

# **The Life and Thought of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa: A Spiritual Journey**

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“ Having overcome ego, passion, greed, anger and desire, one becomes worthy of one's own being, the Supreme Being” ( Bhagavat Gita, Chapter 18, verse 53)

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The million dollar question which is uppermost in the minds of most men and women who are not familiar either with the Indian spiritual tradition or with the lives of her great prophets is, who is Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa ? Why is he so famous and universally acclaimed as a seer ? There are different theories and interpretations of the identity and mission of Sri Ramakrishna, but none is adequate enough to unravel the whole truth , his legacy and prophecy, his vision and philosophy. None can explain the veil of mystery surrounding his life and personality which radiated through robust spiritual energy in a span of only about 52 years at the height of the well - known Bengal Renaissance of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An eclectic, an ascetic, sage ,seer , prophet, an unlettered Brahmin priest, worshipper of the Goddess, a devoted Hindu, an unorthodox and eccentric thinker and so on and so forth. No description of this quintessential life can sum up the totality of his being and his prophecy.

The life and thought of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa have been explored by thousands of scholars and admirers in the last hundred and twenty five years in an endless sequence starting with Swami Vivekananda( 1863-1902), his most famous disciple. It was an amazing spiritual journey from a village rustic to a great prophet for all mankind and for all time. It was not a systematic and conscious life and he never constructed an academic philosophy in a conscious manner in metaphysical terms. Nor did he do any extraordinary thing apart from the

performance of daily worship of the Goddess and discourse with his near and dear ones. His thought and ideas simply flowed spontaneously from his heart and soul in a refreshingly simple and resplendent language which would be intelligible to the men of ordinary capabilities and intellect. He endlessly immersed himself in the ocean of his spiritual thinking, sometimes suffering from ecstasy and delirium, and sometime getting lost in a world of pure bliss and highest spiritual consciousness.

Sri Rama Krishna Paramahansa encountered many challenges and resistance from his contemporaries, the orthodox Brahmins, the Christian missionaries, the BrahmoSamaj, the so called young radicals and Westernized, English educated Bengali middle class intellectuals etc. who were questioning each and every Hindu scripture and refusing to accept sainthood as well polytheistic idol worship. He took everything in his own way and answered each and every question in a manner hardly seen or done before. He continued to remain calm and dispassionate to all these currents and cross-currents of the 19<sup>th</sup> century schools of thought, worshipping and meditating with utmost devotion and sincerity in the hallowed temple built by Rani Rashmoni (1793-1861). He was, in fact, a spiritual reformer who succeeded in transforming and humanizing traditional Hinduism in the face of great challenges posed by the critics and fanatics.

The life and thought of Sri Rama Krishna can be summed up in few words: Do good and be good and heaven is not to be found in the sky or in the clouds but in this existential world of all living creatures. His message that service to man is ultimately a service to God means service to all humans, rich and the poor, the enlightened and the ignorant, the superior and the inferior, the healthy and the sick, the sufferers and the victims without difference or discrimination ( Swami Saradananda, 1920). He had the most liberal and secular mind which was searching for the unity of all men, races, religions, creed and faith. He had the vision of God in all living creatures and he was propagating a philosophy of humanism for those materialists who were devoid of spiritual and human feeling. The great master had infinite ability to transform men and women as we know. The skeptics, the non-believers, the ignorant realized it when they came into contact with him.

The religion and philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna are based on the fundamental concepts of equality of men and women, gender justice and women's empowerment, secular humanism and service to mankind through performance of duties. He did not believe in renunciation but

emphasized peaceful social co-existence. Men and women , living in our society, should not abdicate their duties to the society. Spirituality and divinity can be attained or achieved by living in the society and not by renouncing this world. Sri Ramakrishna told Rani Rashmoni to initiate social reforms and welfare activities for women and the downtrodden. He advised Swami Vivekananda to attain knowledge and enlightenment to light up the mind and soul and to educate the people. Truth, according to him, is God and belief in the Universal Soul. Swamiji subsequently expanded the vision and horizon of Sri Rama Krishna's philosophy by stressing the need for education, enlightenment and uplift of the people, especially women.

Sri Ramakrishna's vision of empowerment of women is evident from his worship of Sri SriSarada Devi, his wife, as the incarnation of Universal Motherhood. Sri Ramakrishna movement opposed all the evils and vices of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal, like casteism, untouchability, communalism, patriarchy, Brahminical despotism, fanaticism, dogmatism and intolerance. The movement was directed towards the establishment of a free, secular and liberal society through restructuring of traditional Hinduism.

Swami Vivekananda was initially introduced to Sri Ramakrishna in November 1881 when they met each other at the house of Sri Surendranath Mitra, a wealthy and influential devotee of the great prophet. At that time Swamiji was not very conscious of the power and spirit of the great master, but gradually understood his teachings and acknowledged it in the following words:

“All that I am, all that the world itself will someday be, is owing to my Master Shri Ramakrishna.” ( “ My Master”, 1901)

The religion of humanity as propounded by Sri Rama Krishna is a religion based on devotion , faith and humanitarian work for the poor and the downtrodden. There is no room for caste, creed, sectarianism or dogmatism in such a scheme of things. All roads lead to the same goal and all are free to worship the divine. Communal religion is not an end in itself. His *Kathamrita* or discourses contains the sum and substance of his perennial philosophy which points toward humanity as the manifestation of divinity. In such a philosophy, man is regarded as the incarnation of the divine and God resides in every soul and every form of life. To lead a pure and spiritual life, man must first purge himself of his ego, creed, hatred, jealousy, desire, anger and cruelty. He must rise above his immediate self to be able to see God in everything. He must not distinguish between one religion and another or between one community and another. Just as all

are the same in the eyes of God, so all should be treated equally by the society. Our life or existence is just a passing stage in the unfolding of the universal spiritual consciousness. What we do in this life is everything and this will determine what we want to be. The prophet, the great master, Sri Rama Krishna, being an incarnation of the Lord, is alive today and will remain so for all time to come to lead and inspire us and to light up our whole existence with his divine glow. His life is his message and his message is our timeless treasure which will pull us out of all troubles at every twist and turn of life.

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