

Swami Bhajananda

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## RAMAKRISHNA MONASTICISM AND THE CHANGING HINDU ETHOS

### *The Evolving Ethos*

The ethos of a people, a term originally used by F.H. Bradley, refers to the fundamental character or spirit of a culture. It is the underlying sentiment that informs the beliefs, customs and practices of a group or society. Every ethnos or race has its own distinctive ethos. The texture of Indian ethos consists of the warp and woof of a number of ethnic groups with caste as its dominant motif. Out of this mosaic ethnos and supported by it arose the Hindu religion which is not one single religion but, like its parent base, a federation of beliefs, symbols, experiences and practices.

It is now accepted by a large number of modern social thinkers that religion is not merely an important factor of the social scene but the very life and spirit of society. It is not one of the products of culture but the producer of a culture. Religion is the seed and culture is the tree. According to Christopher Dawson:

We are just beginning to understand how intimately and profoundly the vitality of any society is bound up in its religion. It is the religious impulse which supplies the cohesive force which unifies the society and the culture. The great civilizations of the world do not produce the great religions as a kind of cultural by-product: in a very real sense, the great religions are the foundation in which the great civilizations rest. A society which has lost its religion becomes sooner or later a society which has lost its culture.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Christopher Dawson, *Inquiries into Religion and Culture* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1957) p. 295.

Hindu culture is not a relic of the past like Egyptian and Greek cultures. It is a living and dynamic force which has been undergoing dialectical changes. And invariably, the impulse for these dialectical changes has come from religion. The Marxian concept of dialectics is one of conflict and violence. The Indian concept is one of complementarity, synthesis and tolerance.<sup>2</sup> This peaceful form of dialectics is nowadays styled as dialogue. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* refers to several types of dialectical complementarity. Father and mother are not conflicting characters but complementary to each other and out of their union arise progeny. The contact of teacher and disciple gives rise to *pravachana* or instruction.<sup>3</sup> The *Sāṅkhya* philosophy speaks of the *Puruṣa* and the *Prakṛiti* co-existing peacefully and the whole creation springing out of that juxtaposition.

The Vedic religion was characterized by naive faith, prayer and rituals. But along with it there existed a school of rational thinking known as the *Sāṅkhya*. Out of their interaction came the Upanishads. Then arose the *Bhāgavata* cult with its teachings of *Bhakti*, and a group of scriptures called the *Pāñcharātra Agama*. The result of the interaction of *Jnana* and *Bhakti* was the *Bhagavad-Gīta*, the finest flower of Hindu spirituality. Buddhism introduced new elements into Indian culture. Its best elements were soon integrated into Hindu philosophy by Sankara, and the result was the *Advaita* philosophy. In this way, down the centuries, dialectical complementarity has been going on as a continuous process in Hindu religion leading to the creation of the multifaceted Indian culture.

The last phase of this integration process was the encounter of Hindu religion with European culture which took place towards the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was the most critical and important cultural event in the age-old history of India. British domination of India dragged Hindu society into the stream of European culture with its ideals of dignity of labour, work efficiency, organisation, democratic justice and casteless, open society. Secondly, it broke the Hindu's intellectual isolation and exposed it to the positivist philosophies of the West, science and techno-

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2. cf. John B Chethimattam, *Dialogue in Indian Tradition* (Bangalore: Dharmaram College, 1969) p. 7.

3. *Taittiriya Upanishad*, I. iii. 1-4

logy. Lastly, it introduced Hindus to a new dimension of religious consciousness in Christianity.

The result of this cultural encounter was the inauguration of a renaissance in Indian society. As it had happened during the earlier phases, this time also the auto-corrective impulse came from the Hindu religion itself. It threw up reform movements like the *Brahmo Samaj*, the *Arya Samaj* and the *Ramakrishna movement*.

### *Ramakrishna Monasticism*

The force which leads and sustains the Ramakrishna movement is a new type of monasticism connected with two sister institutions known as the Ramakrishna Order and the Ramakrishna Mission. The Ramakrishna Order<sup>4</sup> is a purely monastic organization of unmarried, ordained Hindu Sannyasins. It was originally founded by Sri Ramakrishna himself towards the end of his life in 1886 when he initiated a group of his young disciples into Sannyasa and sent them to beg their food—mendicancy being a traditional symbol of total renunciation. After his death, sixteen of his young disciples under the leadership of Swami Vivekananda formed themselves into a brotherhood which was registered as a religious body in 1901. The other institution, called the Ramakrishna Mission, was founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1897 and registered in 1909. It is a purely philanthropic organisation, involving the active co-operation of a large number of lay people but controlled by a body of monks of the Order specially nominated for that purpose. At present the Mission runs 10 indoor hospitals, 67 outdoor dispensaries, 4 degree colleges, 3 B. Ed. colleges, 9 technical institutes, more than fifty schools, a blind boys' academy and an international institute in Calcutta for inter-cultural understanding. But its most important activity which has earned for it unstinted praise from the government and the public is the relief work carried out by it during times of famine, flood, drought, epidemics and other calamities.

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4. By this term the canonical distinction between 'Order' and 'congregation' in the Catholic Church is not implied. The correct Sanskrit equivalent ought to have been 'Sangha' but the Order is now known simply as the 'Math'. Similarly, the term 'monk' is often used in this article as an equivalent of 'Sannyasin', and the Catholic distinction of religious into monk, friar, canon, clerk-regular etc. is not implied.

What distinguishes the Ramakrishna Order from the Ramakrishna Mission (popularly both are called the 'Ramakrishna Mission') is that the former is connected with the cult of Sri Ramakrishna, who is worshipped as an *Avatar* in all Ramakrishna *Ashramas*. This also distinguishes the Order from traditional Hindu monastic orders. Hindu *sadhus* (holy men) belong to three broad groups: the *Dasanāmis* (consisting of ten orders: Giri, Puri, Tirtha, etc.), who are the followers of Shankara and accept *Advaita* as their philosophy of life; the *Vairāgis*, who are mostly followers of Rāmānuja (a few are followers of Chaitanya) and worship Vishnu or Krishna or Rama; and a non-descript group consisting of *yogis*, *munis*, wandering minstrels, etc.<sup>5</sup> Among these, the *Dasanāmis* wear ochre clothes (excepting the *Nāgas*, who go about naked) and shave their heads. The *Vairāgis* generally wear white or yellow clothes (excepting a few, especially the heads of Vaishnava Maths in South India, who wear ochre robes) and keep a tuft of hair on their heads. Monks of the Ramakrishna Order, technically speaking, belong to one of the *Dasanāmi* Orders.

The headquarters of the Ramakrishna Order is at Belur, near Calcutta. The authority of the whole Order is vested with a Board of Trustees elected for life from among the seniormost monks. There is a General President for the whole Order who is the spiritual head; and a General Secretary who control administration. The superiors of individual *āshramas* are called *Mahants* or Presidents. There is an Advisory Board of lay devotees, usually prominent citizens, connected with every *āshrama*, and this not only assures the support of the local people but exercises a regulatory function. The monks, novices and superiors are transferred from one house to another according to necessity. The individual and corporate life of the monks is governed by a rule originally framed by Swami Vivekananda himself. All the inmates are encouraged to live like a single family united by love for one another and devotion to God. Lay devotees too are looked upon as belonging to the same spiritual family and a large number of them, usually unmarried young men, do a lot of voluntary service in the *Ashramas* and Mission centres in many ways. The connection of lay devotees to the Order is strengthened by *mantra diksha* or spiritual initiation (compulsory for all monastic inmates) given by President-General of the Order.

5. For details of Hindu monastic Orders, refer G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1953).

Admission to the Order is open, irrespective of caste and creed, to anyone who is between 18 and 25 years of age, possesses good health, good character, and a monastic temperament; is willing to do any kind of service, and above all, has faith in Sri Ramakrishna. After a year of pre-probationership and two years of probationership he is sent to the monastic training college at Belur Math for a two year study of Hindu religion and philosophy. On completion of the course, he takes his vows and becomes a *brahmachari*. There are twelve vows the most important of which are chastity, poverty and service. Four years after that (i.e. after a total period of nine years' novitiate), if found fit, the *brahmachari* is ordained into *sannyasa* at a ceremony conducted at the Math house in Belur, on the anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna's birthday. He receives his ochre-coloured habit and a new name, and begs food in the neighbourhood for three days as a symbolic act.

Hindu monastic houses are of three types: the *Ashrama*, the *Math*, and the *Akhāda*. The *Ashrama* is the most ancient form. It is usually a small unit consisting of a Guru and a few disciples living under a temporary shelter. In ancient days the inmates of *ashramas* were seldom monks. The early Hindu monks usually led a wandering (*parivrājaka*) life.

The second type of monastic institution is the *Math*. Sankara first established four Maths in four parts of India. Later on, Ramana and Madhva founded their own maths. Unlike the *Ashrama*, the *Math* is a permanent dwelling house with vast endowments but is meant for only a single monk. He is more like a Catholic bishop or archbishop with a definite area as his jurisdiction, which he frequently tours giving spiritual instruction to people. However, a few Maths in North India have many monks and have arrangements for providing food and education of the inmates.

The third institution is the *Akhādā*, which is a large monastery accommodating hundreds of monks, mostly Naga (naked) ascetics, who are the Hindu version of European Knights Templars of the Middle Ages.

Ramakrishna Ashramas do not fit into any of the monastic patterns mentioned above. Absence of mendicancy, modern education of monastic members, social service, a sense of mission, and a well-knit brotherhood working in liaison with a devoted community of lay people—these are some of the features of a Ramakrishna Ashrama which distinguish it from traditional Hindu āshramas. The monks and novices follow a regulated daily routine

in which contemplation, worship, studies and manual work have their proper places; meals are taken together, and at least twice a day there is a common prayer and āraṭi (waving of light).

### *Charismatic Features of Ramakrishna Monasticism*

Though the Ramakrishna Order has on its rolls only about a thousand monks, it has become one of the most influential and respected religious organizations in India. Without any fanfare and propaganda, but in a subtle and pervasive way, its message has been reaching the people, especially the intelligentsia, through the 119 branch centres of the Order and Mission—88 in India and 31 abroad. In the course of its comparatively short existence of eighty years, the Mission has won the confidence of the people and the Government and secured high praise for the quality of work done by the monks. Some of the factors that have contributed to this popularity and acceptance are discussed below:

#### *i. Symbol of Indian Spiritual Renaissance*

We have already spoken about the crisis that faced Hindu culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and also about the auto-corrective reform movements that originated in Hindu religion. One of the reasons why some of these reform movements did not achieve much success and for long, was their failure to understand the logic of the dialectical complementarity in the growth-process of Indian culture. The peculiar ethos of the people demands that the development of Indian culture should take place not by exclusion but by integration and absorption. The reform movements rejected not only some of the fundamental philosophic doctrines which the Hindu culture had developed through centuries of growth, but also its primordial symbols, myths, beliefs, customs and rituals, and thus broke away from the collective unconscious of the race. By neglecting *yoga* and contemplation they lost their spiritual roots. These mistakes the Ramakrishna movement avoided, and thus came to be accepted as representing the progressive trend of the *whole* of Hinduism. In fact, it came on scene more as a counter-reformation than as a reformation. The rise of the Ramakrishna movement coincided with the political awakening in India, and the stirring eloquence of Vivekananda

“came as a tonic to the depressed and demoralised Hindu mind and gave it self-reliance and some roots in the past”,<sup>6</sup> and gave it recognition as the symbol of Indian spiritual renaissance.

## ii. *Spirit of Modernisation*

Though the Ramakrishna movement accepted all that was best in the ancient traditions of Hinduism, it nevertheless attempted to infuse a modern spirit into it. This modernization process took place along the following lines:

a) The first problem to be tackled was a proper definition and identity of Hindu religion which had never even a name, and had become a welter of hundreds of doctrines, creeds, faiths, sects—some living, some dead—all tied loosely to one another by a common cultural base. There was, however, one main strand which ran through all this conglomeration, and that was the Vedanta system of philosophy. Though Hindu philosophy is said to have six schools, the Vedanta school triumphed over the rest, mainly through the efforts of Shankara, and got identified with Hindu religion. All subsequent teachers also accepted Vedanta as the sole surviving philosophy of Hindu religion. Following this tradition, the Ramakrishna movement identified Hindu religion with Vedanta. It accepted the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* as the basic scriptures, and through translations and discourses began to popularise them. The early centres of the Ramakrishna Order in the West were named “Vedanta Centres”, and not “Ramakrishna Ashramas”.

b) The second task was to provide the people with a set of viable religious doctrines embodying the life-giving principles of Hinduism and in a language which they could understand. A study of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Gita* and the epics, shows that the Hindu outlook on life, originally, was one of acceptance and participation. *Sannyasa* or total renunciation was adopted as the fourth stage of life only at a comparatively later period, and even then restricted to a small group.<sup>7</sup> Asceticism,

6. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India* (New York: John Day Company, 1946) p. 338.

7. P. V. Kane, *The History of Hindu Dharma Sastra* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1941) Vol. I, Part (i), p. 416-24.

world-denial and pessimism became the keynote of Hindu religion only during the Middle Ages when it lost its political dominance and social harmony. Though Shankara had restricted his teaching to a narrow section of scholarly orthodox Hindus, and his *adbikarivada* (doctrine of qualification) had excluded mass propagation of his philosophy, *Advaita* soon became the forbidden fruit which everyone was eager to taste. For the disinherited, frustrated people of the country, the theory of *Maya* became a dope, and it considerably altered their attitude towards life.

What the Ramakrishna monks did was to re-interpret the basic tenets of Hinduism in order to provide the people with a practical, positive philosophy of life. *Maya* theory was played down, unity in diversity was emphasized, *Bhakti*, *Jnana*, and *Karma* were harmonized; experience was stressed more than revelation; the struggle for *moksha* or 'liberation' was interpreted as the existential problem of freedom. The result of all this chiselling was to give a new profile to Vedanta.

### iii. Social Commitment

Another important factor which has contributed to the popularity of the Ramakrishna Mission is its active interest in the social welfare of the country. Social service conducted by the Ramakrishna Mission has the following distinctive features.

The first one is the creation of a new work-ethic. Hindu spirituality had always looked down upon *karma* (work) as an expendable first step. Traditional sannyasins considered themselves above this need, and even thought that serving another man was degrading to a monk. The orthodox among them looked askance at the Mission sadhus working in their newly-started hospitals, and sometimes taunted them as "Bhangi Sadhus" (the Hindi word Bhangi means a sweeper or scavenger). Ramakrishna Mission raised *karma* to the level of worship—worship of God in man. This was not exactly a new idea—it forms the central message of the *Gita*—but it had had very little practical application. Further, the new work-ethic meant not only service of one's fellow-men, but also the divinization of all secular activities. Here some of the ideas of Vivekananda come very close to those of Teilhard de Chardin.

The second aspect of the Mission's social commitment is its focus on the masses. Social reform in nineteenth century India



had been restricted to idol worship, widow marriage, child marriage, and similar problems, which affected only the upper strata of Hindu society. More than seventy per cent of the population was as it still is—utterly poor, eking out the humblest forms of living. It was to these sunken millions that the Ramakrishna Mission first directed its service activities, and uplift of the masses has always been the chief concern of the Mission institutions.

The third aspect of the Mission's social commitment is its attitude towards caste. The peculiar ethos of Hindu society is such that any attempt to destroy caste will only add one more caste to the already existing ones! The problem of caste is a very complex one, and denunciation of it alone will not solve it. The Ramakrishna Order not only admits into its fold men of all castes and creeds, but also encourages castelessness within the circle of its lay devotees. But it does not openly denounce caste, rather it tries to work within the framework of caste. Its idea of creating a casteless society is not by 'levelling down' but by 'levelling up'—not by pulling down those who are already high up, but by raising those who are low to higher levels of culture. The original meaning of the Brahmin ideal was the creation of a community of spiritual men, and what the Mission does is to make this ideal practicable for all people.

The fourth aspect of the Mission's social commitment is its complete aloofness from politics. The monks do not even exercise their vote in the general elections or celebrate the Indian Independence Day. During India's freedom struggle, when the Mission discreetly kept away from all political activities, many of its well-wishers feared that might damage its future interest. On the contrary, this only increased its credibility as a purely spiritual, social welfare organization.

Finally, social commitment has necessitated the abandonment of certain traditional ways of monastic life like mendicancy, asceticism, and Guru cult. The Ramakrishna monks wear tailored garments, eat balanced meals at fixed times, use footwear, live in their own well-furnished modern buildings, work as teachers, doctors, book-sellers etc., keep audited accounts, read newspapers, and speak English, which is the common link-language of the Order.

iv. *Spirit of Harmony and Acceptance*

Another distinctive feature of the Ramakrishna movement is its central belief that one supreme Spirit is known in different religions and sects under different names, and that all spiritual paths when followed with purity of heart and sincerity will ultimately lead to God-experience. The theoretical details of this important doctrine have not yet been worked out, but as a symbolic act of acceptance of it, the worship of the Buddha and Christ is conducted in all Ramakrishna Ashramas. Further, the monks study the Bible, the Buddhist scriptures, the works of Christian mystics and Sufis, and try to popularize the universal principles of all religions. This liberal attitude has given Ramakrishna monasticism the image of a non-sectarian, non-communal spiritual influence in the rapidly changing Hindu society.