

## A Manifestation of the Divine Will

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**S**wami Vivekananda, after his epoch-making first visit to the West, came back to India and landed at Colombo on 15 January 1897. His lectures from Colombo to Almora had a tremendous impact in recharging and reigniting the minds of the youth of a vanquished, subjugated and sleeping nation. It is amazing how an unknown young monk became a national hero! Swamiji began his mission to awaken the sleeping nation with the clarion calls of Vedanta: 'Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!' 'Strength, strength is what the Upanishads speak to me from every page.' 'Be not weak.' 'Stand up and be strong.' Swamiji soon felt the need of a man-making organization and a new monastic order to carry forward the message of Vedanta. So on this day, 127 years back, Ramakrishna Mission Association was founded. In a few years it had given rise to two closely connected Institutions namely (a) Ramakrishna Math (b) Ramakrishna Mission. Today with the hindsight, we wonder: Was it only the foundation of an Association or a manifestation of the Divine Will?

Let us for a moment, look at the socio-religious situation prevailing in the 19th century. Scores of bright students, leaving Hinduism, under the influence of Derozio, formed 'Young Bengal', for whom Hinduism was synonymous with superstition and idolatry. Among the educated Hindus, there were neo-reformers and intellectuals full of criticism against a caste-bound, priest-ridden Hinduism. On the other hand, there were 'don't touchists' with irrational orthodoxy.

And the common masses were engulfed in abject poverty. The main architect of Indian Education, Lord Macaulay wrote in 1836, 'If our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater (Hindu) among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence.' Ironically, in the same year we see the Holy Birth of *Avatāra Varishtha* Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa Dev, centring whose life and teachings a vibrant 'Hindu Renaissance' would develop within a short time. In this most critical period, the Lord incarnated Himself to fulfil His eternal promise: '*Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata / Abhyutthānamadharmaḥ tadātmānam srijāmyaḥ*' // (Gītā 4.7) And where did he express himself? Not in an obscure village, but in the heart of Calcutta, by far the most advanced city in British India. And who were the persons meeting Him? The top scholars of the university, doctors, philosophers, preachers, Āchāryas of Brahmo Samaj, Mahantas of different Hindu sects and many others, high and low.

The seeds of the 'Ramakrishna Order' were also sown by Thakur Himself at Kashipur, first by uniting the young disciples under one roof and choosing Narendranath as their leader; and then, by giving them on Makar Sankranti Day, 12 January 1886, the ochre clothes and rosaries meant for monks. They put on those clothes and saluted the Master. The Master was pleased to see them in monastic cloth and blessed them. The disciples who received the clothes were Narendra, Rakhal, Niranjan, Baburam, Shashi, Sharat, Kali, Jogin, Latu, Tarak and Gopal.

The twelfth set was kept aside for 'Bhakta Bhairav' Sri Girish Chandra Ghosh.

Sister Nivedita, the greatest exponent of the works of Swami Vivekananda, mentioned: 'Often it appears to me—that there has been with us a soul named Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.' Swamiji himself also explained, to his disciple Sarat Chandra Chakravarti, how, Thakur, in Samādhi, had literally transmitted from His body a subtle force, like an electric shock to Naren's body, making him unconscious. Gaining consciousness, he found Sri Ramakrishna shedding tears of joy and telling him affectionately, 'Today, giving you my all, I have become a Fakir. With this power you are to do many works for the world's good before you will return.' Swamiji continued, 'I feel that power is constantly directing me to do this or that work. This body has not been made for remaining idle.' To a brother disciple (Swami Ramakrishnananda) he wrote from America: 'While I am on earth, Shri Ramakrishna is working through me. So long as you believe in this, there is no danger of any evil for you.' (*Letters of Swami Vivekananda*, p. 203, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati)

In the modern spiritual history of mankind, Swamiji's appearance at the World Parliament of Religions is regarded as a turning point. But first let us look at the absurdity of the situation. The Parliament of Religions was held in connection with the World's Columbian Exposition in the city of Chicago from September 11 to 27, 1893, with elaborate preparations. The news was heralded to all parts of the globe. Arrangements for invitation, reception and other formalities for delegates were made over a long period. However, the disciples who had sent the Swami to the Parliament were unaware of these details. They had simply recognized the worth of the man and his ideas. So we find, Swami Vivekananda sailed for the new world of America as an uninvited, unheralded, unknown monk with little monetary support, but with

full confidence and unperturbed mind. How was it possible? What was his strength? Who was he? The Man of Destiny? A Prophet from the East?

We get the best possible explanation from the well-researched writings of Marie Louise Burke, not in her famous six-volume *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, but in an article, published in *Prabuddha Bharata*, March 1979 issue. Describing the contemporary period she writes: 'Doubt had set in: morality had lost its divine sanction' and 'Dharma was in decline in the last decades of nineteenth century.' And then quoting the *Gītā*, she concludes it was the time for the Lord to manifest Himself. The Lord did so in the Western world with an appropriate flourish, setting the stage for His appearance there, or more accurately, for the appearance of His Prophet, with a grand assembly of prelates from all over the world. A resonance of this vision is made clear, when, before leaving for America, Swamiji told Swami Turiyananda at Mount Abu, 'The Parliament of Religions is being organized for this (pointing out to himself). My mind tells me so. You will see it verified at no distant date.'

Was the grand Parliament of Religions with its lengthy and elaborate preparations all for a young unknown Hindu Monk? To everyone except his brother monks and disciples, the very idea would have seemed preposterous! But by the time the Parliament was over, it was clear to everyone that Swami Vivekananda, 'an orator by divine right', was the star of the show. And indeed, there seems to have been very little lasting good accomplished by this vast assemblage of ecclesiastical personages except to *introduce the Swami to the Western World at one go*. Through hindsight, it almost seems to have been planned by a master planner in response to the profound need of the age.

We also know how the Harvard University Professor John Henry Wright, before writing the introductory letter for

Swamiji, somewhat like Swamiji's young Madras-disciples, wondered: 'Who can ask the Sun the credential to shine?' The Western Vedantists saw in him the presence of the Living Christ. In San Francisco, Dr H. M. Logan, his host, wrote: 'To me he is "The Christ"..... Great teachers bowed reverently at his feet, the humble followed reverently to kiss the hem of his garments; no other single human being was revered more during his life than was Vivekananda' (Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda His Second Visit to the West: New Discoveries*, pp. 563-64). Josephine MacLeod to whom Vivekananda revealed most of his epoch-making and prophetic dimension mentions in her reminiscences: 'I have fulfilled the mission I was born for.' (and what was that mission?) The 'recognition of the new Buddha.'

So when this modern Christ or Buddha or the soul of his Master returned back and wanted to form Ramakrishna Mission Association, it was not for starting a new society or a charitable organisation. *It was certainly a manifestation of the Divine Will*. Even a few of his brother disciples had some initial doubts whether Swamiji was applying Western methods without following Thakur's teachings. To this Swamiji replied, 'Sri Ramakrishna is far greater than his disciples understand him to be. He is the embodiment of infinite spiritual ideas capable of development in infinite ways. (But) if this time he chooses, to work through me, making me his instrument, I can only bow to his will.' It was Swamiji who saw in his Master, not only the apostle of realization and renunciation, but also, of service to humanity in the spirit of worship.

On 9 December 1898, Naren, followed by his brother disciples and devotees, carried literally on his shoulders the ashes of his Master to the sacred ground of Belur, for the consecration of Sri Ramakrishna Math. The ceremony over, Vivekananda felt there the vibrant presence of the great incarnation of power. He became prophetic and said: 'The spiritual force emanating from here will permeate the whole world, turning the current of men's activities and aspirations into new channels. From here will be disseminated ideals harmonizing Jnana, Bhakti, Yoga, and Karma.' Earlier he had defined the motto of the Ramakrishna Order: *Ātmano Mokshārtham Jagat Hitāya Cha*. He saw prophetically, this would create a new order of monks, who with all the spiritual excellences would spontaneously serve the world, especially the *daridra nārāyan*, establish a harmony among religions, spiritualise civilisations and practise and preach the new religion of '*Shiva Jnāne Jiva Sevā*': Service to God in Man.

The new Math now virtually consumed him. He himself took scriptural classes for the monks and insisted upon strict discipline and hard austerity in the Math's routine. He dictated the rules for the Math, every word meditated and deliberated with a prophetic foresight in order to ensure its safe journey through the vicissitudes of centuries to come. Sister Nivedita wrote in her famous Introduction to the 'Complete Works' of Swamiji: 'These, then—the Shastras, the Guru, and the Motherland—are the three notes that mingle themselves to form the music of the works of Vivekananda.' We find the expressions of all these three, here, in the functioning of this Divine Institution—Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. ■

\* Sri Ramsevak Bandyopadhyay IAS (Retired), former Secretary, Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Govt. of India, delivered this speech at Belur Math on 1 May 2024, on the occasion of 128th Foundation Day of the Ramakrishna Mission.