

CHAPTER-1

INTRODUCTION

The history of India was in the pall of doubts and disbeliefs, at the end of the 18th century and in the middle of the 19th century. The rich and influential classes were in the grip of Western materialism and asceticism. If we look into those gloomy days, we find how the Christian missionaries unitedly plunged into criticizing Hinduism and converting the Hindus. The materialistic thought of the Western people and the glory and success of the anti-religious scientific concepts had a massive attack on the beliefs of the common men. As a result, the glory of ancient India's heritage and culture, the sense of respect, the rites and customs – all were in the attack of doubts and skepticism at the dawn of the 19th century.¹ That is, Indians began to lose interest and faith in their own culture; and thereby India was passing through a great crisis. The crisis had begun before the British conquest which through an alien mode of government, a colonial form of economy, and a rationalist utilitarian pattern of culture hastened it further. At that time, the *Vedas* and the *Vedānta* were not studied in the east *Vārāṇasi*. Crack-pot *Pundits* failed to defend the faith of their forefathers at the bar of Christianity. *Hindus* began to worship a confusing variety of gods. Religion, once called 'sanātana' was confused with *deśācāra* and *lokācāra* (rituals and customs).² Nihilistic thoughts attacked the bastion of *Hindu* faith. The spiritual foundation of the *Hindu* social structure was going to be vanished altogether. The cultural life of the *Hindus* also came to the verge of extinction. India tottered and a collapse became inevitable; but it escaped the imminent crash almost by a miracle.³

1.1. Reform movements of the 19th century and their consequences:

The real history of India is the history of the lives of some great personalities who have changed her life and determined her destiny. These personalities led to the mighty movements of socio-religious reform in order to revive the ancient culture of India and to evolve a glorious future. The earliest of these movements is the *Brāhmo samāj* founded in the 3rd decade of the 19th century by Raja Rammohan Roy. Other *Brāhmo* leaders were Maharshi Devendranath Tagore and Keshab Chunder Sen. Raja Rammohan Roy brought about a *Vedāntic* revival which is theoretical, not practical. The main contribution of *Brāhmo samāj* is the emancipation of women from all forms of social iniquities. It was dead against early marriage, forced widowhood and caste-system. Another movement through which India asserted herself once more is the *Ārya samāj* started in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati in Bombay. He was a *Hindu sannyasin* and a *Vedic* scholar; and differed widely from the *Brāhmo* leaders who went in for finding a half-way house between *Hinduism* and modern thoughts. He stood firmly by the *Vedas* and returned the malevolent attacks of Christian missionaries on *Hinduism* by his sledge-hammer blows on Christianity. This religious movement abolished caste-system and also denied the monopoly of the *Brāhmins* over the *Vedas*. The spread of education is the most important feature of it. It repelled from an extensive area the disastrous inroads of foreign culture and thereby recorded a historic achievement in the cultural history of India.⁴ But the reform movements only superficially changed the face of the society. The result is never-ending doubts leading to fresh differences and a

whirlpool of controversies threatening the individual as well as the society with dis-integration. The greatest anti-thesis that Indian culture had to face was Western culture which introduced three basic principles – materialistic science and reason, the idea of an open society and a new concept of God as the savior of sinners, the poor and social outcastes.⁵ There was first of all a place for reason, then came money and at last, the power. Gradually, man had lost their faith in God. So, it was time to resolve controversies and turning the mind inward. The guidance of a man having direct perception of the Absolute Truth became necessary and at that time emerged Śrī Ramakrishna.

1.2. Śrī Ramakrishna—Historical significance of his emergence and rejuvenation of Indian spirituality:

Śrī Ramakrishna was born in a poor *Brāhmin* family of the village called *Kamarpukur* in Bengal on the 18th February, 1836. *Khudiram Chattopadhyaya* and *Chandra Devi* were his parents. From his infancy, he showed signs of the great power of personality which became a distinguishing feature of him in later life. In 1859, he was wedded to *Saradmoni Devi*, a little girl of five years, daughter of *Ramachandra Mukhopadhyaya*, of the village named *Jayarambati*. In 1885, he had an attack of cancer of the throat and after a period of nearly one year's illness, he gave up the body on Sunday, the 15th of August, 1886.

It appears that when Śrī Ramakrishna emerged, there was no dearth of great personalities; and naturally a question arises – ‘what is the historical significance of Śrī Ramakrishna’s emergence in the world’? In reply to this it can be said that when all religious preachers were engaged in forming their own sects

and were busy in preaching their own ideas and beliefs; Śrī Ramakrishna came in touch with human beings, welcomed all and openly preached – ‘as many faiths, so many paths’ (*yata mat, tata path*). This is the historical significance of Śrī Ramakrishna’s emergence. He made people aware of God and brought them nearer to Him (God). He stated that the ultimate end of human life is to experience God and love Him more than earthly possessions, human relations and even the body and ego. This very fact has been admitted by all the medieval saints like *Kabir, Dadu, Mira* and others .⁶ His main task was to re-establish the spiritual ideal, to unify the different streams of spiritual life and to rejuvenate the spiritual foundations of Indian culture. This resulted in a general awakening of the collective mind of the Indian people and a blossoming of the spiritual aspirations of the people which has been called ‘spiritual renaissance’.⁷

Śrī Ramakrishna played a major role in the rejuvenation of Indian spirituality starting from the *Vedic* period to the present times. This rejuvenation denotes five main tasks – (a) reliving the truths of the scriptures, (b) purifying and re-vitalizing the spiritual paths, (c) integrating the spiritual consciousness of earlier *Avatārs*, prophets and Hindu Deities into one’s own consciousness, (d) awakening the cosmic *kundalini* and (e) unification of Hindu religious traditions. He ensured the continuity of the *Bhakti* tradition and strengthened it further by his intense *sāadhanā*. This has enabled millions of people to recover their faith in God and religion. He followed the occult practices of the *Tantras* and acquired spiritual illumination through them also. He proved their spiritual effectiveness, but never advised others to follow those esoteric practices. On the

contrary, he taught that the Divine Mother could be placated through purity of mind, love and devotion. He made significant contributions in the *Advaitic* tradition also in the form of reconciliation of *jñāna*, *bhakti* and his concept of *viññāna*. This tradition was enriched further by Swami Vivekananda by means of his *Practical Vedānta*. It is noteworthy that by re-establishing the ideal of self-realization or God-realization, Śrī Ramakrishna declared that transcendental spiritual truths are not merely matters of belief, but can be directly and personally verified. His teaching implies that the verification principle which is one of the basic principles of modern science can be applied in the field of religion also. Harmony of religion is a unique and well-known feature of the spiritual renaissance. He showed through his life how harmony of religions could be practiced both in the individual and collective life. The small room in which he lived at *Dakshines'war* served as a mini parliament of religions. People belonging to different religions such as *Brāhmos*, *Vaiṣṇavas*, *Śāktas*, *Muslims*, *Christians* and so on assembled in his room. He was quite at home with all of them and they also felt that he was one of them.⁸

1.3. Indian Renaissance and Śrī Ramakrishna:

The renaissance in India was both a renewal and purification; and its stimulus was internal, external and historical. It had begun with *Raja Rammohan Roy* and includes important personalities such as *Keshab Chunder Sen*, Śrī Ramakrishna, *Rabindranath Tagore*, *Swami Vivekananda*, *Sri Aurobindo* and *M.K.Gandhi*. Śrī Ramakrishna's contribution to the Indian renaissance is the revival of three beliefs --- the philosophy of non-attachment, religion as

realization and the truth of all religions.⁹ He explained the true significance of the Indian renaissance in the world perspective. Aldous Huxley said – “...the ‘accidents’ of Ramakrishna’s life were intensely Hindu ...; its ‘essence’, however, was intensely mystical and therefore universal”¹⁰ (Gupta, 1942). It has been stated earlier that the main theme of the 19th century social reform movement was liberation of women. It is worth-mentioning that Śrī Ramakrishna maintained filial attitude towards women. He regarded every woman as the epithet of the Divine Mother. He also accepted a woman (*Yogeswarī*) as his *Guru*. In ‘Indian Mirror’ it was stated that the place which he assigned to women was “ ‘far higher than which the passions of men might reach’¹¹” (Chakravarty, 1988). Still, there is a common misunderstanding of his frequent use of the term ‘woman and gold’¹² (*kāminī-kāñcan*). He never taught his disciples to detest any woman or womankind; rather, he scolded his disciple *Hari* (*Swami Tūriyānanda*) for he expressed disrespect for women.

The orthodox society of the 19th century found an outstanding seer in Śrī Ramakrishna who had the power of bringing about a mighty awakening of the old religion of the Hindus. The radicals also found a remarkable solution of their intellectual doubts in his realizations. This implies that his life and message influenced both the conservative and radical wings of India and led to the beginning of a new era of Hindu Renaissance. For this reason, truculent advocate of modern thoughts like *Narendranath* (*Swami Vivekananda*) surrendered himself completely to Śrī Ramakrishna.¹³ He said that the arrival of Śrī Ramakrishna led to the beginning of a new *Satya Yuga*. He considered Śrī Ramakrishna as the

Prophet of the Golden Age. He is called ‘*avatāra variṣṭha*’, that is, foremost among incarnations. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has referred to a very significant aspect of the theory of incarnation by stating – “An avatara is a descent of God into man and not an ascent of man into God, which is the case with the liberated soul”¹⁴ (Hopkins, 1915). The present age has set the hearts of men adrift in regard to God and the ultimate reality; and here we find Śrī Ramakrishna rising like a star of hope in the midst of confusion and uncertainty.¹⁵ Śrī Ramakrishna’s relevance in the 19th century resulted in a practical philosophy applicable to day-to-day life. His ideas are relevant not only for the age in which he lived; but he left these as inheritance to the post-war-modern world characterized by co-existence of atheism, materialism as well as baseless superstitions.¹⁶

Objectives of the Thesis:

1. To explore Śrī Ramakrishna’s philosophy of *samanvayī Vedānta*.
2. To show how peace and unity can be achieved by following the path of Śrī Ramakrishna.
3. To understand and highlight Śrī Ramakrishna’s message of the harmony of all religions.
4. To bring out Śrī Ramakrishna’s concept of Brahman as *Śakti* or *Kāli*, the Divine Mother as the Ultimate Reality.

5. To show the difference of Śrī Ramakrishna's view of Reality from the views of Śaṅkara and some Western Philosophers – Bradley, Spinoza, Hegel, Whitehead and Lotze.

Organization of Chapters:

The proposed thesis has been organized into five chapters:

Chapter-1: Introduction.

This chapter looks into the religious, cultural and social situation of India during the 18th and 19th centuries, and highlights the necessity of Śrī Ramakrishna's emergence.

Chapter-2: Śrī Ramakrishna's doctrine of Brahman: Kāli – The Divine Mother.

This chapter does explore Śrī Ramakrishna's doctrine of Brahman as *kāli*, and gives an account of the comparative study of Śrī Ramakrishna's view of the Absolute (Ultimate Reality) with Western as well as Śaṅkara's view.

Chapter-3: Reality, levels of Consciousness (in Indian context) and the World.

This chapter lays emphasis on the fact that Śrī Ramakrishna admits different levels of consciousness which result in different experiences and revelations of Reality, and describes his concept of world as a relative reality.

Chapter-4: Śrī Ramakrishna's doctrine of *Dharma- Samanvaya* or Harmony of Religion.

This chapter concentrates on Śrī Ramakrishna's idea of religion with special reference to the ancient Indian religion. It also focuses on Śrī Ramakrishna's way of bringing about reconciliation between different religions, creeds and cultures, dogmas and doctrines; the preaching of his message of harmony of all religions by Swami Vivekananda and its contribution to establish world peace and harmony.

Chapter-5: **Conclusion.**

Here, an attempt has been made to establish Śrī Ramakrishna's Philosophy as *Samanvayī Vedānta* by pointing out its similarities and differences from various schools of *Vedānta*.

Methodology:

The methodology of the thesis is qualitative in nature and its approach is theoretical. The parameters of observation, comparison and analysis are used in the present thesis.

Hypothesis, if any:

The current thesis develops a strategy to resolve conflict among different sects, religions and philosophies of the world in the light of Śrī Ramakrishna's teachings. A critical study of Śrī Ramakrishna's philosophy makes a lasting contribution to establish peace and happiness in the world.

Delimitation of the thesis:

Śrī Ramakrishna's Philosophy is the outcome of his own spiritual experience and realization of the one, formless, infinite Deity whom he termed '*Akhaṇḍa*

Satchidānanda'. He has no other thought, no other occupation, no other relation, no other friend in his humble life than God. So, it is not possible to measure and explain the width and the depth of his Philosophy through a rational mind. Infinite Reality cannot be explored and explained by finite mind. Obviously, we are being delimited in explaining his Philosophy. His philosophy of *Samanvayī Vedānta* is a vast metaphysical exposition explained in various works. But the present thesis is confined to the study of some major works out of which *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, *Śrī Śrī Ramakrishna Paramahansa* *Jīvanabṛttānta*, and *Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance* are noticeable.

Survey of Literature:

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna is the English translation of the book '*Śrī Śrī Rāmkrishna Kathāmṛta*' in Bengali. In this book, the conversations of Śrī Ramakrishna with his disciples, devotees and visitors were recorded by Mahendranath Gupta (M), a disciple of Śrī Ramakrishna. The Gospel deals with God and how to realize Him, how to free ourselves from the fetters of this temporal world; and from ignorance which is the cause of our successive births and deaths. We, find also in the Gospel how wonderfully Śrī Ramakrishna brings about harmony among *jñāna*, *bhakti* and *karma* through his nectar-like words. A verse from the *Bhāgavata* will make it clear why the book has been entitled '*Śrī Śrī Rāmkrishna Kathāmṛta*'---

*“Tava kathāmrtaṁ taptajīvanam
Kavibhirīditam kalmaṣāpaham,
Śravaṇamaṅgalam Śrīmadātataṁ
Bhuvignanti te bhūridājanāḥ.*

‘The nectar of Thy words revives the scorched spirit of human beings. They purify the sinner and are the life of the holy. To hear them is itself auspicious and peace generating. They are the real givers who spread Thy name far and wide’¹⁷ (Bhuteshananda, 2000).

‘Śrī Śrī Rāmkrishna Līlāprasaṅga’ written by Swami Saradananda has been renamed in its English translation as **Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master**. It is a five part narrative which deals with Śrī Ramakrishna’s childhood, part of his life as *sādhaka* and also his role as a teacher. The book has not been written in a chronological order and is not a complete biography of Śrī Ramakrishna’s life. Actually, Swami Saradananda focused his attention primarily on locating a unifying principle that integrated all the known events of Śrī Ramakrishna’s life and teachings. And this principle he found in the concept of ‘*bhāvamukha*’, i.e., ‘the threshold of consciousness’.

Śrī Śrī Rāmkrishna Paramahamsadeber Jībanabṛttānta is the first major book written on Śrī Ramakrishna by Ramchandra Datta. It chronologically describes the events in Śrī Ramakrishna’s life; and contains profound commentaries. Throughout the book, the author tried to show that Śrī Ramakrishna is the embodiment of eternal and total being of Brahman (*Pūrṇabrahma sanātana*).

In the book '**Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance**', Swami Nirvedananda stated that Śrī Ramakrishna's strength lies in spiritual realization; and this is the keynote of Hinduism. The book reveals the synthesizing elements in Śrī Ramakrishna's life and also the humanitarian services performed by him.

Notes and References:

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2. Tripathi, A. (1984). Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Thoughts in the Nineteenth Century. In: *Studies on Sri Ramakrishna*. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. p.147.
3. Nirvedananda, Swami. (1940). *Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance*. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. pp.3, 5.
4. Ibid. pp.6-12.
5. Bhajanananda, Swami. (2012). *The Light of The Modern World*. 1st edn. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama. p.115.
6. Tripathi, A. (1984). Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Thoughts in the Nineteenth Century. In: *Studies on Sri Ramakrishna*. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. p.149.
7. Bhajanananda, Swami. (2012). *The Light of The Modern World*. 1st edn. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama. p.115.
8. Ibid. pp.95-97,116-117,119-121.

9. Bishop, H. Donald. (1979). Ramakrishna and the Indian Renaissance. In: *Studies on Sri Ramakrishna*. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. pp.154-155, 162.
10. Gupta, M. (1942). *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, vol.I. Tr. Swami Nikhilananda. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center. Foreword. pp.V-VI.
11. Chakravarty, P. (1988). Role of Sri Ramakrishna in the Nineteenth Century Awakening. In: *Studies on Sri Ramakrishna*. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. p.175.
12. Gupta, M. (1942). *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, vol.II. Tr. Swami Nikhilananda. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center. p. 670. In course of his conversation with Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Śrī Ramakrishna said to him that ‘woman and gold’ alone is the world, i.e., it alone is māyā. So, Śrī Ramakrishna used the term ‘woman and gold’ in a very general sense, meaning the world with all its ties – all the earthly possessions that prevent the soul soaring Godward. It does not in any way imply his contempt for woman or womankind.
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17. Bhuteshananda, Swami. (2000). *Sri Ramakrishna and His Gospel*, vol. I. Tr. Dharitri Kumar Das Gupta. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama. p.34.