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Swami Vivekananda- The Institution Builder

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Abstract

The entire organization of Ramakrishna Sangha is said by devotees to be the astral body of Sri Ramakrishna. In the trinity of the Ramakrishna movement, if Sri Ramakrishna is the body then Sri- Ma Sarada Devi may be said to be its heart, and Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji) is the voice.

The seed that was sown by Sri Ramakrishna Himself at Cossipore in His deathbed, and nurtured by Swamiji with his fellow monks availing all out support from Sri Ma Sarada Devi, establishing the Math in His name at Belur, grew like a sprawling banyan tree developing off-shoot branches of more than 190 full- fledged centers across the globe, each being economically self -independent, but under the umbrella with spiritual control and guidance of Belur Math. Many of these centers caters to number of educational institutes and/or permanent health centers spread across, mainly amongst the poorer section of the society (in developing countries, like India, Bangladesh, etc). Thus has sprung up today, 1189 educational institutes, of which 785(66%) are for the villages and tribal areas. At present, there are also 1450 health care centers run by Ramakrishna Math and Mission, of which 1144 centers (79%) caters to the need of the less privileged sections of the society, existing in villages. In addition to above, the house holder devotees have also organized around 1200 branches in India alone (under the auspices of Bhab Prachar Samity) under direct guidance from Belur Math, for their spiritual advancement in line with the message of Sri Ramakrishna, adhering to the principle on 'service to man as service to God' (Atmono Moksarthong Jagathitaya ca). Besides taking recourse to other spiritual practices like, prayer/meditation etc.

This article is an attempt to understand how this mammoth organization was established by Swamiji and what guided it to progress and grow.

Key Words: Organization, Belur Math, Service to Man, Divinity, Spiritual Journey, Ramakrishna Sangha, Sri Ma Sarada Devi, Meditation, Trinity, Prophet.

Introduction: It all started on 1st May, 1897, at the Baghbazar residence of Late Balaram Bose, who was an ardent devotee of Sree Ramakrishna¹. A large number of devotees assembled there at 3PM, addressing whom Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji), gave an inspiring speech on Sri Ramakrishna's message and a proposal to set up an organisation to propagate His message. He said-- "The conviction has grown in my mind after all my travels....that no great cause can succeed without (forming) an organisation.let this association (organisation) be named after Him (Sri Ramakrishna)within twenty years of whose passing away a wonderful diffusion of His holy name and extraordinary life has taken place both in the East and the West. We are all his servants. Be you all helpers in this cause"¹. All the disciples including the great dramatist Sri Girish Chanda Ghosh approved and the society was named Ramakrishna Mission. Swamiji himself became the president for the time being, and other office bearers were also elected.

Swamiji had already spelt out three years before about the scheme of work to be followed by such a mission. In a letter to his fellow monks at Alambazar Math in 1894 Swamiji wrote, "I am giving you a new idea....Make an organized plan....You have lots of poor and ignorant folk there. Go to their cottages, from door to door....and open their eyes. Books won't do- give them oral teaching. Then slowly extend your centers.....What is wanted is (utilizing) a power of organisation....We must electrify the society, electrify the world*Ceremonials are meant for house-holders, your (monk's) work is the distribution and propagation of thought currents.*Start (such) centers at places."²

Swami Yogananda—fellow monk of Swamiji, however had some apprehension over Swamiji's new ideas and said to Swamiji "You are doing these things in Western methods. Should you say Sri Ramakrishna left us any such instruction"¹?

Swami Yogananda was indeed both right and wrong. He was right because the utility of an organization in spreading new ideas or propagating some mission was indeed a Western idea, over which Swamiji himself admitted to for its huge possibility³. He noted the followers of Ramakrishna seated alone under a tree in a village would have to wait for those in trouble to come to consult them. But in the United States he could at once realize how much could be accomplished by organizing such work. However, he was doubtful about the type of organization which would be acceptable to the Indian ethos and gave a great deal of thought as to how to adapt Western schemes, to the best advantage of his own people."³.

On the other side however, Swami Yogananda was unable to fathom the wider vision of Sri Ramakrishna's message, which only Swamiji could gauge unlike his all other fellow monks and devotees. Hence Swamiji responded to Swami Yogananda's apprehension saying, "How do you know this is not in Sri Ramakrishna lines? He had an infinite breadth of feeling and dare you shut him up within your own limited views of life? I will break down all these limits ...and broadcast over the earth his boundless inspiration. He never instructed me to introduce any rites of his own worship.I haven't been born to found one more sect in a world already teeming with sects.we are born to carry his

message to the dwellers of the three worlds (whole universe).Time and again have I received in this life marks of his grace....So casting all doubt please help me in my work’’¹.

Swami Yogananda accepted to the wider vision of Sri Ramakrishna’s message over which Swamiji made them aware of and said, “ Yes, whatever you wish shall be fulfilled..... I do clearly see how Sri Ramakrishna is getting all these things done through you’’¹ Swamiji continued saying, “ Sri Ramakrishna is not exactly what the ordinary followers have comprehended of him.Even if you might have an idea of Brahma Jnana, the knowledge of the absolute, you could not have any idea of the unfathomable depth of His mind!Thousands of Vivekananda may spring forth through one gracious glance of his eyes!He has chosen to get things done this time through me as his single instrument, what can I do in this matter..... take it from me, never did come to this earth such an all perfect man as Sri Ramakrishna ’’¹

It may be relevant to cite here an example of Swamiji’s unique insight in gauging the depth of Sri Ramakrishna’s message. Swami Saradananda cites such an incident, where Sri Ramakrishna was speaking on the principles that are to be adhered to in leading a spiritual life, like, love in God’s name, showing kindness to all, etc. After a while in semi-trance state, He started challenging, “Be kind to all ! What an audacity you have to show kindness! Rather, say- ‘*Service to all as service to God (as Shiva)*’”. Along with others Swamiji also listened to it and it was only Swamiji and nobody but Swamiji, who could realize the depth of this sagacious message. He said, “What a wonderful sermon I heard now. This is the philosophy with which Vedanta of the sages in the forest can be made of practical use by all. If opportunity comes, I shall preach this wonderful message to all. ... This philosophy would be the universal message overwhelming and applicable to all.....If one can serve all beings considering it as the service to God only, then having purified his mind, can thus attain divinity himself.. ...and thus would attain the same spirituality, which can be achievable through intense spiritual practices like Raj-Joga, Bhakti-Joga etc.’’⁴.

Perhaps because of such vision of Swamiji to interpret and annotate his Guru, that Sri Ramakrishna in his deathbed wrote in a piece of paper that it would be His NAREN (Swamiji) who will teach the world.

How important Thakur’s Naren was to Him, can be understood from the letter that Goodwin (Swamiji’s devoted steno cum disciple) wrote to Sarah Bull (a devotee of Swamiji). Learning from some senior monks Goodwin wrote her on 23rd may 1897, “When Paramhansa was passing away he called in all his disciples but Swamiji, and gave them an express command that they were to pay every attention to Swamiji and never to leave anything undone that could add to his health or, comfort. Then sending them out and calling in Swamiji, he committed all his other disciples under his charge⁵. In fact, such instruction to hold together all his favourite disciples under the sole guidance of Swamiji may be considered to be the seed of Ramakrishna Mission sown, at the Cossipore Math by Sri Ramakrishna’s himself in His deathbed.

Sister Nivedita in her book, 'The Master as I saw him' has penned down beautifully how important were the joint efforts of Swami Vivekananda and his fellow monks in formulating Swamiji's dream of setting up Ramakrishna Mission. She commented, "Meaningless would have been the Order of Ramakrishna without Vivekananda, even so futile would have been the life and labours of Vivekananda, without behind him his brothers of the Order of Ramakrishna"⁶. On the other side, Swamiji's deep love, modesty and regards for his fellow monks can be appreciated from the instruction that Swamiji imparted to his first and favoured disciple Swami Sadananda, who was then staying at Baranagar Math with the fellow monks of Swamiji. He wrote to Swami Sadananda on 14th Feb. 1890, "Those with whom you are staying are such (spiritually advanced) that even I am not able to call myself their humblest servant and take the dust of their feet"⁷. Such mutual love and regards for each other was the greatest bondage in the formation of Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

Swamiji's resolve to do good to the world in tune with Sri Ramakrishna's message can be understood from a letter that he wrote from Chicago to Girish Chandra Ghosh in 1895. He wrote, "I shall work incessantly until I die, and even after death I shall work for the good of the world.I do not care whether they are Hindus, or Mohammedans or Christians, but those that love the Lord will always command my service"⁸.

The deep regards of Swamiji towards his Guru, Sri Ramakrishna, whose divinity he did not hesitate to test even in His death bed (August, 1886), wrote later in 1894 to one of his fellow monks-- Swami Sivananda, "...that Ramakrishna Paramhansa was God incarnate, I have not the least doubt....without studying Ramakrishna Paramhansa first, one cannot understand the real import of Vedas, the Vedanta, of the Bhagbata and other Puranas. His life is a searchlight of infinite power thrown upon the whole mass of Indian religious thoughts. He was the living commentary of the Vedas and to their aim. He had lived in one life the entire cycle of the national religious existence in India.He is the most perfect--the concentrated embodiment of knowledge, love, renunciation, catholicity and the desire to serve mankind. ...My supreme good fortune is that I am His servant life after life. A single word of his is to me far weightier than the Vedas and Vedanta⁹ (for propagating his message for the good of the world)⁹. Making a detailed scheme of work that should be undertaken in preaching the message of Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji wrote to Swami Ramakrishnananda on 27th April, 1896, "...He (Shri Ramakrishna) was more liberal, more original, and more progressive than all his predecessors (prophets). ...the teaching of this new incarnation ...is that the best point of Yoga, devotion, knowledge, and work must be combined now so as to form a new society ...this is the new religion of this age....The previous incarnations were alright, but they have been synthesized in the person Sri Ramakrishna....Now we have a new India, with its new God, new religion and new Vedas."¹⁰

The hardship and oppugnancy that Swamiji with his fellow monks faced from the society have also been expressed by Swami Vivekananda in his talk at Pasadona Shakespeare Club in California on Jan, 1900. Swamiji categorically mentioned that all he

preaches are only the echo of the ideas of his Guru and mentor Sri Ramakrishna. He said, "I believed that this man's (Sri Ramakrishna's) ideas were for the good of India and the world.....there with some other young men (his brother disciples) we conceived that this (His) ideal had to be spread andmade practical.We must show the spirituality of the Hindus, the mercifulness of the Buddhists, the activity of the Christians, the brotherhood of the Mohammedans by our practical lives.....just think of it - a dozen boys telling people vast big ideas, saying they are determined to work these ideas in life.everybody laughed. From laughter it became persecution.....His wife (Sri Ma Sarada Devi) was the only one who sympathized with these boys.But she was poorer than us. ...That made us go from Himalayas to Cape Comorin.. ..No compromise was the watchword. This is the ideal and this has got to be carried out. ...finally the Parliament of religions opened and I met kind friends, who helped meI have made a rude beginning (for fulfilling my mission). But the same work I want to do for women. ...I told you of the lady (Sri Ma Sarada Devi) who was my Master's wife. We have all great respect for her"¹¹. Acknowledging the unstinted support of Sri Ma Sarada Devi in the formation of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Swamiji later commented, "Though Sri Ma Sarada Devi herself was as helpless like us, but her unstinted support and sympathy with her ideal life was a great inspiration to all of us"¹².

In fact, the great obeisance and deep regards that Swamiji associated with holy mother Sri Ma Sarada Devi, would be evident from his letter to Swami Sivananda. He wrote in 1894, " Why is it that our country is the weakest and most backwards of all nations-because Shakti is held in dishonor there. Mother (Sri Ma Sarada Devi) has been born to revive that wonderful Shakti in India, and making her the nucleus, once more Gargis and Maitreyis will be born into the world.To me Mother's (Sri Ma Sarada Devi's) grace is hundred thousand times more valuable than Father's (Sri Ramakrishna's). Mother's grace, Mother's blessings are all paramount to me.If but Mother orders, her servant (Swamiji himself) can work anything. Brother! Before proceeding to America I wrote to Mother to bless me. Her blessings came and at one leap I cleared the ocean (attaining success in America etc).I shall show how to worship the living Durga (Sri Ma Sarada Devi) and then I shall be worthy of my name*"⁹

[Swamiji expressed the desire to establish first an Institution, for women Sannyasinis for uplifting the women⁹. But Swami Yogananda dissuaded him reminding that Sri Ma Sarada Devi cautioned not to go for preaching Her, in her lifetime, which Swamiji gratefully acknowledged. However, an institution for women bearing the name as **Sri Sarada Math** came up as a sister organisation of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, three decades after Sri Ma Sarada Devi left her mortal body in 1920. As per Swamiji's direction⁹ this Math is fully run by women monks only, with no control of men over it. Perhaps it is the only organization in history, which is wholly run and administered by women with no say or interference of men over it. It may be pertinent to note that the first President of this Math was a Sannyasini, who nursed Sri Ma Sarada Devi till her last^{9a}, and was a direct student*

of Sister Nivedita, Swamiji's spiritual daughter. Subsequent two Presidents were the faculties of Nivedita School, as had been founded and run by Sister Nivedita^{9a}]

In fact, all the disciples and devotees of Sri Ramakrishna are convinced that it was the earnest prayer and will of Sri Ma Sarada Devi, that bore fruit and formed the basis and foundation of Ramakrishna Math and Mission. She used to pray to Sri Ramakrishna, if His departure puts an end to everything, then what for did he come down at all, and faced so much of hardship? She felt pain to watch Sree Ramakrishna's disciples roaming around and sustaining on mere alms like the roving monks seen in plenty at Benaras or, Vrindaban. Her constant prayer was to let them be provided with regular food and a permanent shelter.¹³ The support of Sri Ma Sarada Devi, and the guidance that she made for the sustenance of the organization (Ramakrishna Math and Mission) was acknowledged by Swamiji with great reverence in his talk at Pasadona Shakespeare club in California, as stated previously.^{9, 11, 13}

Under the above backdrop the different stages on the development of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, may be spelt out as below:

1. Nucleus formation- Serving the Master at Cossipore Math.
2. Preparatory phase I- Spiritual Journey with intense austerity at Baranagar Math.
3. Preparatory phase II- Spiritual journey of intermittent roving monkhood at Alambazar Math.
4. Creation of the Math- Establishment and expansion centering Belur Math.
5. Challenges and Charisma of Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

Elaboration of the above points have been elucidated below.

Nucleus Formation- Cossipore Math: Sri Ramakrishna came to Cossipore garden House on 11th Dec. 1885 for facilitating his cancer treatment, being closer to Calcutta. He stayed there for 248 days at a stretch till 16th August 1886, when He left his mortal body¹⁵. Sri Ramakrishna Himself commenting upon the implication of His deadly disease (Cancer), said it to be instrumental in acting as a sieve to separate the superficial ones from the true and sincere devotees.^{15a} . Around 16-17 of his very close and sincere devotees came together to stay with him for his nursing. Taking the opportunity of the constant presence of their Guru, they all did their utmost in their burning desire of spiritual progress, under His direct care and guidance who himself was Love personified to all of them. Sri Ramakrishna himself gave *gerua* ochre (monkhood cloth) to 11 of them and bound them in one unit¹⁶ . On 11th Feb, 1886 he wrote in a piece of paper that 'Naren will teach the world' giving a clarion call and added "Hail to Sri Radha", the epitome of divine love. Though Naren (Swamiji) at first declined on such a big task, but Sri Ramakrishna not only insisted upon, but also made Naren (Swamiji) worthy of it, transferring him all His own esoteric mystic power. He asked Narendra Nath to oversee, so that all his fellow monks are taken great care, and do not return back to be householder.¹⁶ Thus, the seed of Ramakrishna Math and Mission was sown at Cossipore Math, by Sri Ramakrishna himself.¹⁶

On the other side, Sri Ma Sarada Devi came to Cossipore Math mainly for domestic activity and nursing of Sri Ramakrishna. But unnoticed by all she was being groomed by Sri Ramakrishna for advancing the spiritual message with the advent of the newer age, telling her that, “She would have to accomplish much more than what He had done for.”¹⁷ Later Swamiji gratefully acknowledged Her role, inspiration and unstinted support in the efforts of establishing the mission.^{12, 17}

The house holder devotees and the monks had mutual regards for each other and maintained a respectable distance.¹⁷ On 1st January, 1885, 35 such householder devotees got enriched with His highest blessings, and Cossipore Garden house got reverberated with exclamations of ‘Hail Ramakrishna’ (Jai Ramakrishna) all around.¹⁸

It may be relevant to add here an incident, on Sri M’s (Sri Mahendralal Gupta - the revered author of Gospels of Sri Ramakrishna) aspiration expressed to Sri Ramakrishna. Once at Dakhsineswar while Sri Ramakrishna was seated in meditation at his Holy seat ‘Panchabati’ (auspicious seat near the combination of five specific trees), Sri M standing nearby entreated Him for His current of spirituality to flow from there which could then submerge everything gloriously; to which Sri Ramakrishna nodded . Perhaps that current of spirituality taking shape from Cossipore Math blossomed at Belur Math via Baranagar and Alambazar Math, for the welfare of humanity.¹⁹

Spiritual journey undertaken at Baranagar Math with extreme austerity and devotion: If Sri Ramakrishna was the centre-stage at Cossipore Math, it was Swamiji who was at the centre stage of Baranagar Math. After Sri Ramakrishna left His mortal body, the Cossipore Garden house got vacated. But soon after, with the support* of Sri Ramakrishna’s house holder devotee SurendraNath Mitra--- Narendra Nath (Swamiji) could hire a 6 roomed dilapidated house at Baranagar near Ganges, sometimes in October 1886; so that as per his Guru’s command he bring forth all his fellow monks together and continued with their spiritual journey that started at the Cossipore Math. It could also be a place of solace for the householder devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, reminding them about his life and glory^{20, 21}.

[However the Math suffered great difficulties after the demise of its financiers and Sri Ramakrishna’s house holder devotees, Surendra Nath Mitra on 25th May, 1890, and of Balaram Bose on 25th April, of the same year^{20a}].*

A significant incident occurred in Dec. 1886, a few months after their stay at Baranagar Math, which may be worth citing. Swamiji along with 8 other brother disciples (Tarak, Sashi, Kali, Baburam, Sarat, Niranjan, Gangadhar and Sarada) visited Atpur at the invitation of Baburam’s mother. After a few days of their stay there, Swamiji alighting a fire like the monks, started talking about the glories of Sri Ramakrishna and also narrated in electrifying language the sacrifice of Jesus and his disciples; and along with his other fellow monks took the pledge of leading the life of a monk renouncing the world and sacrifice their life for the good of the world. To their surprise they found it was just the day prior to Christmas (24th Dec). They realised that Sri Ramakrishna had already made them

monk, now it was pledged on a sound base with the ritualistic fire remaining as the witness to their commitment.²² Later, they all took formal monkhood performing rituals like *Biraja Home* etc, which included other fellow monks of Swamiji as well, like, Rakhal, Latu, Jogin, Buro-Gopal, etc; after which each of them took up their monkhood name*^{22, 22a}.

*[*Besides Swamiji, the monkhood names as taken by the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna are: .Brahmananda (Rakhal), Premananda (Baburam), Shivananda (Tarak), Yogananda (Jogin), Saradananda(Sarat), Ramakrishnananda (Shashi), Niranjanananda (Niranjan), Trigunatitananda (Sarada), Abhedananda(Kali), Advaitananda (Buro- Gopal)), Advutananda (Latu), Akhandananda (Gangadhar), Jnanananda, Nirmalananda(Tulsi), Subodhananda (Khoka) and Vijnanananda (Hariprasanna)^{22, 22a} . Swami Vijnanananda, the engineer monk, who was instrumental in giving shape to the construction of the present Belur Math as per Swamiji's design, was working as the Executive Engineer at Allahabad, and took up monkhood much later in 1899, after leaving his coveted job^{22b}.]*

They all used to spend the time in deep contemplation of Jap /Meditation from morn till 4-5PM almost non-stop, when Sashi Maharaj would make them get up forcefully to take food (Prasad of Sri Ramakrishna). He had great perseverance in the worship of the Master, which made him visualize that Sri Ramakrishna has reappeared before him and is actually receiving his offerings made to Him²³.

There was so much scarcity of bare necessities, that they could manage to get only a square meal a day and that too with bitter leaves and boiled rice, as could be availed from alms. The penury was so extreme that even salt was not available many a times. Such hardship continued months together. But they remained enraptured meditating and contemplating on Sri Ramakrishna's love and grace to them²⁴. Sashi Maharaj wrote, "Often we had only plain dry rice to eat and that too once a day. We had no dishes, not even leaf plates. There was one piece of matting, this we would wash, put the rice on it, sit around and eat from the common pile. How joyous it was even while taking this meagre food all together and with lots of fun; many a times discussing high philosophy and virtues of renunciation, even during our eating all together, unmindful of the poor quality of food we were taking. At times, when we had to starve having no food availed, we would forget our hunger getting deeply engaged in meditation and Jap with more vigorousness.²⁴ They all used to sleep together, 10-12 of them, under one big mosquito-curtain. Most of the time they kept concentrated on Jap/Meditation, with a small gap during eating or, discussions on scriptures etc. They slept very little.²⁵ At Baranagar Math, they were totally unmindful of body care or health care over which Sashi Maharaj said, " We were so full of **ardour** in those days, we did not care what we had and what we did not have...In our heart was a burning fire of renunciation which the Master had lighted and we were blissful.²⁶

The residents of Baranagar Math along with their incessant Jap/meditation/study, also took service to people and did not hesitate to nurse leprosy affected people. Swami Sadananda took particularly active role in such services. They nursed small pox afflicted

relation of Swamiji, Ram Dutta's daughter suffering from burn injuries and nursing Balaram Bose during his illness- are some such examples.²⁷

Swamiji and his fellow monks having stayed together for nursing of Sri Ramakrishna at Cossipore Math, had already developed a deep brotherly affection amongst them. Such love for each other and the deep inspiration earned from Sri Ramakrishna were the foundation stones with which their leader Swamiji could proceed to set up the permanent organization, the Math.²⁸ The secret of their unison and deep love for each other was because of their intense spirit of sacrifice and firm faith for the ideal.²⁹

Sri Ma Sarada Devi used to say, "It is love which has concretized Ramakrishna Sangha, the other name of which is Love." Mahendra Nath Dutta (younger brother of Swamiji) wrote, "It was such a deep lively love that was seen at Baranagar Math, that it could be touched, felt and even smeared over whole of the body."³⁰ Speaking of such deep love amongst the brother disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji told Nivedita, "If I become drunkard or characterless, my extremely devoted disciples would kick me out, but still to my brother disciples I shall remain the same dearest Naren to them." Where such love is met it gives birth to a great religion. The creation and growth of Ramakrishna Mission stems from such unstinted love only. ...The five and half years life at Baranagar Math, played a pivotal role in the formation of Ramakrishna Mission.³⁰

Swami Shivananda (Tarak) said, the four pillars of Ramakrishna mission are: love, generosity, purity and selflessness'. He used to say, "We have not created this Sangha, it was Sri Ramakrishna himself who created it during his illness. It was during this period that he taught Swamiji and others as to how it should be formed and run."³⁰

It may be worth citing that Sri Ramakrishna's ideal did spread amongst receptive minds without any preaching. Even before Swamiji became well known and famous from his Chicago address, quite a number of young men started visiting, interacting and even staying with the monks of Baranagar Math. Some of the important ones of them are: Sudhir, Sushil, Sukul, Haripada, Khagen, Kalikrishna, etc. All of them later joined in the monkhood of Ramakrishna Math and Mission.³¹

Alambazar Math - Spiritual Journey Phase II: Around 1892—that is 6 years after the Master's demise --Baranagar Math had to be shifted to a bigger house at Alambazar near Dakhsineswar, to accommodate increasing number of the members joining the Math, requiring a larger space. It also had the benefit of having a cheaper rent, since it was believed by locals to be a haunted house.³²

For an year or, so the monks at Alambazar Math faced virtually hardship similar to that of Baranagar Math, but later things eased out to some extent, from donations and support of many new devotees³⁴. By then, the number of monks at Alambazar Math had increased considerably (around 23) than that of Baranagar Math (around 11 or, so permanently staying); despite the fact that some of them stayed away from the Math quite frequently, in their zeal to undertake spiritual pursuits at holy places, like, Vrindaban, Varanasi or, for

Himalayas, etc. The exception was Swami Ramakrishnananda, who steadfastly remained in the Math itself, worshipping the image of Sri Ramakrishna, as if feeling His actual presence there all the time. He worshipped with great devotion continuously for eleven years at a stretch (at Baranagar Math together with the Alambazar Math), till he started for Madras towards the end of March 1897, to start a new Ramakrishna Mission center there, at Swamiji's request.³⁵

The activities and importance of six years duration of the Alambazar Math, starting from Feb. 1892 till Feb. 1898, may be divided into three phases. The first phase may be said to have continued till April, 1894 when the monks got elated receiving Swamiji's letter; the second phase till Feb. 1897, immediately before formally setting up of Ramakrishna Mission; and the third phase ended on 13th Feb. 1898, when it shifted seeking for a permanent center with the abode of its own. As the Alambazar Math got severely damaged from an earthquake in mid 1897, it had to be shifted with Sri Ramakrishna relics etc. to the Garden House of Nilambar Mukherjee (adjacent to the present Belur Math), as provisional arrangement to make ready for a permanent center at Belur Math.^{36,37}

The first two years of Alambazar Math may be said to be virtually the extension of Baranagar Math with similar spiritual pursuits, but with intermittent visits of the monks at different holy places, from their individual quest for spirituality.^{36, 38} Swamiji however had left from Baranagar Math itself in 1891, for a long journey as wandering monk (after a few intermittent visits away since July 1890), from his inner call to fulfill his life's mission, entrusted by Sri Ramakrishna.³⁶ Six years later after creating greatest stir in Chicago and grand success in America, he returned back to join at Alambazar Math on 19th Feb. 1897, towards the end of its second phase.^{38,39}

It may be pertinent to add here that in 1891 itself, when Swamiji met the well-to-do Sanskrit scholar Promoda Das Mitra at Varanasi, he boldly announced by way of talks with him, that before his next visit there, he would make such a big bang that the whole nation would be bound to follow him, which proved to be a prophecy later on.⁴

The monks learnt of the activities with success stories (at Chicago, in Sept. 1893) of their adorable leader Swamiji, when his letter from America reached them in April, 1894; after his long absence from Baranagar Math, having undertaken his solo journey as a wandering monk to fulfill his life's mission. That was the first letter that reached them since Swamiji's absence from them. Thereafter, Swamiji's letters sent frequently to them scheming of their proposed future programme and success stories, were making them enthralled, enkindled but to some extent perplexed as well, from Swamiji's *new ideas* of their future plan and mission.³⁶

It may be noted that Baranagar Math along with the initial stage of Alambazar Math was mainly envisioned with intense spiritual pursuits of the individual monks. But at Alambazar Math, it got heightened to accommodate the society at large seeking for their all out welfare, with new order of norms, way of life and certain self imposed regulatory disciplines, at the

call of Swamiji to his brother disciples.³⁶ Swamiji wrote them in 1894 itself, “I am ready to lay down my life to help his (Sri Ramakrishna’s) teachings ...his message (be) spread all over the world. ...Make an organized plan.A huge spiritual tidal wave is coming- he who is low shall become nobleArise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached.....He alone is a child of Ramakrishna, who is moved to pity for all creatures and exerts himself for them even at the risk of personal damnation.he who is Ramakrishna’s child does not seek his personal good. ...They wish to do good to others even at the point of death.Propagate his character, his teachings, his religion. This is the only spiritual practice, the only worship, this verily is the means, and this the goal. . . .Whoever will be ready **to serve him-no, not him but his children-** the poor and the downtrodden, the sinful and the afflicted, down to the very worm -who will be ready to serve these, in them he will manifest himself.”⁴¹ This letter clearly spelt out the plan for future Ramakrishna Mission, that could be formally set up three years later, on 1st May, 1897, to fulfill the task he was assigned for, by his Guru Sri Ramakrishna.

In the same year in 1894, Swamiji inspired the monks of Alambazar Math, elaborating his thoughts more clearly whom he wrote, “....Worship the Living -God, the Man-God- every being that wears a human form- God in his universal as well as an individual aspect. The universal aspect of God means this world, worshipping it means serving it- this indeed is work, not indulging in ceremonials.....Let some of you spread like fire, and preach the worship of the universal aspect of the Godhead- a thing that was never undertaken before in our country.It is only by doing good to others that one attains to one’s good, and it is only by leading others to Bhakti, Mukti, that one attains them oneself. ...Remember these few points:

1. We are Sannyasins, who have given up everything -Bhakti, Mukti, enjoyment and all.
2. To do the highest good to the world, everyone down to the lowest -this is our vow.
3. Ramakrishna Paramhansa came for the **good of the world.**
4. He who will bow before Him will be converted into purest gold that very moment. Go with this message from door to door....spread them in an organized way. .. PS. We want thousands of men, and thousands of women, who will spread like wild fire from Himalayas to Cape Comorin, from North Pole to South Pole- all over the world.⁴²

It may be noted that the fellow monks of Swamiji kept on preaching the message of Sri Ramakrishna far and wide at Swamiji’s behest, during the third part of their stay at Alambazar Math. In 1896, Swami Saradananda went to England for the same and returned back preaching Vedanta in America, as well. Swami Sivananda went to Colombo for preaching Vedanta and returned back after seven months in Feb, 1898. Swami Abhedananda started for London, in Aug. 1895 to preach Vedanta in the West.⁴³ Swami Ramakrishnananda set out to establish a permanent Math and Mission center at Chennai, in March, 1897.^{35, 39}. Thus with Swamiji’s new ideals introduced, the focus of the activities of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, started concentrating on preaching and doing good to the world as service to God. Perhaps, that is why Swami Ramakrishnananda said to Devmata (Ms. Laura Glenn) , “In the beginning we had no thought of Mission. We believed that all

we had to do was realize the ideal the Master set before usIf we had believed we have some special work to do, probably we had lived differently. We would not have spent out our strength in so many severe austerities.’’⁴⁴

It may be pertinent to add here that towards the end of March, 1897, two months before the formation of Ramakrishna Mission, Swamiji seeking for blessings of Sri Ma Sarada Devi prostrated before her, who blessed him saying, “Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) is always with you, you have to do lots for uplifting the society.’’

Swamiji replied, “Mother! I can clearly see to it, that I am but the instrument in the hands of Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna). I went to America with your blessings and from my grand success there I could clearly realize that it was the Mother Kali, as Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) used to say, paved my way to success throughout.’’

Sri Ma Sarada Devi replied, “Thakur and Mother Kali is one and the same. It was he who got everything done through you.’’

With great emotion Swamiji said, “Mother!I want to preach His message all around, and for this purpose would like to start an organization, as early as possible, but am not been able to achieve it fast.’’

Sri Ma Sarada Devi responded, “My son! Surely Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) will soon fulfill your dream, and you will meet with success in your noble efforts.’’⁴⁵

As if a divine prediction was made thus, Sri Ma Sarada Devi’s blessings bore fruit. By next two months Ramakrishna Mission could be formally set up (1st May, 1897) with Swamiji as the President, Swami Brahmananda as the head of the Calcutta centre, and Swami Yoganada getting elected as the Vice President.^{46, 47} Thereafter, within a year of Sri Ma Sarada Devi’s blessings, the land for a permanent center was possible to be acquired at Belur, after Swami Yogananda okayed it from necessary inspection on suitability of the land (for making the Math), which was situated on the Western bank of the Ganges with around 22 Bighas of land inclusive of two houses.^{45, 48} This land deal for constructing Belur Math, could then be finalized making the initial payment Rs 1001/ by Swami Vijnanananda on 3rd Feb, 1898; the final payment of which, could also be made on 4th March, 1898, on availing the donation of Rs 39,000/ from Swamiji’s devotee Miss Henrietta Muller of UK.⁴⁸ Of course, it took around four decades (14th Jan. 1938)⁴⁹ to construct the Belur Math, completing the massive Math structure and placing the marble statue of Sri Ramakrishna in the Sanctum sanctorum of the big hall, as per Swamiji’s design (besides preparing the ground and renovating/ constructing the required houses for office, monks quarters, training center, etc, in it); all of which were accomplished by the engineer monk, Swami Vijnanananda.^{49, 50}

Creation of the Math- establishment and expansion centering Belur Math: The severe austerities with incessant spiritual contemplation at Baranagar monastery was necessary for future genesis of the Math. Likewise, certain new values and disciplines, introduced at

the Alambazar Math, was also an important step in monastic life with idealization of Sri Ramakrishna movement that culminated and expanded centering the Belur Math.⁵¹

In fact, Ramakrishna movement centering Belur Math, may be considered to have begun from 9th Dec. 1898, when Swamiji himself (along with his brother disciples and other devotees) carried the urn containing the ashes of Sri Ramakrishna (the holy pot of *Atmaram*) to the spot of the newly acquired land at Belur, where the construction of the Math was being contemplated. Worshipping it there with Yajna, Swamiji prayed for Sri Ramakrishna to stay there for a long period for the good of many and for welfare of all. He then affirmed, “With the will of Sri Ramakrishna the spiritual centre for the pursuit of wisdom and spirituality has just been founded here now.” The very atmosphere there vibrated with spirituality with all sensing the presence of the Master himself.^{52, 53} It may be remembered that Sri Ramakrishna assured Swamiji that he would be glad to reside wherever his favourite Naren (Swamiji) would keep him carrying in his shoulder. However, it took nearly a month, 2nd Jan. 1899, for permanent shifting of the Math to its newly acquired abode at Belur.⁵⁴ But mainly due to paucity of funds it took nearly four decades to complete the construction of the massive structure of Belur Math, as per Swamiji’s proposed design, along with the marble statue of Sri Ramakrishna in the pedestal of the sanctum sanctorum, which was inaugurated on 14th Jan. 1938, with regular worship of Sri Ramakrishna there since then.⁴⁹

Other significant and auspicious dates, where grand functions were held at Belur Math (make- shift Math then) etc, are as below:

- 12th Nov, 1898- when Sri Ma Sarada Devi Herself visited the Math and worshipped the image of Sri Ramakrishna in the newly procured land at Belur, after which Swamiji entreating her said, “Mother! This being your own place, now you roam about here as you please.”⁵⁵
- 13th Nov. 1898- Swamiji’s cherished dream of opening up Nivedita’s school for women education was fulfilled on that Kali Pujah day. It had the blessings and all out support of Sri Ma Sarada Devi, from its very start.⁵⁷
- 20th Dec. 1898- when Sri Ma Sarada Devi Herself visiting Belur Math was much delighted to see the progress of the construction of Belur Math etc.⁵⁶
- 19th March, 1899- Advaita Ashram, dedicated to Advaita and Advaita alone, was set up at the lap of Himalayas (at Mayabati near Almorah at around 6500ft elevation) as per Swamiji’s longing, by his disciples Capt. Savier & Mrs Savier of UK. They along with Swami Swarupananda took charge of publishing anew the Journal ‘Probuddha Bharat’ from there.⁵⁹
- 13th March, 1899- Sri Ramakrishna’s birth anniversary festival (*Janma-tithi Puja Utsab*) was first held, in Sri Ramakrishna’s newly acquired abode at Belur Math. The general function followed on next Sunday (19th March), with Swamiji himself present there, where Nivedita gave an inspiring speech to the large assembly of devotees attending the function.⁶⁰

- 1901- when first Durga Pujah at Belur Math was held, where Sri Ma Sarada Devi graced the occasion .Thereafter Laxmi Pujah and Kali Pujah were also held successively.⁵⁸ Since then, all these Pujah functions of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, are held in the name of Sri Ma Sarada Devi.

Swamiji considered Sri Ramakrishna's birth anniversary festivals, to be instrumental in disseminating the message of Sri Ramakrishna amongst the masses. He commented, "Those who are not much conversant with the philosophy of religion, soul, etc would by and by, get conscious of and try to understand these abstract ideals, through such festivities. ...Such Tithi Utsab of Sri Ramakrishna would (thereby) be instrumental in advancing the message of Sri Ramakrishna."⁶¹ Even the grand receptions given to Swamiji himself (for his success in America etc) were also considered to be instrumental in promoting the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna. On one such occasion, Swamiji told his childhood friend Priya Nath Sinha, "Was not this reception done for me personally or, was not His (Sri Ramakrishna's) name glorified by this?Now they (people) will know Him graduallyWhen they know what He really was, then men- real men - will be made..So I say there should be some bustle and stir ...Let the people first learn to renounce their selfish nature by studying Sri RamakrishnaWhat we want are some young men, who will renounce everything and sacrifice their life for their country's sake....then some real work can be expected."⁶² While discussing what the members of the newly formed Ramakrishna Mission should do, Swamiji stressed upon the supreme importance of the 'gift of learning' and the 'gift of knowledge'and said 'Educate, educate' (stressed upon educating the people at large).⁶³

Swamiji's earnest desire to awaken the country was expressed in his talk with Sri Ramakrishna's highly esteemed house holder devotee Sri Durga Charan Nag, whom Swamiji told that he wanted to wake up the sleeping leviathan, the then India lost in stupor, to a sense of the eternal true religion. But he (Swamiji) was in dilemma and wondered whether his efforts in starting these Mutt's and Ashramas, are a step in the right direction. Sri Nag responded that such efforts will certainly *conduce to the well being of the world*. He also reminded of Sri Ramakrishna's words who said, 'the treasure is now locked'. The moment he (Swamiji) *knows of it*, his play as human being will be at an end. Sri Nag also applauded commenting that Swamiji himself was virtually the image of Sri Ramakrishna, the obverse and reverse of the same coin.⁶⁴

In fact, Swamiji's vision was quite clear in implementation of his ideas for organization of the Mutt with its mode of administration, imparting training, etc.To him organization meant division of labourHe stressed upon obedience, plodding industry and perseverance for success of the organisation. He envisioned the Mutt to emerge as the purity drilling machine,⁶⁵ which was virtually his envisioned theme of 'man-making mission'. Even much ahead of acquiring the land for establishing Belur Math, Swamiji wrote to the monks of Alambazar Math on 27th April, 1896, chalking out to the minutest details on the management of the Math, and suggested the guidelines and norms to be followed; so that it could fulfill the purpose for which the Master (Sri Ramakrishna) came- for the good of the world with propagation of knowledge and devotion to all, down to the

very lowest. Swamiji also categorically mentioned that they all have to play a great role for the well being of the world, of which they might not be self aware.⁶⁶

The role that was played later, by the Ramakrishna Mission monks in addressing societal maladies like, concurrent famine, epidemics, natural calamities, etc., invited high appreciation from all quarters, who were till then quite ignorant of the very existence of the mission. Particular mention may be made of plague that created havoc in Calcutta towards the end of nineteenth century (1898-1900).^{67, 68} People were then wonder-struck to notice an English Lady (Swamiji's spiritual daughter Sister Nivedita) and ochre robed monks (under the leadership of Swami Sadananda of the mission) doing a yeomen social service-cleaning the slum areas, streets and drains of Calcutta; and nursing those highly infectious patients of this deadly disease, with mother's care. The then paper wrote in its editorial, "The filthy habitation of the poor were carefully disinfected ...by the zealous members of the mission." Within five weeks the mission volunteers cleaned 1300 slum houses and 160 buildings and cleaned 160 cart load of domestic wastes/ rubbish. About the pitiable condition of the people then, Swami Saradananda wrote, "The plague, the famine, the cholera and small pox are doing their harvest."⁶⁷

Swamiji must have been quite elated at the self-less service rendered by the monks of the mission that he formed in the name of his Guru. He wrote to Mary Hale on 9th July, 1897, within a couple of months of setting up his cherished Ramakrishna Mission, "...my boys are working in the midst of famine and disease and misery- nursing by the reed mat-bed of the of the cholera -stricken pariah and feeding the starving ChandalaI must see my machine (Ramakrishna-Mission) in strong working order, and then knowing sure that I have put in a lever for the good of humanity...which no power can strike back, I will sleep." He wrote further, "...and may I be born again and again ...so that the only God that exists...the sum total of all souls; and above all, my God ..the miserable ...is the special object of my worship...He who is high and the low, the saint and the sinner, ..Him worship, the only visible God."⁶⁹ More or less in the same tune Swamiji wrote to Promoda Das Mitra, on 30th May, 1897, "--the truth I have realized is that altruistic service only is religion ...even it is wrong to hanker after one's own salvation."⁷⁰ Such humanism centric spirituality has also been expressed in Swamiji's letter to Alasinga, whom he wrote on 27th Oct. 1894, "I do not believe in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth.Where shall you go to seek for God -are not all the poor, the miserable, the weak, Gods ? Why not worship them first ?Have you love? -you are omnipotent.... Are you perfectly unselfish ? - you are irresistible."⁷¹

Such were the concept of religion and spirituality that Swamiji preached and vouched for.

Nearly a year after setting up the Mission, Swamiji being concerned for perpetuating the fruits of his endeavour, wrote to Swami Brahmananda, on 1st Aug. 1898, "...the work has somehow been started but it should go on and progress even when we are not here; such thoughts worry me day and night....I refer repeatedly election, accounts, and discussions so

that everybody must be prepared to shoulder the work.....Set up a machine as will go on automatically, no matter who dies, who lives.’’⁷²

The Math and Mission being fully run from donations of devotees and admirers, Swamiji was particularly careful to maintain high standard of financial probity in running of the Math and Mission, and plugged all loopholes for any lapses on the same. As the future guideline he strictly instructed, “One should keep the clearest account of everything in one’s charge-and never, never apply the funds (as may be availed) intended for one thing to another whatsoever- even if one starves the next moment.’’⁷³ Giving a meticulous guideline on maintaining account records, Swamiji also instructed, “To all those who send money to the Math:

- i) The acknowledgment of the amounts will be issued from the Math.
- ii) The acknowledgment will be in duplicate, one for sender and one for filing in the Math.
- iii) There must be big register in which all names and addresses of donors will be entered.
- iv) Accounts to the last pie must be kept of the amount donated to the Math.

The accounts afterwards should be published.’’⁷⁴

As the future guideline to be followed, Swamiji wrote to Swami Brahmananda, on 10th Aug. 1899, “Make a committee of all those who are in the Math. Consult the Committee in every detail regarding money matters. Get the signature of the committee for every item of expenditureno expenditure will be made which is not countersigned by them- none at all !’’⁷⁵ He also wrote cautioning Swami Akhandananda (who was the first to start Swamiji’s missionary work amongst orphans at Mahula, Mushidabad), “Wherever there isleast concern for money, there is the chance of misunderstanding. Let therefore nobody undertake such work as raising money on behalf of the Math.’’⁷⁶

Following his guidelines, rigorous financial measures and norms are followed, over all centers of Ramakrishna Math and Mission’s organisations, consisting of more than 190 centers across the globe.

Besides advising to be meticulous and careful in maintaining the accounts of the Math, Swamiji cautioned his fellow monks from mingling in politics, which may jeopardize its long term vision and perspective. Being thoroughly irritated for attaching political fodder in his write ups and speeches, Swamiji wrote to his disciple Alasinga, “You must warn the Calcutta people that no political significance be ever attached to any of my writings or sayings. What nonsense.This nonsense of public life and newspaper blazoning has disgusted me thoroughly.’’⁷⁷ The same opinion was expressed in Swamiji’s letter to Swami Akhandananda on 30th June, 1897, whom he cautioned on his philanthropic work undertaken, “Do not mix in politics etc., nor have any connection with them. At the same time you must not have quarrel with anybody.’’⁷⁸ Even to this day Ramakrishna Math and Mission maintains the same stance advocated by Swamiji. On being questioned later as to “Why not respond to the immediate needs of the society, if that can be met from following

the current political ideals;” a senior monk responded, “ These (current political ideals) are on temporal values only, whence ours (mission) is for eternal values.”

In order to seek funds for the construction and maintenance of the Math in its newly acquired land at Belur- Swamiji, despite his ill health, set sail for West towards the end of June 1899, with Sister Nivedita and Swami Turiananda.⁷⁹ In his address before his departure Swamiji explained in a short speech on his ideal of the monk hood- whom he wanted to be as free as the blowing wind, but with simultaneous obedience as a dog, and tenderness like the creeper (in their approach). They were also to be prepared for and efficient on also sorts of work, like keeping mindful on intense meditation and at the same time be ready if needed, for land-cultivation or, some such menial job performance, as well.⁷⁹

Making a long tour on preaching as well as assisting in the opening up Vedanta centers at different places in America, and also completing Europe visit (to UK, France -Paris, Germany, Switzerland) and interacting with the then intellectuals and the religious aspirants, Swamiji returned back to Belur Math on 9th Dec. 1900.⁸⁰

By mid 1900, Swamiji realised that his end is drawing near and wanted to hand over all the charges of Ramakrishna Math and Mission to the immediate disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, suggesting it to be run by a trustee board in accordance with the view of the majority.⁸¹ After consulting with the pleaders Swamiji finalized a religious trust deed on 30th Jan, 1901, and handed over the entire property of Belur Math to a trustee board consisting of his fellow monks keeping himself out of it.⁸² Swami Brahmananda, Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual son (opined to possess the wisdom of running an empire and affectionately nick-named as *Raja*, meaning **king**, by Swamiji), became the President* with Swami Saradananda as the General Secretary, of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, with its head quarters at Belur Math. Prior to this Swamiji wrote to Sister Nivedita from Paris, “Now I am free, as I have kept no power or, position for me in the work (of Ramakrishna Math and Mission). The Math etc. belong now to the immediate disciples of Ramakrishna except myself.The President-ship is now Brahmananda’s - next it will fall on Premananda, etc. etc. in turn. ...I am happy I have served Ramakrishna through mistakes and success for 20 years now.”⁸³

*[*Swami Brahmananda became the first President of all the units Ramakrishna Math and Mission with its head quarter at Belur Math. Till then, Swami Vivekananda was the General President, with Swami Brahmananda acting as the President of Calcutta center. From now on the post of general president got abolished.⁸⁴]*

Swamiji lived hardly one and half years, after he relinquished himself of all his charge from the active control of the Belur Math though he continued with his scholastic and spiritual interaction in its affairs. Even on the very day of his leaving the mortal body (night of 4th July, 1902), he took classes on Vedas (Sukla Jajur Vedas) and Sanskrit

Grammar, and thereafter discussed with Swami Premananda on his pet scheme of opening up an institute for teaching of Vedas, in addition to carrying on his usual routine of meditations.⁸⁵

Swami Brahmananda, as the President, had to take a proactive role to meet the teething troubles of the Math over which Swamiji got assured for his successful leadership. Proper accounts maintained on donations for relief work etc of the mission, of the amounts even accepted from abroad, having been circulated for public information, earned high regards from all quarters. As new centers started coming up, the center of Belur Math emerged as the headquarter. The monks with their spiritual journey undertaken on 'service to man as service to God' (*Atmono Moksarthong Jagadhitaya ca*), made a new impact on the society at large. Thus the spiritual stream that started from Dakshineswar spread across.⁵¹

The seed that was sown by Sri Ramakrishna himself at Cossipore and nurtured by Swamiji with his fellow monks establishing the Math in his name at Belur, grew like a sprawling banyan tree developing off-shoot branches of more than 190 full-fledged centers, each being economically self-independent, but under the umbrella with spiritual control and guidance of Belur Math.⁸⁶ Many of these centers caters to number of educational institutes and/or permanent health centers spread across, mainly amongst the poorer section of the society (in developing countries, like India, Bangladesh, etc). Thus has sprung up today, 1189 educational institutes, of which 785(66%) are for the villages and tribal areas. At present, there are also 1450 health care centers run by Ramakrishna Math and Mission, of which 1144 centers (79%) caters to the need of the less privileged sections of the society, existing in villages. In addition to above, the house holder devotees have also organized around 1200 branches in India alone (under the auspices of Bhab Prachar Samity) under direct guidance from Belur Math, for their spiritual advancement in line with the message of Sri Ramakrishna, adhering to the principle on 'service to man as service to God' (*Atmono Moksarthong Jagathitaya ca*), besides taking recourse to other spiritual practices like, prayer/meditation etc.⁸⁷ In 1954, women of Delhi organized Sarada Sangha which have made 60 centers of them covering 15 states in India, propagating the message of Sree Ramakrishna, Sri Ma Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. In 1963, with Eknath Ranade's involvement 'Vivekananda Centre at Cape Comarin' was opened which by now have 200 branches. Their studies in the advancement of agriculture, education, health care and their indigenous research on the same have been well recognized by the international community.⁸⁷

Ramakrishna Mission's societal services, in addition to helping the poorer section of the society are working incessantly for making them self supporting, which can be perceived from their service amongst Khasi-Chakma-Garos in Meghalaya, amongst Santals in Jharkhand, amongst Gonda- Oraons in Chattisgarh, amongst Harijans in Kerala, and amongst the Bhills in Gujrat. In addition, the Mission tries to make the destitute women self-reliant through Pallimangal service centers.⁸⁷

It is also worth citing in this context, Swamiji's ambitious forecast made as early as in 1902, when Ramakrishna Math and Mission remained confined to just a few centers only. Two days before leaving his mortal body Swamiji prophesied, "The spiritual impact that has come to Belur will last fifteen hundred years- and this will be a great University. I see it."⁸⁸

Charisma and Challenges of Ramakrishna Math and Mission: It would be obvious from above discussions, that the momentum gained in spreading the spiritual message of Sri Ramakrishna associated with its societal services for good of the world, as initiated by Swamiji in 1897, has got accelerated by now to a great extent, giving shape to the Ramakrishna movement to reckon with across the globe. After the demise of Swamiji, it was the untiring services and sacrifice of his fellow monks, besides the blessings and guidance from Sri Ma Sarada Devi (till 1920), that this movement could be advanced to its current stature. In fact, Swamiji's new ideas could not have been implemented without Sri Ma Sarada Devi's direct and unstinted support. Many of the house-holders devotees and even the monks thought meditation, prayer practices are the only means to be adhered to for spiritual advancement. Sri Ma Sarada Devi lauding Swamiji's ideas told them categorically, "How many people can do it that way (Jap/Meditation for spiritual advancement). If carried on such practices beyond one's innate capability then it may cause losing the mental balance. And sitting all the time with such Jap-Meditation etc practices *only*, one may become braggart and boastful. To annul all these one sided approach in spiritual practices, Naren (meaning Swamiji) therefore started self-less work as the means of making mind pure (needed for necessary Jap/Meditation etc. properly) for attaining spirituality."⁸⁹

In order to explain the logic for undertaking self-less work as the means for spiritual journey, Swamiji elaborated to his disciple Sarat Chandra Chakrabarty, the single sentence sermon of Sri Ramakrishna stressing upon, *service to man as service to God*. Swamiji wrote him "When you serve Jiva with the idea that he is a Jiva, it is Daya (compassion) and not Prema (love); but when you serve him with the idea that he is Self, that is Prema. That Atman is the one object of love is known from Shruti, Smriti and direct perception.Our principle therefore should be love and not compassion.For us it is not pity but to serve. Ours is not the feeling of compassion but of love, and the feeling of Self in all."⁹⁰

Two typical examples over such humanistic oriented spiritual journey, undertaken by the monk disciples of Swamiji are worth citing. Swami Achalananda (Kedar Baba) along with his friend Charuchandra (Swami Shubhananda) started 'Poor Man's Relief Association' at Varanasi in 1900, for nursing and treatment of the ailing forlorn pilgrims and destitute.⁹¹ They developed there a culture of looking to the ailing patients as Narayana (God-form) elevating their service to the stage of worship. The same tradition of worshipping the patients as God-form, is maintained in their services, till today -despite its huge development of coming up as one of the best hospitals as Ramakrishna Mission Sevashram, at Varanasi.

The other story is on Swamiji's two disciples Swami Kalyanananda and Swami Nischayananda. Motivated by Swamiji, they started a service center at Konkhol for treating and nursing the ailing monks and pilgrims of Haridwar-Hrishikesh, who were then left uncared for in those far flung places of Himalayas. The meager center, they began based on alms and donations received, have by now assumed the shape of a large hospital equipped with all modern facilities. Since they themselves used to clean and nurse the bedridden ailing monks, they were rather looked down upon, terming them as 'menial monk' (for doing cleaning etc menial jobs themselves); till they were given due honour, acknowledging their innate spirituality to be of the highest order by the then highly regarded Chief monk (Mohant) of Kailash Ashram, Dhonraj Giri himself.⁹² Such attitude prevailing amongst the then common monks speak volumes as regards Swamiji's contribution, in revolutionizing the spirituality concept, rationalizing it with the concept of humanity and societal values. This has been termed as popularizing the theoretical Vedanta in the forest to practical Vedanta having house-hold utility, for undertaking the spiritual journey.

Should we then consider the Ramakrishna mission that Swamiji set up to be one amongst many other philanthropic organisations (run by the monks)? The answer is: No, not precisely. It would be wrong to consider the Ramakrishna Mission set up by Swamiji to be just one of the many philanthropic organization run by monks. It is primarily a spiritual organisation, and nothing but a spiritual organisation and only a spiritual organisation. Its humanistic oriented societal services rendered by the monks, is the byproduct of it, not the main aim of it. It acts as an accelerating agent in undertaking spiritual practices with greater zeal, by improving upon the purity of mind. In this context Swamiji's letter to Mrs. Bull from New York is very significant. Swamiji wrote to her, "I get more and more convinced that there is no other object in work (self-less philanthropic work) except the purification of the soul-to make it fit for more knowledge (of spiritual growth). This world with its good and evil will go on in various forms. Only the evil and good will take new names and new seats."⁹³ Similar views are expressed in his Karma-Yoga, where he writes, "This world will go on with its happiness and misery through eternity.....It is a great privilege for all of us to be allowed to do anything for the world. In helping the world we really help ourselves" (making our mind purified for undertaking spiritual practices).⁹⁴

In fact, all the centers of Ramakrishna Math and Mission as per Swamiji's instruction opens before 4 AM, to get ready for meditation etc. sharp at 4AM. The vesper service for the evening prayer with oblations and prayer is also fixed at a particular time. The well known prayer songs and oblation were composed by Swamiji on 6th feb,1898, while worshipping Sri Ramakrishna at the residence of Sri Ramakrishna's devotee (Sri NabaGopal Ghosh).⁹⁵ It is to be stressed upon that Swamiji never gave any laxity to the usual spiritual practices like Jap/ Meditation etc. Even today many of the monks of the mission undertake *Tapasya* (spiritual practices staying alone for certain period of time) in forlorn cells of Himalayas or Narmada, as is the usual practice of serious spiritual seeker of the Hindu monks.

Does it then mean that Ramakrishna Math and Mission that Swamiji set up is another additional Hindu religious outfit ? Not exactly! It is true that like any other religious Hindu outfit Durga Puja-Kali Pujah etc. are rigorously and regularly held at the Mission; but it is also true that unlike other Hindu religious groups, birth celebration of Jesus at Christmas, is also held with equal sobriety at its centers. When Swamiji was travelling as a wondering monk, he had only two books with him- Srimad Bhagvad Gita and Imitation of Christ of Thomas A Kempis. When Swamiji's favourite disciple Maharaja Ajit Singh of Khetri met Swamiji, he was staying as an honoured guest of a Muslim advocate, near Abu hills, Rajasthan⁹⁶. Hyderabad's Muslim Nawab Khurshid Ja himself wanted to contribute to Swamiji's mission of going to Chicago as the representative of Hindu religion.⁹⁷ Even to this day a devout Muslim educationist (Ms. Marufi Khan) coming across with the monks of Ramakrishna Mission, is now fully engaged in advancing Ramakrishna movement with her writings and speeches on Sri Ma Sarada Devi, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. There are numerous examples of aspirants of different faiths (Muslim and/or Christian or others) who have been motivated in their spiritual journey on their own respective faiths, coming across with the monks of Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

This is possible because of Sri Ramakrishna's message to the mankind, which insisted upon becoming spiritual and to realize the truth for themselves. He proclaimed and made clear the fundamental unity of all religions (realized from his own religious practices of different religions). He left every religion undisturbed, because he had realised that in reality they are all part and parcel of the one eternal religion.⁹⁸ That is why Swamiji wrote to Sashi Maharaj, " ..the religion taught by Shri Ramakrishna, let the Hindus call it Hinduism- others call it in their own way.Was Sri Ramakrishna the savior of India only?"^{98a} Also, stating the purpose of the organization that Swamiji formed in the name of Sri Ramakrishna, he prophesied to his disciple Sarat Chandra Chakraborty, " This Math that we are building will harmonize all creeds, all standpoints. Just as Sri Ramakrishna held highly liberal views, this Math too will be a centre for propagating similar ideas. The blazing light (of spirituality) that will emanate from here will flood the whole world."⁹⁹

Keeping in tune with Swamiji's lectures at the Chicago Parliament of religion, Ramakrishna movement, that Swamiji initiated establishing Ramakrishna Math and Mission, helps a Hindu to become a better Hindu, a Muslim to become a better Muslim or, a Christian to become a better Christian - practicing attainment of spirituality in their own respective ways. We therefore find that this Math and Mission set up by Swamiji in the name of his Guru, is now drawing best scholars and sincere spiritual aspirants across the globe, irrespective of caste, creed, religion or, country.

But it has its own challenges to be met as well, over which Swami Saradananda's caution mentioned in its convention in 1926, is quite significant.¹⁰⁰ While analyzing an organization with its interaction with society, he mentioned three phases in its development. The first phase is the *opposition*, any new idea floated is obviously met with opposition from the conservatives. The second phase is *indifference*. People allow it to function once the organization survives the first onslaught of opposition, and remain indifferent to it. The

third phase which should be considered most crucial is the phase of *acceptance*. The organization is then required to develop its own vigil to maintain its sanctity, once the society starts accepting and considers it to be alright whatever the organization offers to it.

Being well aware of the ills of such acceptance phase, through which this organisation is passing through now, Ramakrishna Math and Mission have developed their own safeguard. Since it is the monks who are most important for heightening its sanctity, there is a system of rigorous training period after which only one can qualify to attain the highly esteemed position of monk-hood. Even after that, there is a system of purging. If one gets too much attached in the particular self-less work he is assigned to, or one's own self image comes up as the logghead to the spirituality pursuits which is the prime aim, then either he is detached from that job or, asked to leave. Of course later on, many of such monks have advanced Ramakrishna movement itself, which may not be exactly Belur Math centric only.

Thus the wave of Ramakrishna movement that started with Swamiji's setting up Ramakrishna Math and Mission, have swelled far and wide across the globe constituting Belur-Math centric as also beyond it, across the globe within one century and a quarter.

It may not be out of place to add here the mode of spread of the messages of two great prophets, Jesus and Buddha.

It was St Paul who took to spreading the message of Jesus, not confined to the Jews, but across the Roman empire. But His message spreading Christianity had to wait more than three centuries after Christ, for it to be embraced fully by the Roman empire¹⁰¹. As regards Buddhism is concerned, Buddha spread his message from intense travelling and teaching for 45 years, till he died in 483 B.C.E. His disciples were however, overshadowed by the dominant Hindu believers, till the Maurya King Ashoka converted to Buddhism at about 263 BCE (more than 200 years after Buddha) and started preaching covering almost the whole of India, consisting of his empire, as also sending emissaries to spread it in Sri Lanka and central Asia.¹⁰² It may be of interest to note that Buddha is considered to be a Hindu Prophet (one amongst the ten Incarnations of God -form), as per ancient Hindu scriptures.

Conclusion:

1. In the present consumer oriented culture of this global village, with perpetual unrest on competitive market economy, Ramakrishna Math & Mission with its message on Ramakrishna movement is perhaps the oasis, to rest upon its shades of spirituality enjoying the bliss.
2. If we compare Sri Ramakrishna's journey of spirituality (set as an example) with Swamiji's endeavour with his fellow monks to institutionalize Ramakrishna movement, encompassing Belur Math etc, we shall find a striking similarity in both. There was a stage in Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual pursuits, when He remained constantly in trance state with total withdrawal from body sense. A monk then appeared to feed him by force to keep Him alive. Likewise, the monks of Baranagar Math gratefully acknowledge the efforts of Sashi Maharaj to keep them

alive, feeding them Sri Ramakrishna Prasad virtually by force, when many a times they got totally lost for the whole day in *Jap/Meditation* etc, unmindful of their body. Also, the glories of Sri Ramakrishna got the glare of the elite world only after Brahma Samajist Keshob Chandra Sen got influenced by him and wrote about him in his paper the Indian Mirror. Likewise, it was only when the foreigner Christian Americans got highly impressed by Swamiji from his Chicago address, that institutionalising Ramakrishna movement could advance, as gratefully acknowledged by Swamiji in his lecture at Pasadena Shakespeare club, USA.

Of course, even before the acknowledgment of the glories of Sri Ramakrishna by Keshob Chandra Sen, the real spiritual seekers and Gurus of all hues acknowledged and started singing the glory of Sri Ramakrishna seeing in Him a great Prophet. Likewise, even before Swamiji's Chicago address, the real spiritual seeker students of College and University, started visiting and even staying at Baranagar Math, who later became monks and advanced Ramakrishna movement to a great degree.

Thus, it can be concluded as the corollary that the institution that Swamiji with his fellow disciples and subsequent monks and devotees built up, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission with all its branches in its entirety- inclusive of its monks, the devotees, its beautifully decorated gardens and all -happens to be virtually the *astral body of Sri Ramakrishna himself*, not bound within the image in sanctum sanctorum.

Even to this day, the monks believe in their heart of hearts, that they are only the instruments in running the Ramakrishna Sangha, where it is Sri Ramakrishna himself who guides and runs it allaying any crisis met.

3. In the Trinity of the surging advance of Ramakrishna movement, if Sri Ramakrishna is the head of it, then Sri Ma Sarada Devi may be said to be its heart, with Swamiji the voice advancing it.

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