INTRODUCTION

SHRI RAMAKRISHNA

The real history of India is the history of the lives of some of her spiritual personalities. It is they who have moulded her life and determined her destiny. On Indian life as a whole, the influence of a Shri Krishna, a Buddha, a Shankaracharya, or a Chaitanya is much more pronounced than the influence of any king or emperor. And it is an interesting phenomenon that at every critical time in the cultural and spiritual life of India there has been born a saint who has saved the country from afatal catastrophe and shown the nation the right direction.

In the beginning of the last century, India was passing through a great crisis. With the impact of Western civilisation and the spread of English education, the Indians began to lose interest and faith in their own culture. Amongst the English-educated people of India there were very few who had a genuine appreciation of Indian culture, though they were born on Indian soil and had the heritage of India's past.

At that time was born, in an out-of-the-way village of Bengal, one whose life was an unconscious but spontaneous and powerful protest against disregard for the value of Indian religion and culture. It was a strange, divine dispensation that while in Calcutta, the then metropolis of India and the citadel of English education, the Christian missionaries were criticising and abusing Hinduism as idolatrous and a large number of English-
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educated Indians even joined or sided directly or indirectly with this proselytising body, Shri Ramakrishna was revitalising the truths of Hinduism by his intense Sādhanā (spiritual endeavour) and wonderful realisations at the temple-garden of Dakshineswar, four miles north of the city. And he soon became the powerful instrument of turning the mind of India again to the strength and beauty of its own religious and cultural heritage.

Shri Ramakrishna was born on 18th February 1836 at Kamarpukur, an obscure village in the district of Hooghly. His parents were pious, orthodox Brahmins, and his family surroundings were such that no ray of Western civilisation had any access there. Shri Ramakrishna was a child of nature, and as a matter of fact, throughout his life he remained such, untouched by the least worldliness. The sight of anything beautiful in nature, or the stirring up of emotion by a religious sentiment, would throw his mind into a superconscious state, and in that condition he would remain for a long time oblivious of his surroundings. While his guardians pressed him to receive education at the village school, the boy found great delight in remaining in the open fields, acting religious dramas with his companions or singing devotional music with them. Finding that his life was going to be spoilt in the village atmosphere, his eldest brother took him to Calcutta, where better facilities might be had for education. But the boy was untractable; he would not undergo the drudgery of an education which was simply a "means of earning bread", though he was athirst for that knowledge which would solve the problem of life and death. His guardian gave up the case as hopeless and let him have his own way.

Shri Ramakrishna was, however, persuaded to take up
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the priestly duties in the temple of Kali at Dakshineswar, which was opened in 1855. Here he found congenial work in an atmosphere which was to his liking. But Shri Ramakrishna’s was not a mind to be satisfied with the routine duties and the mechanical performance of rituals in the temple. As he was offering worship from day to day before the image of Kali, the thought that oppressed him was, “Is She a living presence, or simply a stone image before which I am bowing down every day?” He was passing through a great mental agony, and this simple childlike thought became almost devouring to him. Day and night he would give vent to his feelings in tears till at last he experienced a living and vivid presence in the image far beyond the possibility of any doubt. After that the Goddess Kali—or the Divine Mother as he would call Her—was to him a greater reality than any material object. He would talk to Her, he would pray to Her, he would hear Her voice—nay, he would feel the very breath of Her nostrils. It is not for us to prove how that was possible, but it was a fact for him.

Shri Ramakrishna was not satisfied with a single form of Sadhana, he undertook almost all the forms of spiritual practice advocated by Hinduism in the different periods of its history. So it is said that he represented in one life the whole religious history of India’s past. It was a unique phenomenon. Whereras an aspirant usually undertakes one mode of spiritual practice and considers himself blessed if he can succeed in that, here was one who performed countless forms of Sadhana and in every one attained success in an incredibly short time. Not being content even with that, he practised Islam and realised also the truth of Christianity. Thus he realised
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from his own personal experience that all religions are true and that fundamentally there is no difference between them. This is a teaching on which he laid great emphasis.

During the last few years of his life he lived more in the superconscious than in the conscious plane. He remained constantly in tune with the Infinite, and the slightest thing having the remotest association with any religious idea would throw his mind into ecstasy, in which he would be totally oblivious of his surroundings—nay, of his very bodily existence.

Such being the condition of his mind, any worldly thought was impossible for him. He was the embodiment of renunciation. Even if inadvertently his fingers touched any metallic currency, his whole body would recoil, representing as the coin did to his mind the human desire for sense-pleasure. Though in the world, his mind was beyond the reach of the world. His mind was buried in visions, ecstasies and divine communion.

Such a powerful personality could not remain unknown. People began to flock to him for religious inspiration and for the solution of the deeper problems of life. Persons of diverse types and from different walks of life began to come to him. Kristodas Pal—the great national leader, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee—the great Bengali prose writer, Girish Chandra Ghosh—the great actor-dramatist and the father of the Bengali stage, Dr. Mahendra Lal Sarkar—the great physician, Shashadhar Tarkachudamani—the leader of the orthodox Hindu community and an erudite Sanskrit scholar, Keshab Chandra Sen—the great Brahmo leader, to name only a few, were amongst those prominent men of the day who met him and drank in the words of wisdom that fell from
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his lips. There were innumerable devotees—men and women—whose lives he completely metamorphosed and turned into pure gold. But his chief concern was with a band of disciples, both men and women, whose lives he moulded with particular care for the fulfilment of his future mission.

In the middle of 1885 Shri Ramakrishna fell ill, and for facilities of treatment he had to be removed to Shyampukur in Calcutta in the beginning of October that year. Subsequently, in December, he was taken to a garden-house at Cossipore, where he passed into Mahasamadhi on the 16th August 1886. This sad period, however, served indirectly to strengthen the bond of love among the disciples of the inner circle and gave better opportunity to Shri Ramakrishna to lay the foundation of his future mission surely and adequately. He had to deal with three classes of disciples—the women headed by his own consort Shri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother; the young men led by Narendra Nath who renounced the world afterwards; and the lay disciples like Nag Mahashaya, Girish Chandra Ghosh, and others.

THE HOLY MOTHER

Shri Sarada Devi—the nun-wife of Shri Ramakrishna and familiarly known as the Holy Mother—was born on 22nd December 1853 in Jayrambati, a village not very far from Kamarpukur, the birth-place of Shri Ramakrishna. Though Shri Ramakrishna lived constantly on a high spiritual plane, almost oblivious of his surroundings, he consented to his marriage. It was, however, out of the question for him to live a married life; his mind was always on God, and any worldly thought was excruciat-
ing pain to him. Pure as purity itself, Sarada Devi also had no desire for a life of worldliness. She sympathised with the aspirations of her husband and became a help to him in his spiritual pursuits. All that she wanted was to have the privilege of serving him. That favour she was given in abundance. Shri Ramakrishna, for his part, was extremely considerate to her. He gave her the best spiritual training and clearly hinted that his mantle would fall on her and that she would have to fulfil a spiritual mission. He looked upon her as the veritable manifestation of the Divine Mother, and once actually worshipped her as such.

During the last few years of the life of Shri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi often lived at Dakshineswar and later at Shyampukur and Cossipore. During these years, although she hardly came out of her room or could be seen, her sweetness of character, loving heart and saintliness commanded such respect from the disciples and devotees of Shri Ramakrishna, that they all began to look upon her as their mother.

After Shri Ramakrishna’s departure she passed through a period of great suffering and hardship. But as her divine personality unfolded itself more and more, people began to flock to her in larger numbers for spiritual refuge and shelter. She transformed many lives and brought solace and comfort to hundreds of weary souls. It was a rare privilege to come under her spiritual influence, and people thought it a blessed opportunity to serve her in however slight a measure. But she would hardly take any service from anybody; on the contrary she would, just like a mother, look after the comforts of all who came in contact with her. During the later days she lived partly in Calcutta and partly at her
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parental home at Jayrambh. In spite of the fact that she belonged to a high spiritual plane, she could and would do all the household work just like an ordinary woman of the village. This simplicity of her life gave opportunities to many to mix with her without any awe or fear. But when one got even a faint glimpse of her real spiritual stature, one was overwhelmed.

In the Ramakrishna Order her place is next, if not equal, to that of the Master himself. Swami Vivekananda started for the West on his historic mission only when she gave her permission and blessings. Her word was final in all the important affairs of the Order, and her slightest wish was more than a sacred injunction to every individual. She was virtually the spiritual guide of the Mission as long as she was in her earthly existence. She passed away on 21st July 1920.

THE DISCIPLES

Next to the Holy Mother rank the monastic disciples in spreading the Master's message and giving practical shape to it, with Swami Vivekananda at their head, and the Ramakrishna Math as their centre. When the Great Light disappeared, the lamps that had been kindled by it began to shed lustre in innumerable places. Indeed each monastic disciple of the Master became a centre of wide influence and was instrumental in transforming hundreds of lives. Each one of them was, as the following pages will show, a gigantic spiritual personality—superb in character, unique in achievement, and an asset to humanity. When one considers this, one wonders how so many almost superhuman characters could cluster together at one and the same time. Truly
Shri Ramakrishna was a great jeweller, who could collect so many jewels and leave them as a legacy to the world.

The present volume partially replaces *The Disciples of Ramakrishna* which included the lives of lay disciples also but is now out of print. These “lives”, except that of Swami Vivekananda which is included here for the first time, are reproduced from the earlier book after thorough revision. Originally they were written by different persons. This plan had the advantage of presenting the lives from different representative angles of vision, and thus placing before the reader the best picture possible. The same can be said of this volume as well.

The lives of several disciples being closely interlinked, reference has, of necessity, been made in the book earlier to names of persons about whom details come afterwards. But a glance at the contents will obviate any difficulty that may be experienced on this account. As all the lives centred round the single personality of Shri Ramakrishna, and as many of them had the same or similar background, there have been some unavoidable repetition.

At the end of each chapter except the first, we have also added some teachings of the disciples on religion and spirituality.

For the original writings, we are indebted to Swamis Pavitrananda, Kirtidananda, and Vipulananda.

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Editor