

VIVEKĀNANDA'S RĀMAKRṢṆA: AN UNTOLD STORY  
OF MYTHMAKING AND PROPAGANDA\*

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## Summary

The author argues that the familiar Vedāntin and messiah image of Rāmākṛṣṇa Paramahansa was created deliberately by his great disciple Svāmī Vivekānanda. The Svāmī's global Hindu evangelical mission called for the master's respectable image. Hence he rejected the sincere rendering of the Paramahansa's biographies by others and, in place of the rustic ecstatic but authentic Gadādhara, fabricated the awesome figure of a modern messiah—the Vedāntin Paramahansa. This paper documents the history of this purposive distortion.

## I

The reputation of Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa Paramahansa (1836-86) as a living godman—an *Itarokoti* and an *avatāra*—had been established during his youth, thanks to the efforts of his admiring patron Mathurānohan Bīṣvās and his *tāntrik* mentor, the *Bhairavī* Yogesvarī. Later, the *Brahma* press of Brahmānanda Keśabchandra Sen publicized the *samādhis* and sermons of the Paramahansa. Toward the end of his life, especially following the diagnosis of his throat cancer in April 1885, the saint himself began to insist on his divinity and this claim of his was widely endorsed by his enthusiastic *bhaktas*, particularly men like Vijāyākṛṣṇa Gosvāmī, Girīśandra Choṣ, and above all, Rāmācandra Datta, "one of the earliest among the devotees to hold that Sri Ramakrishna was an incarnation of God."<sup>1</sup>

However, the transformation of Rāmākṛṣṇa from a religious ecstatic to a religious eclectic, especially a Vedāntin prophet of the highest caliber, is an interesting development that calls for a closer scrutiny. Of late some researchers have begun to question the deliberate concealment and distortion of the master's speech and behavior to his disciples and devotees.<sup>2</sup> Not only has Svāmī Nikhīlānanda, the distinguished translator of Mahendranāth (M) Gupta's *Śrīrāmākṛṣṇakāhāṇṭya*, been put on the dock for having

committed the academic crime of commission and omission in his *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, even the celebrated M himself has come under fire from the Chicago scholar, Jeffrey J. Kripal.<sup>3</sup> Yet the brain behind the fabrication of Rāmākṛṣṇa's modern image was his most favorite and famous disciple, Svāmī Vivekānanda (monastic name of Narendranāth Datta, 1863-1902). This paper seeks to chart the history of this distortion.

## II

First of all, we need to take a close and critical look into Narendranāth's religious-spiritual attitudes and academic accomplishments. His biographers agree that as a student Naren was something of a prodigy. Rev. William Hasie, the principal of General Assembly's Institution (later renamed as Scottish Church College), where he studied during 1881-84, reportedly observed: "Narendra is really a genius. I have travelled far and wide but I have never come across a lad of his talents and possibilities, even in German universities, among philosophical students."<sup>4</sup> He is said to have studied the writings of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Johann G. Fichte, Baruch Spinoza, Georg W. F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, John S. Mill, and Charles Darwin. According to Professor Dhar, "among philosophers ... Herbert Spencer was perhaps the greatest favourite." Additionally, we learn that he read some classics in Sanskrit, Bengali, and English. According to some, he was what we might call a "rapid reader", possessed of prodigious memory (*śrutidhara*).<sup>5</sup> He was quick to learn from scholars such as Pramādāś Mītra of Benares, Paṇḍit Sundarlāl of Khetri or Paṇḍit Śankar Pāṇḍurang of Porbandar. In particular, Paṇḍit Pāṇḍurang not only taught him Sanskrit grammar and let him study a variety of subjects in his personal library, but also suggested to him the idea that he should preach the Hindu *sanātana dharmā* ("eternal religion") and Vedic tradition to the Westerners. The Paṇḍit's help and encouragement instilled so much confidence in the young monk that he unhesitatingly told his *gurubhāi* ("monastic cohort"), Svāmī Triguṇātānanda: "Really, there is so much power in me I feel as though I could revolutionize the world."<sup>6</sup>



Even though, coming as he did from a well-to-do urban family and had an affluent and eventful childhood and adolescence spent in riding, swimming, wrestling, playing with sticks and swords, music, and playacting, he was, reportedly, also a spiritual minded individual. On his own admission, he began meditating from the age of seven and even told Sister Niveditā (monastic name of Margaret Noble) that he had experienced *samadhi* as an eight year old boy.<sup>8</sup> He had always been curious to see God and was a worshipper of such Hindu deities as Rāma and Śiva. His spiritual *Angst* as a young man was noted by his senior colleague at college, Brajendranath Śil. In his article, "An Early State of Vivekananda's Mental Development," Śil wrote about the *Surm and Drang* of young Naren's soul, the "hour of the darkest trial" of his life prior to his meeting with Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa.<sup>9</sup>

We must, however, note that information on Vivekānanda's childhood and early youth comes from his devotees and admirers and contemporaries, to whom the Svāmī had described his early life. His remarkable childhood and adolescence have been described in the classic Indian hagiographical style.<sup>10</sup> A problem with such a description is that it is based on Vivekānanda's personal testimony. Anybody familiar with his writings must admit that he had a penchant for the dithyramb—overstatement with highflow rhetoric and hyperbole. He was also often inconsistent in his various pronouncements. Even his biographer brother recognized that Vivekānanda possessed a "complex character" and his "was a life of striking contrasts and moods of infinite variety..."<sup>11</sup>

Rev. Hastie's admiring comments were loving exaggerations at best. Hastie hated Hinduism and Hindus, witness his diatribes against both in his controversy with Barkincandra Captopādhyāya.<sup>12</sup> His comparison of his favorite student with the best of the German academic philosophers is too frivolous to merit attention. And, as for Śil—who was later to attain eminence as a philosopher—his reminiscences published in *Prabuddha Bhāra* (a journal begun by Vivekānanda's disciples in Madras) in 1907 were most certainly an encomium for his erstwhile college mate who had died in 1902 an international celebrity.

No doubt, Naren was an intelligent individual capable of creatively appropriating others' insights and of synthesizing his accumulated knowledge with his own imagination—witness his

highly popular sermons on Hinduism, Vedānta, or Yoga<sup>13</sup>—but he was neither a brilliant scholar nor an accomplished student. He had to take a transfer from the Presidency College (Calcutta), the leading institution of higher learning in India of his day, where he had enrolled after high school, and passed his First Arts and B.A. examinations both in the modest second division. Narendranāth Gupta has written that Naren "was an average student with no promise of brilliance, because he was not destined to win any prize of the learned or unlearned professions."<sup>14</sup> Professor Dhar has observed: "Naren did not win any laurels at the university examinations, though during his four years at college, he acquired a considerable scholarship, for which and for his other qualities of head and heart he was admired by his fellow-students and the teachers."<sup>15</sup> Vivekānanda's admirer Śil commented on his "ardent and pure nature," his sociableness, and recognized his musical and forensic skills, but remained silent on his academic achievements. In Śil's language, Narendranāth was "an inspired Bohemian ... possessing ... an iron will."<sup>16</sup> The Svāmī, however, thought of himself primarily as an intellectual. As he claimed: "I was born for the life of scholar—retired, quiet, pouring over books. But the Mother dispenses otherwise—yet the tendency is there."<sup>17</sup> There is little doubt, however, that he was quick on the uptake of controversial issues, that his trenchant critique of Christian evangelicalism in India was sincere and accurate, and that his generalizations on the history and culture of India and Europe, though not original, were yet informed by wide reading.

### III

Narendranāth, we know, was greatly admired by the Paramahansa, who literally doted on the young man with large eyes and in fact lovingly named him Kamalākṣa ("lotus eyed").<sup>18</sup> Sārānanda has written about "this strange and strong attraction of the Master for Narendra" and "how intensely the Master regarded Narendranath as his own and how deeply he loved him from the day he met him first."<sup>19</sup> Rāmakṛṣṇa's infatuation for Naren was expressed frequently in his petting the young man's face and body, shedding tears while seeing him, gazing at him intently



for a long stretch of time, and above all, becoming rigid in *samādhi*.<sup>20</sup> No doubt, the aging mystic was fully aware of public reaction to his apparent homoeroticism and he is reported to have confessed: "What will they think on seeing that I, a man of such advanced age, am weeping and panting so much for him? ... But by no means can I control myself."<sup>21</sup> In fact he was once reprimanded (though to little effect) by his dauntless devotee, the insufferable Prāpāndra Hāzrā. As Rāmakṛṣṇa himself reported: "Hazra took me to task because I was anxious to see the boys. He asked 'When do you think of God?'<sup>22</sup> Hāzrā is also reported to have observed that the saint was especially fond of goodlooking and wealthy boys."<sup>23</sup>

Needless to mention, Narendranāth, a college student with some acquaintance with Western rationalism and pragmatism, felt scandalized by the bizarre behavior of the "madman" of Dakṣiṇēśvar.<sup>24</sup> He, however, felt somewhat obligated to the saint, who was persistent and eloquent in his admiration for the young man. Naren was compared to everything and every being that could be imagined or described in superlatives, and was feasted and feted by his adoring mentor.<sup>25</sup> Such attention and adoration as well as the *ambiance* of Dakṣiṇēśvar's erotic community naturally worked on the teenager. More important, this outburst of infatuation was especially comforting to the restless and hapless youth after his father's untimely death which had impounded his entire family. Sudden confrontation with the harsh realities of life was quite upsetting, almost traumatic, for the inexperienced but flamboyant young man. We have a graphic account (though we must be cautious as to its exaggerated dimension) of his personal predicament:

I went about hither and thither in search of a job even before the period of mourning was over. Suffering from lack of food and walking barefooted, I went from office to office with an application for a job in my hand in the blazing midday sun .... But I was disappointed everywhere.<sup>26</sup>

Unable to cope with the prospect of abject poverty, the shocked college graduate naturally wondered: "Does God actually exist? If so, does He hear the plaintive prayer of man? ... Whence has so much evil come in the creation of a benign Creator?"<sup>27</sup> Henceforth he became a regular visitor to Dakṣiṇēśvar, most probably, *inter alia*, to benefit from Rāmakṛṣṇa's contact with the elites of

Calcutta. Also, his acquaintance with the master at such a moment of torment and doubt proved to be especially helpful, almost therapeutic. Rāmakṛṣṇa had not forgotten the memories of his own childhood trauma after his father's death and he now sympathized with, and came up with a powerful justification for, Naren's present tribulations. One night he told the distraught young man: "Know that you have come to the world for the Mother's work; you can never live a worldly life. But remain in your family for my sake as long as I live."<sup>28</sup> It is not clear or certain if Rāmakṛṣṇa actually uttered these words or if Narendranāth actually believed in what his master said, but we know that he made a very good use of Rāmakṛṣṇa's prediction. It is evident that his later career as the great peripatetic Hindu missionary was chosen by default—when the life of a common householder with a normal secular profession seemed well-nigh impossible.<sup>29</sup>

#### IV

It is important to bear in mind that Narendranāth did not seem much inclined to spiritualism, mysticism, or devotionism when he first encountered the Paramahansa. He was frankly opposed to the saint's prescription for total inaction and passive surrender to *Jagajñanī* ("Mother of the universe"<sup>30</sup>—an appellation of Goddess Kālī)—"mew mew" like a kitten profusely and pitiously<sup>31</sup>—as well as to his anti-intellectualism. His thundering admonition to his monastic brethren against Rāmakṛṣṇa's religious enthusiasm provides a most telling testimony in this regard:

Study, public preaching, and doing humanitarian works are, according to you, Mayai, because he said to someone, 'Seek and find God first; doing good to the world especially in the West is a presumption.' As if God is such an easy thing to be achieved! As if He is such a fool as to make Himself a plaything in the hands of the imbecile.<sup>32</sup>

Vivekānanda was also quite lukewarm about Rāmakṛṣṇa's ecstatic enthusiasm. Toward the fag end of his *guru's* life, at the Śyāmpukur residence, Narendranāth openly inveighed against the Paramahansa style of dances and trances indulged in by several eager young devotees of the master. As he boldly asserted,



physical contortions, tears, horripilations, every momentary trance which result from this wrong emotion are, in reality, hypocritical. These should be controlled by a determined effort. If that fails one should take a nutritious diet or even consult a doctor.<sup>32</sup>

He disdained mysticism because "these mysticisms, in spite of some grains of truth in them are generally weakening."<sup>33</sup> He claimed he had come to this conclusion on the basis of his "lifelong experiences of it."<sup>33</sup> Thus he had little qualms in mimicking and making fun of Rāmakṛṣṇa's *samādhi* shortly after his death.<sup>34</sup> He even preached against Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa worship—something that would have sorely troubled his master. He wrote Rāmakṛṣṇānanda in April 1897:

There is not the least necessity for teaching the divine love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa .... Remember that the episodes of the divine relationship between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are quite unsuitable for young minds.<sup>35</sup>

He in fact told Aṣvini Datta at Ālmora sometime in June of that year:

And wherever you hear the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa songs going on, use the whip right and left. The whole nation is going to rack and ruin! People with no self-control indulging in such songs!<sup>36</sup>

Vivekānanda, likewise, was quite impervious to Rāmakṛṣṇa's insinuation, even insistence, that the latter possessed *siddhāi* (Bengali corruption of the Sanskrit *siddhi*, meaning "supernatural power"). When once at Dakṣiṇeśvar, the master, overwhelmed by a generous mood and in his characteristic naïvete, offered to transfer his "supernatural" powers to Narendran, the disciple is reported to have declined the offer politely but firmly.<sup>37</sup> Narendranāth, of course, cared very little for his master's magical powers, if any. In 1898 he related to the Holy Mother (Rāmakṛṣṇa's widow Sarādamānī) how he had suffered from a terrible stomach ache believed to have been caused by the curse of a Moslem mendicant of Kāśmīr. He told her in plain terms: "Your Master could do nothing whatsoever. In fact the Master was nothing."<sup>38</sup>

However, toward the end of his life, the Svāmī confided to Śaratacandra Cakrabartī his secret and mysterious experience with Rāmakṛṣṇa who, reportedly, had made Narendranāth sit before him alone and channelled his own energy into the latter by gazing

into his eyes and entering into *samādhi*. This transmission of his *guru*'s power kept him energized for life.<sup>39</sup> He succeeded in convincing a young American girl, Frances Bagley Wallace, sometime in February 1894, that he could materialize anywhere he wished. He wrote to another American devotee, Mrs. Sara Bull, that he was endowed with the faculty to "size up" an individual by merely looking at him. He was also believed to have possessed the power to change, "if he so wished, the whole trend of a man's life by his mere touch."<sup>40</sup>

## V

In spite of his being a favorite of the master, Narendranāth, initially, remained, unlike Vijayakṛṣṇa Govāmī or Girīś Ghoṣ, a devotee with a low profile. The first perceptible change in his stature in Rāmakṛṣṇa's *communio sanctorum* is to be noticed from the time the ailing master was transferred from Dakṣiṇeśvar to Calcutta—first to a rented home at Śyāmpukur (October 1885) and subsequently to the retreat (*bhṅgābhāṭī*) at Kāśīpur (December 1885). At Śyāmpukur, Naren seems to have emerged as the self-asserted but widely acknowledged leader of Rāmakṛṣṇa's flock.<sup>41</sup> There are numerous episodes, all purportedly based on hearsay or on Vivekānanda's report, showing Narendranāth becoming a spiritual adept, capable, *inter alia*, of *nirvāḥa samādhi*, and the inheritor of Rāmakṛṣṇa's spiritual *thesaurus meritorium*.<sup>42</sup> He had, of course, already proved his trustworthiness to his master by pretending to recognize the latter's thaumaturgical powers but declining to imbibe them until God-realization.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, as Vivekānanda asserted later, his master had actually made him the leader of his disciples.<sup>44</sup>

Though thus mandated by the master, Naren, after Rāmakṛṣṇa's death, revealed the making of a spiritual entrepreneur envisioning the formation of an organization working toward social as well as spiritual reform. By the time he assumed his famous monastic name he had developed his agenda.<sup>45</sup> As Svāmī Vivekānanda, he decided to present his spiritual master to the world in a new light—not as the divinely mad devotee of Kālī and Kṛṣṇa but as a Vedāntin, the inspiration behind



Vivekānanda's grand plan for Hindu missionary enterprise. Not until 1894 did he decide on Vedānta as the basis for his world mission.<sup>46</sup> By that year he had arrived at a definite determination in this regard. As he wrote to Rāmakṛṣṇānanda on March 19, 1894:

At Cape Comorin sitting in Mother Kumari's temple, sitting on the last bit of Indian rock—I hit upon a plan. We are so many Sannyasins wandering about and teaching people metaphysics—it is all madness. Did not our Gurudevā use to say, 'An empty stomach is no good for religion?' That these poor people are leading the life of brutes is simply due to ignorance.... Suppose some distinguished Sannyasins, bent on doing good to others, go from village to village, disseminating education and seeking in various ways to better the condition of all....<sup>47</sup>

He was quite explicit three years later. "Do you know what my idea is?" asked the Svāmī of Narendranāth Sen, editor of the *Indian Mirror*, during an interview in 1897 in Calcutta, and then answered his own question:

By preaching the profound secrets of the Vedānta religion in the Western world, we shall attract the sympathy and regard of these mighty nations, maintaining for ever the position of their teacher in spiritual matters, and they will remain our teachers in all material concerns.<sup>48</sup>

This program of social work required a religious inspiration and the Vedānta philosophy with its central emphasis on *das Wellganze* seemed to be the right religion for the upliftment of the people, because it taught that one need not seek the truth outside of oneself and that it underscored the present, the given, and the real that exists in the world.<sup>49</sup> This Vedānta, the religion for the humanity at large, needed to be associated with Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, who was depicted as a prophet of the common man. Thus Vivekānanda would have nothing to do with the image of his master as a delicious devotee of God given to singing and swooning. When one of his *gurbhāis* mildly and perhaps jestingly admonished him for having introduced Western ideas of service, organization, and activism in Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings which disapproved of any kind of social action, the Svāmī exploded:

What do you know? You are an ignorant man... and you think your salvation is secured and Shri Ramakrishna will come at the final hour and take you by the hand to the highest heaven... Your Bhakti is sentimental nonsense, which makes one impotent... Hand off! Who cares for your Bhakti and Mukti? Who cares what your Scriptures say? ... I am not a slave of

Ramakrishna, or anyone, but of him only who serves and helps others, without caring for his own Bhakti or Mukti!so

## VI

Vivekānanda's personal religious views and social concerns, though based on his master's ministrations, yet were strikingly modern, albeit often ambivalent in minor details. He aspired for a universal religion, that is, "a religion that will be equally acceptable to all minds... [and] must be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystical, and equally conducive to action."<sup>51</sup> Following his *guru's* famous formula of *yata mat tata path* ("as many views so many venues"), he declared: "We must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes."<sup>52</sup> He, however, favored a practical religion. "I do not believe in God that cannot give bread," roared the "patriot-prophet" of India.<sup>53</sup> As a matter of fact, he interpreted the principles of the Vedānta to suit the requirements of his age, his watchword being "dynamic religion and united India."<sup>54</sup>

His practical bent of mind led him to preach equality. He especially espoused the cause of the poor, the downtrodden, and the women. He was highly impressed by the liberty and liberality of Western women who he thought "control[led] social and civic duties."<sup>55</sup> "Do you know who is the real 'Shakti-worshipper'?" he asked Haripada Mitra in a letter from America. "It is he who knows that God is the omnipresent force in the universe and sees in women the manifestation of that Force."<sup>56</sup> "The mission of Swami Vivekananda," writes Bhūpendranāth Datta, "was to arouse the sleeping Leviathan, that is, Indian society."<sup>56</sup> This awakening was to be predicated on a comprehensive program of education of the masses, the *gana Nāgāyana*, whose upliftment was to be accomplished by "preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of equality."<sup>57</sup>

And yet this inspired socialist and Vedāntin was not a declared ascetic. Even though he remained a monk (*sannyāsi*) throughout his life, he confessed with disarming candor: "Well, I must tell you that I am not a very believer in monastic systems."<sup>58</sup> He even went to the length of asserting that "asceticism is fendish" and con-



cluded that "to laugh is better than to pray."<sup>59</sup> He once proudly recalled the ancient Hindu society of the beefeating *brahmins* and advised young men of India to "be strong" so that they could "understand the Gita better with ... biceps."<sup>60</sup> No wonder, with such an outlook on beef, biceps, and the *Bhagavadgītā*, Vivekānanda was regarded as a "Hercules" or a *Palatuvan Svāmi* ("Athletic Svāmi") by his Western and Eastern admirers.<sup>61</sup>

Vivekānanda's modernity contrasts sharply with the pronounced medievalism of his rustic mentor. Rāmākṛṣṇa considered wealth and women the roots of all evils and hence always counselled against *kāmi-kāntan*. In real life, however, he depended on a number of women, including his wife Sāradāmañi, and on the magnanimity of his wealthy patrons. He also preached against scholarship and social activism. He thought Paṇḍit Iśvarandra Vidyāsāgara, the famous scholar and social critic, was merely wasting his time trying to reform society. He forbade his devotee and patron Śambhūcāran Mallik to spend money for community development. He advised another devotee that "it is not good to be involved in too many projects." He admonished his devotees:

You people talk of doing good for the world. Is the world a small place? And who the hell are you to do good to the world? Meet Him by means of spiritual discipline. Realize Him if He gives you the strength, then you can do good to everybody; otherwise not.<sup>62</sup>

Quite naturally, both the master and his disciple projected a fundamentally different image to their followers. The Paramahansa had been popular as the *pāgal bhātur*, the "mad master"—childlike, naive, and unsophisticated. The Svāmi, on the other hand, appeared to his admirers as a veritable prince—regal, heroic, intellectual as well as a *mahāvīgī* ("great ascetic").<sup>63</sup> Yet there remained common personality traits between the *guru* and his *śiṣya* ("disciple"). Both possessed charisma, charm, and a curious combination of authority and populist appeal. Most important, both were capable of violent mood swings which invested their personality with a mystique that inspired respect and awe in their devotees and admirers. By means of a curious symbiosis, Vivekānanda recreated his master in his own image while also appropriating the style and mannerisms of the Paramahansa.<sup>64</sup>

## VII

The new image of Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa was to be built on a reconciliation of his asocial devotionism to the Svāmi's social activism. The Paramahansa of Vivekānanda's ideal was to be a unique prophet of modern India. Hence Vivekānanda dramatized his experience of altered state of consciousness by his master's touch, interpreted Rāmākṛṣṇa's erotic devotionism as the purest form of Hindu spirituality, and depicted his caste conscious, androgynous but frankly misogynist mentor as "the Saviour of women, Saviour of the masses, Saviour of all, high and low" as well as declared that he was the greatest of all *avatāras*.<sup>65</sup> He was convinced that "India can only rise by sitting at the feet of Shri Ramakrishna" and hence "his life and his teachings are to be spread far and wide, are to be made to penetrate every pore of Hindu society."<sup>66</sup> This absolute necessity for a redeemer figure like his master explains his efforts to discover a new meaning in the Rāmākṛṣṇa phenomenon. He told Nivediā that Rāmākṛṣṇa "lived that great life," and he "read the meaning."<sup>67</sup> He discovered that the Paramahansa had "spoken of the Vedānta as an all-comprehensive and synthetic religion," which he was preaching.<sup>68</sup> And that was not all. Vivekānanda now claimed:

Avatāras like Buddha and Chaitanya are monotonous; Ramakrishna Paramahansa is the latest and the most perfect—the concentrated embodiment of knowledge, love, renunciation, catholicity, and the desire to save mankind.<sup>69</sup>

Upon his return from the West, he declared at a massive gathering in Calcutta on February 28, 1897:

Through thousands of years of chiselling and modeling, the lives of the great prophets of yore came down to us; and yet, in my opinion, not one stands so high in brilliance as that life which I saw with my own eyes, under whose shadow I have lived, at whose feet I have learnt everything—the life of Ramakrishna Paramahansa.<sup>70</sup>

The new Rāmākṛṣṇa was not to be the conventional godman—or even a godlike man, as he had once regarded the master over a decade ago<sup>71</sup>—but to project the image of a godly and saintly superman. This delicate balancing of the traditional *avatāra* image with the modern prophet motif informed Vivekānanda's interpretation



and propagation of his *guru's* message in the world. Though he recognized the political value for an *avatāra* in a religious movement, he publicly announced his disapproval of such 'orthodoxy' as belief in an incarnation.<sup>72</sup> He in fact clearly told Paramakumār Śāstrī in 1899 that he did not 'preach that the Master was an avatar.'<sup>73</sup> His ideal godman and prophet was a militant mystic—an amalgam of a *yogī* ('saint') and a *kyatriya* ('soldier'). A recent study shows how he was influenced, *inter alia*, by Thomas Carlyle's 'Great Man' idea.<sup>74</sup> His ideas in this regard were articulated in his letter of June 20, 1894 to Dewān Haridās Deśān:

It is a character, a life, a centre, a God-man that must lead the way, ... That centre, that God-man to lead ... was the great Rāmakṛiṣṇa Paramahansa....<sup>75</sup>

### VIII

Vivekānanda's quest for a special image of his master led him to criticize the extant biographies of Rāmakṛiṣṇa. His reaction to the biographies published in the 1890s was far from favorable. He was particularly vehement in his denunciation of his cousin Rāma Datta's *Śrīrāmānakṛiṣṇadeber Jīvanbhūtānta* (1890). As he complained in his letter of November 30, 1894 to Alasinga Perumal, his most important disciple in Madras:

What nonsense about the miracle of Rāmakṛiṣṇa! ... Had Rāmakṛiṣṇa nothing to do but turning wine into the Gupta's medicine (alluding to the popular herbal preparation patented in Calcutta by D. Gupta & Co.)? Lord save me from such people! What materials to work with! If they can write a real life of Shri Rāmakṛiṣṇa with the idea of showing what he came to do and teach, let them do it, otherwise let them not distort his life and sayings .... I read a Bengali life sent over .... I am simply ashamed of the Bengali book ... *Bosh and vol.*<sup>76</sup>

He was, however, quite appreciative of Akṣaya-kumār Sen's biography of Rāmakṛiṣṇa in verse, *Śrīrāmānakṛiṣṇapūñihī* (1894).<sup>77</sup> As he wrote to Svāmī Rāmakṛiṣṇānanda in 1895 from the United States:

Just now I read Akṣaya's Book. Give him a hundred thousand hearty embraces from me. Through his pen Shri Rāmakṛiṣṇa is manifesting himself. Blessed is Akṣaya! Let him recite that *Pūñihī* before all .... If the work be too large, let him read extracts of it. I cannot tell in words the joy I have experienced by reading his book. Try all of you to give the book an extensive sale.

Sen was an intimate friend of Vivekānanda, who nicknamed the homely looking Akṣaya *śāṅkumārī* ('goblin').<sup>78</sup> The *Pūñihī's* primary appeal for the Svāmī lay most probably in its delightful *paṅktī* ('rhyme') so dear to the Bengalis. But the substance or message of the work could not measure up to Vivekānanda's taste. He noticed that 'there is no glorification of the *Śakti* at the opening which is a great defect.'<sup>79</sup> He instructed Rāmakṛiṣṇānanda to ask the author to 'bear in mind that we are now standing before the gaze of the world, and that people are watching every one of our actions and utterances.'<sup>79</sup>

Vivekānanda's emphasis on *śakti*, the female power, was the outcome of his experiences with the American women. He not only found them 'very beautiful' so that 'even the most beautiful woman of our country will look like a black owl here,'<sup>80</sup> but also possessed of divine attributes.<sup>80</sup> In his characteristic rhetoric, the awestruck young monk wrote to his brother disciples from New York on September 25, 1894:

They are like Lakṣmī ... in beauty, and like Sarasvatī .... in virtues—they are the Divine Mother incarnate and worshipping them, one verily attains perfection in everything.<sup>81</sup>

The Westerners are rich and strong because 'the Dharma of the Westerners is worship of Shakti—the Creative Power regarded as the Female Principle.'<sup>82</sup>

Thus Vivekānanda offered some editorial suggestions for refining Sen's *Pūñihī*. To quote from his letter to Rāmakṛiṣṇānanda, once again:

Ask Akṣaya to write these few points in the third section of his book, 'The Propagation of the Faith.'<sup>83</sup>  
 1. Whatever the Vedas, the Vedānta, and all other Incarnations have done in the past, Shri Rāmakṛiṣṇa lived to practise in the course of a single life.  
 2. One cannot understand the Vedas, the Vedānta, the Incarnations, and so forth, without understanding *his* life. For he was the explanation.  
 3. From the very day he was born, has sprung the Satya-Yuga (Golden Age). Henceforth there is an end to all sorts of distinctions, and everyone down to the Chandāla will be a sharer in the Divine Love. The distinction between man and woman, between the rich and the poor, the literate and illiterate, Brahmins and Chandālas—the lived to root out all. And he was the harbinger of Peace—the separation between Hindus and Mohammedans, between Hindus and Christians, all are now things of the past. That fight about



distinction that there was, belonged to another era. In this Satya-Yuga the tidal wave of Shri Ramakrishna's Love has unified all. Tell him to expand these ideas and write them in his own style.<sup>85</sup>

Like Aksaya, even M could not help being nicked by the horns of the charging bull of a critic. It must be noted that Vivekānanda had enthusiastically applauded M's enterprise a few years before he made his sojourn to America. In a letter dated February 7, 1889, from Añpur (Bengal), Narendranāth had written: "Thanks! 100000 Master! You have hit Ramkristo in the right point. Few alas, few understand him!"<sup>84</sup> But when he read M's own translation of his diary as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in 1896, probably in manuscript form before its printing in 1897, he did not like the stuff Mahendranāth had written. In his letter of April 14, 1896 Vivekānanda wrote to Svāmī Trigunātīrānanda:

That Ramakrishna was God and all that sort of thing, has no go in countries like this [U.S.A.]. M—has a tendency to put that stuff down everybody's throat, but that will make our movement a little sect.<sup>85</sup>

However, the Svāmī executed a *volle face* next year. In October 1897 he wrote from Rawalpindi:

Dear M. *C'est bon ami*—Now you are doing just the thing. Come out man. No sleeping all life. Time is flying. Bravo that is the way. Many many thanks for your publication ....<sup>86</sup>

Again, in November of that year, he wrote to applaud M's second part of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*:

My dear 'M.' Many thanks for your second leaflet (leaves from the *Gospel*). It is indeed wonderful. The move is quite original and never was the life of a great Teacher brought before the public untarnished by the writer's mind, as you are presenting this one. The language also is beyond all praise, so fresh, so pointed, and withal so plain and easy. I cannot express in adequate terms how I have enjoyed the leaflets. I am really in a transport when I read them! Strange, isn't it? Our Teacher and Lord was so original, and each one of us will have to be original or nothing. I now understand why none of us attempted his life before. It has been reserved for you, this great work.

In a postscript the ebullient Vivekānanda added another comment on M's *Gospel*:

The Socratic dialogues are Plato all over: you are entirely hidden. Moreover, the dramatic part is infinitely beautiful. Everybody likes it here and in the West.<sup>87</sup>

Even when the Svāmī found a work on the life and *logia* of his master quite acceptable in all essentials, he still noticed something in it to cavil at, as was the case with Sureścandra Datta's collection of Rāmākṣṣṇa's sayings in Bengali, *Śrīrāmākṣṣṇadeber Upadeś* (1886), which contained a short but comprehensive biography of the master titled *Śrīrāmākṣṣṇalīlā*. Commenting on this work, Vivekānanda wrote to Rāmākṣṣṇānanda in 1895: "Sureśh Duttā's object is noble; his book, too, is well written. It will bring some good, no doubt. However, how far have they been able to fathom Sri Ramakrishna?"<sup>88</sup>

The Bengalis, thus, disappointed the Svāmī, as none of them could write an "original" piece, that is, one which would depict Rāmākṣṣṇa as a dignified and enlightened reformer acceptable and respectable throughout the world. He considered the Madrasis as "at least far superior to the Bengalis, who are simply fools and have no souls, no stamina at all."<sup>89</sup> "I have all hope in Madras," Vivekānanda confided to his south Indian follower Alasinga, in a letter of November 30, 1894. His expressed reliance on his south Indian devotees in November had been preceded five months ago by his disappointment with Alasinga and his crew. On June 28, 1894 the Svāmī had complained against Alasinga's effort to link up Vivekānanda's teachings with those of the Theosophists. In sheer disgust he had written: "What nonsense does Alasinga mean ... Fools! ... And this pack of Madras babies cannot even keep a counsel in their blessed noodles! Talk nonsense all day, and when it comes to the least business, they are nowhere!"<sup>90</sup> However, now he suggested to Alasinga that Kidi (nickname of Singaravelu Mudaliar, another south Indian disciple) write a biography of Rāmākṣṣṇa.

He even prescribed the parameters for such a study:

The life of Shri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion. He was the object-lesson of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Śāstras (scriptures). He showed by his life what the Rishis and Avatāras really wanted to teach .... The Vedas can only be explained and the Śāstras reconciled by his theory of Avastha or stages—that we must not only tolerate others, but positively embrace them, and that truth is the basis of all religions.

He especially cautioned Alasinga to



avoid all irregular indecent expressions about sex etc. ... because other nations think it the height of indecency to mention such things, and his life in English is going to be read by the whole world.<sup>91</sup>

Vivekānanda wrote to Kidi on the same day:

Take thought, get materials, write a sketch of Rāmakṛṣṇa, *studiously avoiding all miracles*. The life should be written as an illustration of the doctrines he preached.<sup>92</sup>

Soon he was disenchanted again with his south Indian hopefuls. In the same year, in a letter to his monastic brethren in Calcutta, the Svāmī lamented:

Of course I never relied on the Bengalis, but the Madrasis couldn't do anything either ... not one original idea crosses anyone's brains, all fighting over the same old, threadbare rug—that Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa was such and such and cock-and-bull stories—stories having neither head nor tail ... Today you have your bell, tomorrow you add a horn, and follow suit with a chowry the day after; or you introduce a cot today, and tomorrow you have its legs silver-mounted, and people help themselves to a rice-porridge, and you spin out two thousand cock-and-bull stories ... This is called in English imbecility.

In the postscript, the writer observed: 'It won't do merely to call Shri Rāmakṛṣṇa an Incarnation, you must manifest power.'<sup>93</sup>

Vivekānanda's double disappointment in respect of a model biography of his master could be partly explained. Most probably, he found the Bengali works full of *verbatim* reproduction of Rāmakṛṣṇa's sermons in *patois*, often full of crude and obscene expressions as well as innocent and uncritical reports, including eyewitness accounts, of the master's *atī bhayānka* ('very scary') and *atīva bhayānka* ('extremely horrible') *sāthas* ('spiritual exercises') with the *bhairavī brāhmaṇī* as well as his intimate encounters with Mahurāmohan.<sup>94</sup> Certainly he felt uncomfortable with any reference to Rāmakṛṣṇa's obsession with Narendranāth. He admonished his brother monks at Ālanbāzār for having published the late Paramahansa's loving remarks on him. 'What made you communicate to the *Indian Mirror* that Paramahansa Deva used to call Narendra such and such, and all sorts of nonsense,'<sup>95</sup> wrote the angry and exasperated Svāmī.<sup>96</sup> His dislike for the works by the south Indians stemmed probably from the fact that these depicted Rāmakṛṣṇa in the conventional *maif* of the Indian hagiographical tradition. The Bengali works were embar-

rassing while the Madrasis ones dull and both eminently *unoriginal*! It is quite possible that Sārādānanda's *Līlāpāraṅga* was influenced by Vivekānanda's ideas and suggestions. Indeed, the Preface to its third part clearly states that the author,

following in the footsteps of Swami Vivekānanda, attempted in this book a description of that unique life ... with a view to depict that exalted state of the Master's mind (Bhava), the realization of a little of which has made Swami Vivekānanda and others, including ourselves, dedicate their lives at the lotus feet of the Master.<sup>96</sup>

It is also quite likely that M dared not publish his *Kāhāṁṛīya* during Vivekānanda's lifetime.<sup>97</sup> Nīkhlānanda's concern for projecting the right image of the Paramahansa was most certainly inspired by the ideas of Vivekānanda whom he greatly admired.<sup>98</sup> Most probably the real reason for his praising the second part of M's own translation of his *Kāhāṁṛīya* as the *Gospel* was the fact it partly reflected (in M's commentaries) Vivekānanda's ideas of a godman.

## IX

Sometime in 1896 or 1897 Sārādānanda asked Vivekānanda why the latter had not written Rāmakṛṣṇa's biography for Professor Max Müller. The Svāmī replied in his characteristic dithyramb:

I have such deep feeling for the Master that it is impossible for me to write about him for the public. If I had written the article Max Müller wanted, then I would have proved, quoting from philosophies, the scriptures and even the holy books of the Christians, that Rāmakṛṣṇa was the greatest of all prophets born in the world.<sup>99</sup>

And he did write about the Paramahansa. As early as 1895 he had informed Brahmānanda:

I am going to write a very short sketch of Shri Rāmakṛṣṇa's life in English, which I shall send you. Have it printed and translated into Bengali and sell it at the festival [Rāmakṛṣṇa Festival]—people do not read books that are distributed free. Fix some nominal price. Have the festival done with great pomp ...<sup>100</sup>

Though this biography is short, it is shot through with the author's very personalized interpretation of Rāmakṛṣṇa's preachings and teachings and his claims on behalf of the Rāmakṛṣṇa phenomenon.<sup>101</sup> In many respects, this short biography is original in its interpretation of Rāmakṛṣṇa's contributions. It is not



Saradananda's *Great Master* but Vivekānanda's *My Master* which is familiar throughout the world, and *My Master* is Vivekānanda all over.

Rāmakṛṣṇa's new image was further refined in the Svāmī's lecture, "The Sages of India", delivered in Madras on February 11, 1897. As he declared, the Paramahansa combined the

brilliant intellect of Shankara and the wonderfully expansive, infinite heart of Chaitanya; one who would see God in every being, one whose heart would weep for the poor, for the weak, for the outcast, for the down-trodden, for every one in this world, inside India or outside India, and at the same time whose grand brilliant intellect would conceive of such noble thoughts as would harmonise all conflicting sects, not only in India but outside of India, and bring a marvellous harmony, the universal religion of head and heart into existence ... [T]his great intellect never learnt even to write his own name, but the most brilliant graduates of our university found in him an intellectual giant. He was a strange man, this Shri Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa.<sup>102</sup>

Vivekānanda's inspired hyperbole in respect of his master was at its best in his claim made in 1901: "It is my opinion that Shri Rāmakṛṣṇa was born to vivify all branches of art and culture in this country."<sup>103</sup>

## X

Since Vivekānanda's days, the life and *logia* of the Paramahansa have been written and interpreted by a variety of researchers both in India and abroad. Almost all the biographies of Rāmakṛṣṇa have relied upon the interpretation of the master's life provided by the Rāmakṛṣṇa Order founded by Vivekānanda. One of the Svāmī's *Bhāṣa* contemporaries, Kṛṣṇakumār Mītra, astutely observed: "It is true that Narendranath became the disciple of Rāmakṛṣṇa, but the disciple made his guru 'unsectarian'.<sup>104</sup> The much publicized Paramahansa is not only the greatest incarnation who ever descended on earth but also the patron saint of renaissance India. The projection of Rāmakṛṣṇa as the universal redeemer was made in total disregard of the master's pronounced casteism and misogyny."<sup>105</sup>

On the other hand, Thākur Rāmakṛṣṇa of the householder disciples such as Mahendranāth Gupta or Rāmacandra Datta, while trapped in the ivory tower of divinity, still has a human

face—an unsophisticated bucolic *brāhmin* and a semi-literate ecstatic possessed of charming simplicity and naivete.<sup>106</sup> The authentic god-mad Gadādhara—neither a social reformer nor a Vedāntin nor even a *kāṅhīka* in any meaningful sense but an enthusiastic *bhaktā*, a *śakṛtyā* at best—was transformed into a modern prophet.<sup>107</sup> If Rāmakṛṣṇa appeared as a mere *bhagavan* ("God") to most of his devotees and disciples, he had become something more—*bhagabān* *bābā* (literally meaning "God's father"), greater than God—at the hands of the "cyclonic" Svāmī.<sup>108</sup> Vivekānanda once confessed:

I am Rāmakṛṣṇa's servant, and I am willing even to steal and rob, if by doing so I can perpetuate his name in the land of his birth and Sādhana (spiritual struggle) and help even a little his disciples to practise his great ideals.<sup>109</sup>

And he succeeded! Indeed there is a good deal of justification in the Svāmī's boast to his *gurubhāṣā*:

Without me, who would have made your Master known to the world!<sup>110</sup>

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\* I thank the office of the Provost, Western Oregon State College for some financial assistance through the Faculty Development Fund in respect of this research. I also thank the anonymous reader of an earlier version of my paper for his insightful critique and helpful suggestions. Finally, I am grateful to the staff of the Library of Western Oregon State College for their help in procuring a number of sources through their interlibrary loan services.

<sup>1</sup> Swami Prabhānanda, *First Meetings with Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa* (Mylapore: Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa Math, 1987), p. 134.

<sup>2</sup> See Narasimha P. Sil, *Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa: A Psychological Profile* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), chs. V & VII.

<sup>3</sup> J. J. Krippl, "Revealing and Concealing the Secret: A Textual History of Mahendranath Gupta's *Srīrāmakṛṣṇakāhānīya*," Clinton B. Seely, ed. *Calcutta, Bengal, and Bengal Studies* (Asian Studies Center: Michigan State University, 1991). See also M. Mahendranath Gupta, *Srīrāmakṛṣṇakāhānīya*, 5 *bhāgas* (1902-32). Rpt. Kalkātā: Kāhāmṛta Bhavana, 1987), henceforth cited as *KM*; Swami Nikhīlānanda, *The Gospel of Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa* (1942. Seventh printing. New York: Rāmakṛṣṇa-Vivekānanda Center, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Satiendranath Dhar, *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekānanda*, 3 vols. in cited as *CB*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-59. His translation of Spencer's *On Education* was published by Gurudās Caitṛpādāhārya of Calcutta. He also translated Thomas à Kempis' *Imita-*



tion of Christ in Bengal. See also Bhupendranath Datta, *Swami Vivekananda Patriot-Poet: A Study* (Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1954), p. 134 n. 8.

<sup>6</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 8 vols. (Mayavati Memorial edn. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1990), V, letter #2; VI, letters #8, 9 (hereafter cited as *CW*); *CB*, I, 328. Though Vivekananda's knowledge of the Vedānta and other Hindu scriptures owed a good deal to the help from Mitra, there developed some bitterness in the relationships between the veteran scholar and the young monk. Mitra considered belief in Rāmākṛiṣṇa's *avadānta* a "perversion", and Vivekananda found Mitra's intimacy with the "white-skinned missionaries of the Hindu religion" repelling.<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 292-93. Vivekananda also borrowed many books from Dr. Sāsbhūṣaṇ Sānyāl, Alasinga Perumal, and E. T. Sturdy; *CW*, V, letters #39, 68; VI, letter #59 & VIII, letter #68.

<sup>7</sup> Narendranāth learned classical vocal music from maestros such as Beni Ośād and Kāśh Ghōṣāl. He authored a short guidebook on *vāḍā* (percussion instrument) playing and it was published by Bāṣṇavacandra Basāk of Bārāḷā, Calcutta. *Patriot-Popple*, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> *CB*, I, 40. This, somewhat interestingly, parallels the first childhood trance of his master, Śrī Rāmākṛiṣṇa. Swami Saradānanda, *Śrī Rāmākṛiṣṇa the Great Master (Śrīrāmākṛiṣṇāḥ-pravāṇig)*, tr. Swami Jagadānanda, 2 vols. (Sixth rev. edn. Mysāpore: Śrī Rāmākṛiṣṇa Math, 1983-84), I, 55-56 (henceforth referred to as *GM*).

<sup>9</sup> *CB*, I, 85. Narendranāth met Rāmākṛiṣṇa for the first time at the residence of his friend Surendranāth (*alias* Sureś) Mitra sometime in the first week of November 1881. He first visited the saint's abode at Dakṣiṇeśvar on January 15, 1882.

<sup>10</sup> A pioneering study calling for the need to distinguish "the historical Swami Vivekananda" from "the archetype of Vivekananda as the Hindu spiritual hero" is by George M. Williams ("Swami Vivekananda: Archetypal Hero or Doubting Saint" in Robert D. Baird, ed. *Religion in Modern India*, Delhi: Manohar, 1981). See also Charles S. J. White, "The Śāi Bāhā Movement: Approaches to the Study of Indian Saints," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, XXXI, 4 (1972).

<sup>11</sup> *Patriot-Popple*, p. 265.

<sup>12</sup> Tapan Raychandhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perception of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 8 (see also ch. III, 103-218).

<sup>13</sup> See Marie L. Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West. New Discoveries. A New Gospel*, 2 pts. (Third edn. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1980), II, 1-107.

<sup>14</sup> His Eastern & Western Admirers, *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda* (1961. Third edn. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *CB*, I, 51.

<sup>16</sup> His Eastern & Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols. (revised & enlarged fifth edn. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979-81), I, 107-11. John A. Bright of Harvard remarked, somewhat exaggeratedly, that Vivekananda's learning "matched that of all the professors of his university put together." *CB*, II, 1443.

<sup>17</sup> *CW*, VI, letter #125: letter to Sister Niveditā, June 3, 1897.

<sup>18</sup> Romain Rolland, *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*, tr. E. F. Malcolm-Smith (Tenth impression. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1984), p. 8 n. 11.

<sup>19</sup> *GM* II, 854-55.

<sup>20</sup> *Sil, Rāmākṛiṣṇa*, ch. IV.

<sup>21</sup> *GM*, II, 857.

<sup>22</sup> *Life of Vivekananda*, I, 90.

<sup>23</sup> *KM*, IV, 230 (diary of July 15, 1885).

<sup>24</sup> *Life of Vivekananda*, I, 76-78.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77, 87-88, 92; *KM*, IV, 228 (diary of July 15, 1885). All quotations from the *KM* are my translation.

<sup>26</sup> *GM*, II, 922.

<sup>27</sup> Cited *ibid.*, p. 924.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 927.

<sup>29</sup> It is not clear why, in spite of Narendranāth's reputation as an allrounder, coupled with the fact that his father had built up a social as well as professional circle, he failed to procure an employment.

<sup>30</sup> *KM*, II, 69.

<sup>31</sup> *CB*, II, 956.

<sup>32</sup> *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (1912. Fourth edn. Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1949), p. 126. In the two-volume fifth edition (see n. 16 above) Vivekananda's statement has been edited and paraphrased (I, 156).

<sup>33</sup> *CW*, III, 225.

<sup>34</sup> *KM*, IV, 298 (diary of February 21, 1887).

<sup>35</sup> *CW*, VIII, letter #90.

<sup>36</sup> *Life of Vivekananda*, II, 354.

<sup>37</sup> *GM*, II, 909-10.

<sup>38</sup> Swami Gambhirānanda, *Holy Mother, Śrī Saradā Devī* (Third edn. Mysāpore: Śrī Rāmākṛiṣṇa Math, 1977), pp. 182-83.

<sup>39</sup> Rolland, *Vivekananda*, pp. 127-28 n. 2.

<sup>40</sup> See *CB*, I, 497-503; "Swami's Psychic Powers."

<sup>41</sup> See *Life of Vivekananda*, I, 149-86.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177-83.

<sup>43</sup> See n. 37 above. See also *Sil, Rāmākṛiṣṇa*, p. 159.

<sup>44</sup> *CW*, VII, letter #32. In his letter of May 1890 to Pramadās Mitra, Vivekananda wrote: "I am Rāmākṛiṣṇa's slave; having laid my body at his feet 'with Tili and Tulsi leaves', I cannot disregard his behest.... His command was that his all-renouncing devotees should group themselves together and I am entrusted with seeing to this." *Ibid.*, VI, letter #33. See also *Life of Vivekananda*, I, 182.

<sup>45</sup> According to Beni S. Sharma, Narendranāth's monastic name Vivekānanda was proposed by Rājā Ajit Singh of Khettī (*Swami Vivekananda: A Forgotten Chapter of His Life*, Calcutta: Oxford Book & Stationary Co., 1965, chs. III & IV). The controversy surrounding the question who first suggested it or when Narendranāth first used it has been competently summarized in *CB*, I, 401-2.

<sup>46</sup> Marie L. Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West. New Discoveries: His Prophetic Mission*, 2 pts. (Third edn. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983-84), II, 383-93. For Vivekānanda's plan for Vedāntic movement see *CW*, I, 383-92 ("Vedānta as a Factor in Civilisation"); III, 207-27 ("My Plan of Campaign"); V, 188-94 ("India's Mission"); VII, 411-12 ("Śrī Rāmākṛiṣṇa: The Significance of His Life and Teachings"); VIII, 73-91 ("My Life and Mission").

<sup>47</sup> *CW*, VI, letter #41.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 448.

<sup>49</sup> See *CW*, VIII, 122-41 ("Is Vedānta the Future Religion?").



- <sup>50</sup> Cited in Rolland, *Life of Vivekananda*, pp. 124-26.
- <sup>51</sup> *Vivekananda: The Yogas and Other Works*, ed. Swami Nikhitananda (1953. Third printing. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1984), p. 394: "The Ideal of a Universal Religion" (New York, January 12, 1896).
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391: "The Way to the Realization of the Universal Religion" (January 28, 1900).
- <sup>53</sup> *Patriot-Prophet*, p. 227.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- <sup>55</sup> *CW*, V, letter # 6 (letter of December 28, 1893).
- <sup>56</sup> *Patriot-Prophet*, p. 197.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 216-17.
- <sup>58</sup> *CW*, VIII, 89: speech in Pasadena (January 27, 1900).
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227: lecture in London (November 23, 1895).
- <sup>60</sup> *CW*, III, 174 (reply to the address of welcome at Madurai), 242 ("Vedantia and its Application to Indian Life").
- <sup>61</sup> *Life of Vivekananda*, I, 368. V. Subramanya of Madras called Vivekananda *Pahluvan Swami*. Rolland called him Hercules. *Life of Vivekananda*, p. 6 n. 3.
- <sup>62</sup> *KM*, I, 50-1 (diary of October 27, 1882).
- <sup>63</sup> See Burke, *Vivekananda in West. Prophetic Mission*, pts. I & II, *passim*; *Reminiscences of Vivekananda*, especially the contributions by Sister Christine, Sister Niveditā, Madame E. Calvé, E. T. Sturdy.
- <sup>64</sup> See Sil, *Ramakrishna*, p. 158.
- <sup>65</sup> *CW*, VI, 335 (letter #75: letter to Swami Rāmakrishnānanda from the U.S.A., c. 1895). See also Vivekananda, *Ahimsā* ("Opinion") in Assayakumar Sen, *Srīrāmakrishnapūthi: Srīrāmakrishnādebhā Caritāmṛta* (English edn. Kalkāṭā: Udbodhan Kāyālāya, 1378 Bengali Era).
- <sup>66</sup> *CW*, VI, letter # 51.
- <sup>67</sup> His Disciple Niveditā, *The Master as I Saw Him: Being Pages from the Life of Swami Vivekananda* (London: Longman, Green & CO., 1910), p. 255.
- <sup>68</sup> *Life of Vivekananda*, II, 354.
- <sup>69</sup> *CW*, VII, letter # 25.
- <sup>70</sup> *CW*, III, 313.
- <sup>71</sup> *KM*, I, 253 (diary of October 27, 1885).
- <sup>72</sup> *CB*, II, 1018. See also Niranjan Dhar, *Vedantia and Bengal Renaissance* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1977), p. 129.
- <sup>73</sup> *CB*, II, 955.
- <sup>74</sup> Thomas L. Bryson, "The Cyclopic Hindu: Swami Vivekananda," paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Conference, Kansas City (November 23-26, 1991). I thank Jeff Kripal for having mailed me a copy of this paper.
- <sup>75</sup> *CW*, VIII, letter # 20.
- <sup>76</sup> *CW*, V, letter # 22 (*italics* in original).
- <sup>77</sup> See n. 65 above. Sen originally composed *Bhagabāhā Srīrāmakrishna Pāramahansaḍebhā Caritāmṛta* during 1894-1901. He publicly recited from the *Srīrāmakrishnapūthi* for the first time in 1895 at Dakṣiṇeśvar on the occasion of Rāmakrishna's birth anniversary. He sent a copy of this version of the *Pūthi* to Vivekānanda. Later, on November 29, 1901, this *Pūthi* was published, incorporating all the four parts of the *Caritāmṛta*.
- <sup>78</sup> Swami Chetanānanda, *They Lived with God: Life Stories of Some Devotees of Sri Ramakrishna* (St. Louis: Vedanta Society, 1989), p. 374.

- <sup>79</sup> *CW*, VI, letter # 75.
- <sup>80</sup> *CW*, VIII, letter # 23.
- <sup>81</sup> *CW*, VI, letter # 47.
- <sup>82</sup> *CW*, V, 505: "The East and the West."
- <sup>83</sup> See n. 79 above.
- <sup>84</sup> Cited in *KM*, V, 287.
- <sup>85</sup> *CW*, VI, letter # 97.
- <sup>86</sup> Cited in *KM*, V, 287.
- <sup>87</sup> *CW*, V, letter # 82.
- <sup>88</sup> Cited in Prābhananda, *First Meeting with Ramakrishna*, p. 252 n. 23.
- <sup>89</sup> *CW*, VIII, letter # 21.
- <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>91</sup> See n. 76 above.
- <sup>92</sup> *Letters of Swami Vivekananda* (Sixth impression. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1986), p. 71 (letter # 29). Emphasis in original. Puzzlingly enough, *CW* omits this important letter of Vivekānanda.
- <sup>93</sup> *CW*, VI, letter # 49.
- <sup>94</sup> The most "scandalous" biography of Rāmakrishna containing the lurid details of his *sādhana* as well as his quite suggestive encounters with his patron Mathur was Datta's *Jīvanitāna*. See J. J. Kripal, "Vivekānanda and Ram Chandra Datta: An Early Conflict over the Person and Message of Ramakrishna," paper presented at the Fourth International Congress of Vedanta, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio (April 2-5, 1992).
- <sup>95</sup> *CW*, VI, letter # 56. It is on record that he hesitated to discuss Rāmakrishna's life confessing that he did not quite understand his *guru*. See Śaracandra Cakrabartī, *Swami-śiṣya Sambhāḍ*, p. 146 cited in Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, p. 242.
- <sup>96</sup> *GM*, I, 366.
- <sup>97</sup> *The Prahāna Bhāga* ("First Part") of the *KM* was published in 1902, the year Vivekānanda died.
- <sup>98</sup> See Nikhitananda's Preface to *Gospel of Ramakrishna* (see n. 3 above). See also J. J. Kripal, "Kālī's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in Mahendranath Gupta's *Srīrāmakrishnakāhānīya*," Ph.D. dissertation in preparation (University of Chicago). I thank Jeff for having shared with me an early draft of the Introduction.
- <sup>99</sup> Cited in Swami Nikhitananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography* (1953. Second Indian edn. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1971), pp. 193-94.
- <sup>100</sup> *CW*, VI, letter # 71.
- <sup>101</sup> *CW*, IV, 154-87: "My Master."
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 267-68. Cf. Vivekānanda's conversation with Śaracandra Cakrabartī: "First we must raise the whole Hindu race in this way and then the whole world. That is why Shri Ramakrishna incarnated." *CW*, VII, 171. Vivekānanda was wrong in making Rāmakrishna a completely illiterate man. Perhaps the misstatement was made deliberately for rhetorical effect. In actuality, however, Rāmakrishna could and did sign his name. He also, reportedly, copied a portion of Kṛtīvāsā's *Ramāyana*. Swami Ramakrishnananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Mission* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1972), p. 14.
- <sup>103</sup> *CW*, VII, 205: Vivekānanda's conversation with Rānādāprasād Dāsgupta, the founder of the Jubilee Art Academy, Calcutta.
- <sup>104</sup> Cited in *Patriot-Prophet*, p. 178.



<sup>105</sup> See Sil, *Ramakrishna*, especially chs. II & III. A typical sample of the popular image of *Ramakrishna*, which is universally held by devotees and admirers alike, is to be found in the statement made by independent India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1949. Speaking on the occasion of the 114th birth anniversary of the master at the Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi, Pandit Nehru declared that "men like Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, men like Swami Vivekananda and men like Mahatma Gandhi are great unifying forces, great constructive geniuses of the world ... not only in regard to the particular teachings that they taught, but their approach to the world and their conscious and unconscious influence on it is of the most vital importance to us." Pandit J. Nehru, *Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda* (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1949), pp. 13-14. The last sentence in the above quote must have been inspired by Vivekananda's characterization of the Paramahansa: "He is the method, that wonderful unconscious method!" Nivedita, *Master as I Saw Him*, p. 255.

<sup>106</sup> Sil, *Ramakrishna*, chs. VII & VIII. See also Kripal's paper cited in n. 94 above. Very few scholars, since Friedrich Max Müller's days, are prepared to regard *Ramakrishna* as a Vedāntin. Sil, *Ramakrishna*, pp. 97-98. Walter G. Nevel ("The Transformation of Sri Ramakrishna," Bardwell L. Smith, ed. *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religion*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976) argues that *Ramakrishna's* basic orientation was *tāntrika*. He is powerfully supported by Kripal (see all his works cited above). For a contrary view see Sil, *Ramakrishna*, chs. VI-VIII.

<sup>108</sup> Svāmi Prameyānanda *et al.*, eds. *Bhāvanāy: Śrīrāmkṛṣṇa* (Kalkātā: Udbodhan Kāryālaya, 1987), p. 28. Once the Svāmi compared *Ramakrishna* with Lord Kṛṣṇa and commented that "even where Kṛṣṇa failed to show a complete reconciliation (*samānāyog*) among the warring sects, it was fully accomplished by *Ramakrishna* Paramahansa in the nineteenth century." Swami Vivekananda, *Sri Ramakrishna as Svāmiji Saw Him* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 20. The journalists of Detroit called Vivekananda "cydonic Hindu" for his eloquent and forceful lectures. Burke, *Vivekananda in West. Prophetic Mission*, I, 431.

<sup>109</sup> *CW*, VI, letter #33.

<sup>110</sup> Cited in *CB*, II, 955.

#### A REPORT ON THE "INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC CONFERENCE ON RELIGION," BEIJING, APRIL 6-10, 1992

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The International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) was especially pleased to hold a conference for the first time in China, the second time in Asia (as an IAHR International Congress was held in Tokyo in 1958). The IAHR aims to be a truly international organization and has been very supportive in recent years of the nascent discipline of Religious Studies in the People's Republic of China (PRC). In this report, I would like to introduce the conference's organizers and participants, its academic content, and its overall nature.

##### *Organizers and Participants*

The Chinese organizers were from the Institute of World Religions (IWR) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Chinese Association of Religious Studies (CARS), Beijing. IWR was founded in 1964, but has been much more active since the late 1970's. Since that time it has accepted 40 students into its M.A. and Ph.D. programs; and it has helped to establish the first faculty in religious studies at a Chinese university (Beijing University, Philosophy Department). CARS, founded in 1988, is an academic affiliate of the IAHR for scholars all over China. According to its constitution:

The association is a nationwide nonofficial academic organization of researchers on religions. Guided by the principles of Integrating Theory with Practice and Letting a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend, the association will play an active role in arranging academic exchanges and activities both at home and abroad, so as to develop and promote religious studies, thus contributing to the cultural undertakings in China.

Organizers from IWR and CARS were even more concerned than IAHR organizers about the success of the conference. Despite recent progress, the discipline of Religious Studies is not yet secure and totally beyond suspicion in the PRC. This international conference played an important legitimization function for local organizers and scholars. As the title they gave to the conference indicates, they wanted to stress its "international" and "academic" nature. Foreign scholars were aware of these factors and tried to avoid making any impolitic remarks, although there were in fact