

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: An Unconventional Bengali Priest

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa is to be considered one of the most profound figures in India's history. Unlike many people who centre their lives primarily around their outward actions and extrinsic influences, Sri Ramakrishna lived only for spirituality and his innermost thoughts. Solange Lemaitre remarks that, "his life is the muted accompaniment of the purely inner story of an exceptional soul and its spiritual steps towards the Absolute" (146) [For further information on "the Absolute," see Lemaitre 83-93]. Over the years, Ramakrishna received great fame and admiration for his effortless ability to enter into *samadhi* [this is one of the Eight Limbs of Yoga; a spiritual state when one's ego disappears, for more information, see Nikhilananda 169], his deep beliefs rooted in the Hindu tradition, and his teachings on acceptance and charity.

Even Ramakrishna's birth was said to be surrounded by divine occurrences. Both of his parents, Khudiram Chattopadhyaya and Chandra Devi, apparently received spiritual visions about their son before they were even aware of his conception. Khudiram dreamt that the god Visnu made a promise to him to be born as his son, and Chandra experienced a vision "indicating the birth of a divine child" (Nikhilananda 4). And it was on February 18, 1836 that Chandra gave birth to a son, Gadadhar [this name translates as "the Bearer of the Mace," an epithet of Visnu, see Nikhilananda], who would go on to be recognized as Sri Ramakrishna. He was born at Kamarpukur, a village in the Hooghly District of Bengal, India. Gadadhar grew to be an intelligent, inquisitive, and "healthy and restless boy" (Nikhilananda 4) whose primary interests lay in Hindu mythology and the epics, religious readings, and observing Hindu monks' pilgrims and worship. Gadadhar's strong passion for religion and the spiritual world was only beginning to develop and would continue to grow stronger with time.

From an extremely young age, Gadadhar demonstrated unconventional manners, according to the Indian caste system. At his sacred thread ceremony, the nine-year-old Gadadhar accepted and ate food that had been prepared by a *sudra* woman, which was seen as improper due to his *Brahmin* status. This event marked the beginning of his long-standing belief that, “[t]hose who love God belong to no caste” (Lemaitre 78).

Gadadhar had special divine qualities about him that sparked in him a burning desire to know God and continually obtain more knowledge about God. Lemaitre explains that as soon as the teenaged Gadadhar “entered into contemplation, the Lord appeared to him virtually immediately. It was from this time forward that the propensity of his nature to lose consciousness became stronger” (49). It was this strengthening propensity that would go on to guide Gadadhar in his new role as a priest at the Kali temple of Dakshineswar, located near Calcutta, in the state of Bengal. Gadadhar would also be guided throughout the course of his life by two influential and very different people. One of his mentors was a master of non-dual Vedanta, “Totapuri” (Nikhilananda 26), and the other was a female tantric, “the Brahmani” (Nikhilananda 18).

Sri Ramakrishna became a priest at the Kali temple by replacing his brother, who had died one year after accepting the position. At only twenty years of age, Ramakrishna was brimming with vibrant energy and enthusiasm for religion and pursuing God, but he did reserve some hesitation towards the temple of Kali and the hierarchical implications of his new position as a priest. He did not support the idea of the caste system, as previously mentioned, and this was reflected in his initial reluctance to accept the position. But soon after beginning this new chapter of his life, Ramakrishna was overwhelmed by the holiness of the temple, its close proximity to the sacred river the Ganges, the atmosphere of the temple and its surroundings, and

above all, “the living presence of the Goddess Kali” (Lemaitre 57). He would go on to regard Kali as the “Divine Mother” (Lemaitre 86) and rapidly became more obsessed with seeing her in her absolute form. This obsession drove Ramakrishna to perform unorthodox rituals, such as praying to Kali throughout the night while removing all of his clothing, including his sacred thread (this was thought to be sacrilegious), in an effort to free himself of all external bonds (Lemaitre 65). These unorthodox practices intensified the growing notion that Ramakrishna was, in actuality, insane. It is not difficult to understand the assumption that Ramakrishna had gone “mad” as he would suffer bouts of hysteria when he felt as though his body was on fire, fits of uncontrollable sobbing, delirious moments of ecstasy, and an overall complete indifference to the outer world (Nikhilananda 18).

Sri Ramakrishna was twenty-three years old when he married Sarada Devi in 1859. His marriage further emphasized his devotion to God and his “unquenchable desire to enjoy God in various ways” (Nikhilananda 15) as their marriage was never consummated. This act of celibacy lifted Sarada Devi to a type of pedestal so that Ramakrishna could “worship his wife as an embodiment of the Divine Mother” (Rodrigues 285). They remained married until his death in August of 1886.

Although Ramakrishna remained a priest in Dakshineswar, his teachings rapidly spread throughout India and eventually worldwide as well. People were traveling in increasingly larger groups to see the “Divine Incarnation” (Lemaitre 84) and to hear him share his thoughts on life and God. He is well known for his warm acceptance of religions outside of Hinduism, as he himself briefly practiced the disciplines of Islam and Christianity. Nikhilananda remarks, “Sri Ramakrishna realized his identity with Christ, as he had already realized his identity with Kali, Rama, Hanuman, Radha, Krishna, Brahman, and Mohammed [...] thus he experienced the truth

that Christianity, too, was a path leading to God-Consciousness” (34). These realizations of various spiritual identities undoubtedly caused controversy amongst Hindus and others, but they also underlined Ramakrishna’s notion of tolerance and non-ignorance.

Of all the people who Sri Ramakrishna influenced, his impact on Swami Vivekananda was perhaps the most profound. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) became Ramakrishna’s most devoted disciple, spreading his master’s teachings and stories throughout the world, including the Western world. Ramakrishna’s name, along with Vivekananda’s, became known in North America after Vivekananda visited the United States. His appearance at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 marked the beginning of the development of a more compassionate, accepting, and appreciative relationship between Eastern and Western religions. He established the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York City and this center, along with its missions, continues to bridge the gap between the East and the West.

It was on August 16, 1886, that Sri Ramakrishna died in a house in Cossipore, India, with his disciples, dearest friends, and Sarada Devi at his side. His name lives on in his teachings and in the actions that thousands upon thousands carry out today in his honour. Lemaitre notes that “Ramakrishna’s sympathy for the unfortunate derived from his conception that God is in every being” (116). This sympathy is recognized and put into action through such groups as the Ramakrishna Order which, among other accomplishments, has “created schools, colleges, hospitals, dispensaries, homes for the aged, and orphanages” (Rodrigues 285). And so, Sri Ramakrishna remains a celebrated and illustrious religious figure and one whom Narasingha P. Sil affectionately calls, “the nineteenth-century Bengali Saint” (1).

REFERENCES

Lemaitre, Solange (1969) *Ramakrishna and the Vitality of Hinduism*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Funk & Wagnalls.

Nikhilananda, Swami (1984) *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center.

Rodrigues, Hillary (2007) *Introducing Hinduism*. New York: Routledge.

Sil, Narasingha Prosad (1991) *Ramakrishna Paramahansa: A Psychological Profile*. Ed. Johannes Bronkhorst. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Related Topics for further investigation:

- The Absolute
- *Samadhi*
- The Ramakrishna Order
- Keshab Chandra Sen and the Brahma Samaj
- Swami Vivekananda
- Tantra
- The Vedanta
- The Goddess Kali
- Brahmin class
- Eight powers of yoga
- Aum

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic:

<http://www.ramakrishna.org/>

<http://www.sriramakrishna.org/>

<http://www.kathamrita.org/>

<http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/>

Article written by: Stefanie Rausch (2008) who is solely responsible for its content.