the definition of materialism totally by declaring that materialism does not mean handling matter, it means sacrificing man for matter. It is a fact that human well-being will remain a far cry unless intelligence is freed from the clutches of illusive materialism. Hence, the Ramakrishna Mission gives great emphasis on the dissemination of culture.

In the early years of the Ramakrishna Movement the Mission had no permanent cultural centre worth that name. To remove this want, after the year-long celebration of the birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna (1936-37), a decision was taken at a meeting in 1934 to set up a cultural centre wedded to the spread of a culture that will foster religious harmony and universal brotherhood. Accordingly, the Ramakrishna

Mission Institute of Culture was founded on 29 January, 1938. This institute was shifted four times from place to place and eventually the present magnificent building at Golpark as a centre of universal culture was inaugurated on 1 November, 1961, by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Swami Nityaswarupanandaji was its first Secretary.

This Institute is now one of the most renowned and popular centres where different cultures and religions of the world are studied analytically. The purpose of such research and study is to strengthen the bond of mutual understanding and fellowship among different cultures. On 13 November, 1961, with this end in view The School of Humanistic and Intercultural Studies was set up at the Institute.

The Central Government has always maintained a supportive attitude to the Institute for obvious reasons. Although the Government has a separate department called the Ministry of Culture, it has no centre as such for the dissemination of culture among the common people. In fact, in this field, this Institute seems to fulfil a very special responsibility on behalf of the Centre, as it were, and the Central Government is well aware of the role this Institute has been playing for over eight decades.

Here, at the Institute, a very special kind of worship—the worship of knowledge and wisdom—is being conducted daily by a handful of sannyasins with the active cooperation of many participants, volunteers and the devotees. Here distinguished educationists, scholars and religious leaders from different parts of India and other countries regularly deliver lectures on a wide variety of subjects. Many scholars also are engaged in the Indology Department. The Institute maintains a shrine and Meditation

Hall, a huge Library and a sprawling reading-room, a museum, art gallery for holding exhibitions, an Art School for children, art appreciation courses for art enthusiasts, a printing press for the publication of books and the monthly journal *Bulletin*, and an International Scholars' House. Over and above all these, the Institute has a School of Languages where about 10,000 students come everyday to learn more than a dozen Indian and foreign languages. There is also a Counselling Department for helping youths who suffer from various kinds of mental inconveniences and a department that conducts value-education courses based on Swamiji's man-making ideals. The Institute also arranges international seminars and musical functions. There is also a Science Circle for the promotion and broadening of scientific knowledge among the common people.

In these multifarious ways the Institute has been trying to keep the light of knowledge blazing steadily. Let all people be benefited by this light physically, mentally and intellectually and evolve into higher and higher levels of consciousness is our prayer. We invite all to come and see this 'wonder' of Kolkata. Swamiji said: 'We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran.' (*C.W.* Vol. VI, p. 416.) We always keep in mind this great goal underlined by Swamiji. It is not too much to say that. This Institute is a visible form of Swami Vivekananda.

The task we carry out is obviously quite tough. Sometimes we may commit mistakes, but our humble request to those who criticize us from outside—please get in,

see everything with your own eyes; and then if you find anything objectionable, criticize the Institute, we have no objection.

Before I conclude let me refer to an incident. You know, we have to rush to New Delhi every three or five years to receive the grant the Centre gives us. But before the grant is sanctioned we have to appear before the Review Committee where normally five or six IAS officers belonging to the State and Central Government remain present. We have to face a barrage of questions from them. For example, one such query is: 'We are giving money and getting the proper accounts from you. Fine! But tell us exactly, how many people have become cultured last year as a result of your activities?'

A very difficult question indeed! However, 'The Mother' saves us and promptly provides a clue. We say: 'Sir, a cultured person is expected to be non-violent, truthful, non-covetous, desireless and so on. These are the yardsticks. Maybe, you and I are honest right now. But can we say with certainty what will happen to us after two years? Who does not take a wrong step? Only he who is perfect and has attained the highest consciousness. So how can we pass a fixed opinion about the mental state of any person? We only pray for all and go on working. There is always a danger where the mind and the intellect are not inspired and pure. So, we provide all with good thoughts and ideas and serve them with unflinching zeal.'

We need *buddhi-yoga* or enlightened intelligence. Out of that kind of intelligence only dawns a pure mind and this purity is the quintessence of culture which is higher than material civilization. ■

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