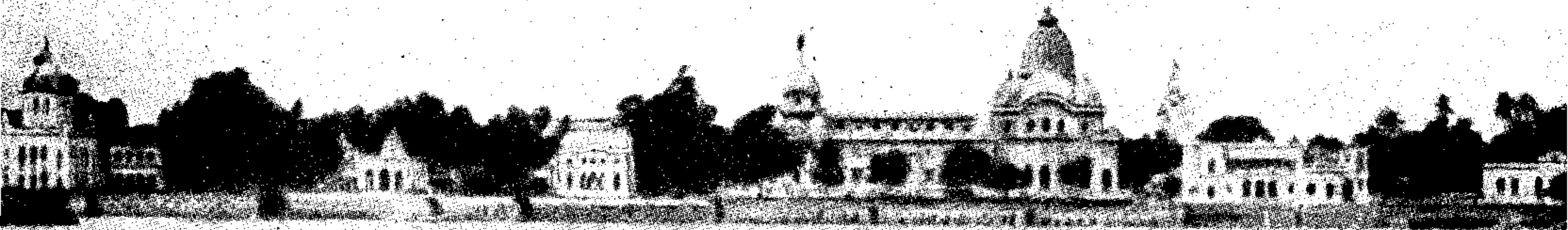
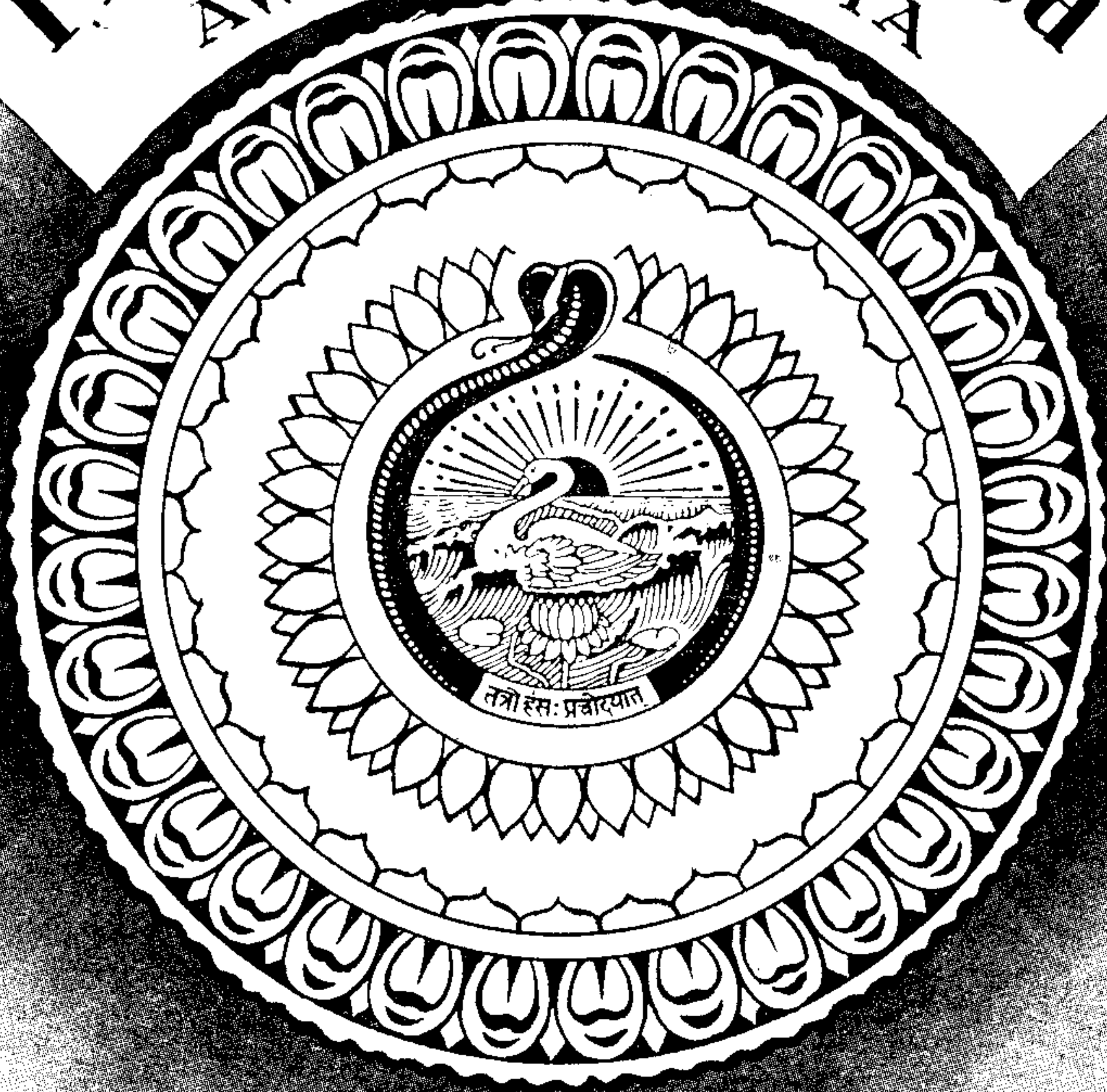


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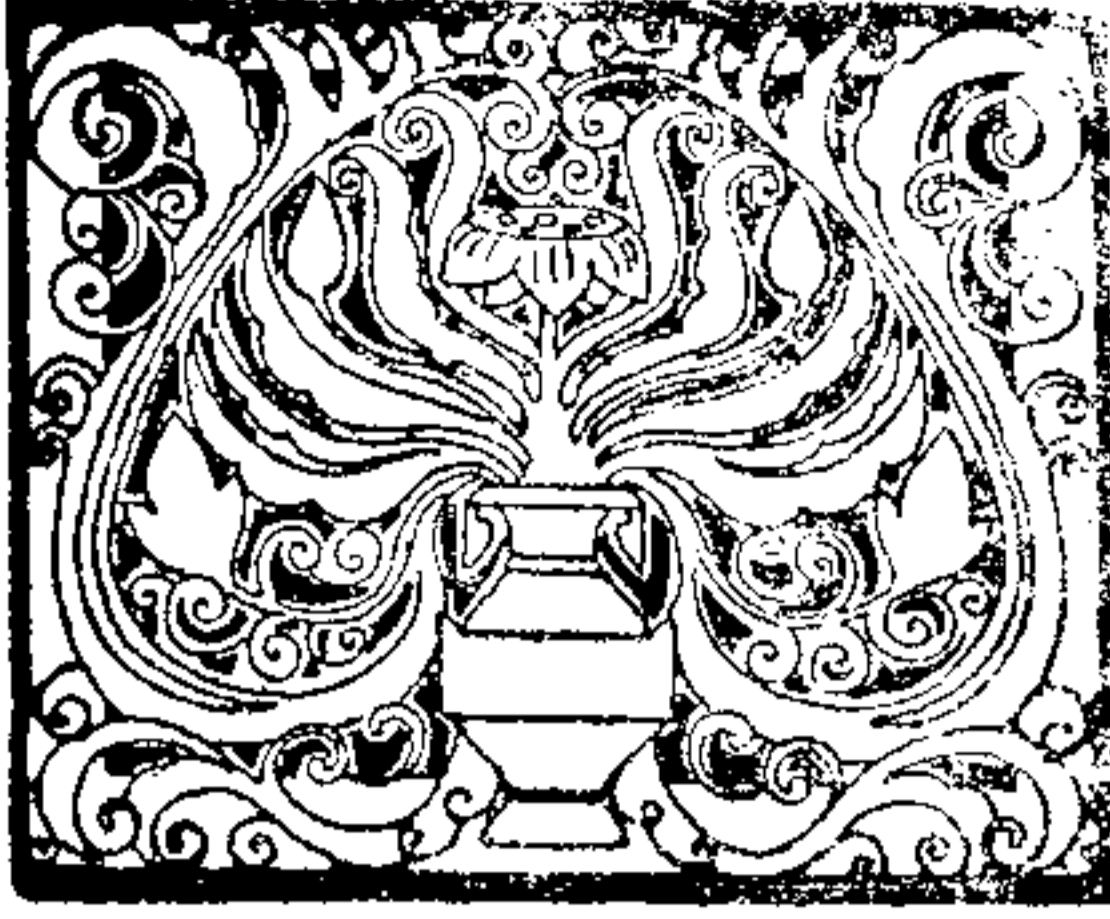
JUNE 1987

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Prabuddha Bharata

Started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

A MONTHLY JOURNAL OF THE
RAMAKRISHNA ORDER

JUNE 1987

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Prabuddha Bharata

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Arise ! Awake ! And stop not till the Goal is reached.

ETERNAL VOICE OF INDIA

Vidyayā vindate amṛtam

'Immortality is attained through Self-knowledge'

All is the letter Om. It is explained thus: All that was, that is and that will be, is the Om. And also what is beyond all time is verily the Om.

All this is assuredly Brahman, and this Atman is also Brahman. That Atman is four-footed.

The *Vaiśvānara*, whose field is the waking life, whose consciousness is outward, who is the enjoyer of the gross, seven-limbed and nineteen-mouthed, is the first foot (of Atman).

The *Taijas*, whose field is the dreaming life, whose consciousness is inward, who is seven-limbed, nineteen-mouthed, enjoyer of the (subtle) mental impressions only, is the second foot (of Atman).

When the sleeping man does not desire any desirable objects, nor dreams any dream, that state is the deep-sleep state. The *Prājña*, whose existence is in deep-sleep plane, unified, of ingathered potential consciousness, of the form of bliss only, verily the enjoyer of bliss, whose mouth is knowledge, is the third foot.

Neither inwards conscious nor outwards conscious, nor conscious of the intermediary state, nor ingathered potential consciousness, nor (total) consciousness, nor unconsciousness—what is invisible, unrelated, unperceivable, devoid of all connotations, unthinkable, undefinable, essentially of the nature of self-consciousness alone, negation of all relative existence, peaceful of supreme bliss and unitary—is called the fourth foot of Atman. That is Atman, He is to be realized.

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad
(1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7)

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This month's EDITORIAL discusses the importance of the respect to Divine Motherhood in all women, as taught by Swami Vivekananda, in the context of modern times.

Sri G. Venkataramana Reddy is an outstanding architect of India and scholar in Tamil literature. Mr. Reddy represented India in International Conference on Town Planning held in Moscow. A senior adviser to the government of Andhra Pradesh, Mr. Reddy writes in his article POET SUBRAMANYA BHARATI AND THE RAMAKRISHNA-VIVEKANANDA MOVEMENT on the celebrated Tamil poet Subramanya Bharati and his significant contribution towards the propagation of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda ideas in South India.

In PRACTICAL VEDANTA FOR TEACHERS Swami Yogeshananda of the Vedanta Centre, Chicago lucidly writes on how Vedanta philosophy of the essential divinity of man, can be applied in teaching young students. The swami worked as a teacher in Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya,

Narendrapur, one of the well-known public schools in India. Afterwards he also worked as preacher and writer in the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre of London and Paris.

The recitation drama 'SRINVANTU VISVE AMRITASYA PUTRAH' (Hear ye, children of Immortality) was staged by the students of Vivekananda Vani Samstha, Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad. A monk of the Ramakrishna Order, under the assumed name Bodhisattva has authored the drama. It is specially meant for public performance by the youth on Swami Vivekananda Anniversary celebrations, or the National Youth Day which is now observed (Government of India, D.O. No. F 6-1/84-IYY, Department of Sports, dated 17.10.1984) on 12 January, the birthday of Swami Vivekananda.

Swami Chetanananda of Vedanta Center, St. Louis writes in a fascinating way on Sri Ramakrishna's influence and grace on the life of his great householder devotee Sri AKSHAY KUMAR SEN.

MODERN TIMES, MOTHER POWER, AND VIVEKANANDA

(EDITORIAL)

A few years ago a group of visitors from different countries came to visit one of the Ramakrishna Mission centres in India. They met a swami and requested him for an answer on what was probably a burning question with them, 'Swami, in our societies today a woman gets a husband and a man gets a wife almost every year. Family is virtually withering. Children are at anybody's mercy. What is going to happen to us and how can we change this

tide?' The swami's answer was categorical: 'If such a condition continues, life in your societies will be without peace. The only way to come out of this plight is to bring about a change in your outlook on women. In the West women are looked upon and valued as wives. In India women are respected and honoured as mothers. Culturally and traditionally Indians respect the eternal presence of the Divine Mother in all women. This outlook

will bring a radical change in your traditional thinking. This is ultimately the way out for you.'

Again, last year after an extension lecture on 'Indian Womanhood' in an Indian University, a girl student got up with a slightly different kind of question, 'Sir, I am a girl belonging to a minority community. I represented my state in athletics four times in all-India competitions. This time when I tried to enrol myself as a candidate, my guardians resisted. They said, "Thus far and no farther. A woman cannot and must not go to that limit". What shall I do now?' The swami's answer again was categorical, 'Indians learnt to see the world-creating and world-destroying Mahāśakti, the great Mother power in all women irrespective of caste, creed or race. During centuries of foreign invasion Indian women could not come out for fear of attacks. But today Indian women have come up boldly and are expressing their higher potentialities in all walks of life, thus contributing not only to their family but also to the national welfare in a hundred different ways. You must also do that. You must awaken the physical, intellectual and spiritual power of the Mahāśakti within you, by self-discipline, hard work and holy idealism. Women must develop total independence, not just physical and social, but also spiritual independence which will make them invincible against floods of sensate temptations.' 'Your words are good', said the girl, 'But how can I practise your ideas?' The speaker answered, 'First of all, you must know these ideas, especially from the burning lives of great women before you. Do you not remember how Rizia Sultana became the first woman supreme ruler of India and how she captured the throne of Delhi? Do not you remember the women risis, seers of Vedic times, who were repositories of the

highest knowledge? Do not you remember the great Indian women like Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi or Meerabai? Many such great women have been born in India and other countries as well. And then, when you feel exhausted in your struggle for a higher evolution, you must recharge your drooping spirit by coming in contact with holy persons with burning characters, and the holy texts of your religion.'

If modern women with education and efficiency are suffering from the excesses of the women's liberation movement, many others are suffering from the strangling hold of the orthodox and fundamentalist ideas, especially tightening their noose on the helpless and uneducated women folk all over the world.

The women's liberation movement was, in fact, a reaction against the exploitations of the male-dominated societies everywhere in the world. The hankering for psycho-social freedom came to the western woman in the nineteen forties as a reaction to their subjugation and confinement in a Victorian culture. Betty Friedan's revolutionary book *The Feminine Mystique* lit the fire of this conflagration. Women demanded and dreamt of an unrestrained liberty in a materialistic and permissive society. And yet the sense of failure lingered. Prof. B.A. Carol of the University of Illinois in a recent lecture in India confided that in the West women have been treated as 'objects' rather than 'subjects' of history. This is nothing new. The image of woman as 'enchantress' right from the Greek days of Helen of Troy dominated western consciousness.

The Judeo-Christian culture was primarily patriarchal. Women were given a secondary position. In the Judeo-Christian theology Eve is nothing but a dispensable bone from the ribs of Adam. Saint Paul writes,

Man is God's honour and God's image...Man does not exist for the sake of woman but woman exists for Man and hence there shall be this difference that a man shall love his wife but never be subject to her, but the wife shall fear and honour her husband, in all obedience and awe.¹

Martin Luther calls woman, 'A stupid vessel'.² Woman is, according to Herbert Spencer, 'arrested man'.³ It is Protestant religion which undermined the importance of woman in the western culture, and Protestant culture was based on the worship of God as Father.

One single passage of the Gospels—the beginning of Luke (I:46-48) does honour to Mary: 'My soul doeth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God, my saviour. For he had regarded the low estate of this handmaiden: For behold—from henceforth all generation shall call me blessed'. Here is the root of the cult of Mary—the Great Mother. Eastern orthodox Church of Russia started worshipping Mary as the most holy Mother of God. This is how they pray:

Light of my darken soul, my hope, protection and refuge. I thank thee that thou hast enabled me to be partaker of the Body and Blood of Thy dear Son. Enlighten the eyes of my heart. Quicken me. Give me tears of repentance and thanksgiving.⁴

India gave more respect to Mother than Father. We call our land of birth as *matṛbhūmi* and our national slogan is Vande Mataram and not Vande Pitaram. Radha's name comes before Kṛṣṇa (Radha-kṛṣṇa) and Sita's before Rama (Sitarama). In the Vedic rituals, a man would always

perform sacrifice along with his wife, otherwise he would be unfit to perform it.

The earliest Indian scripture where the supremacy of Mother power was established is the *Ṛg-Veda*. In the Devi-Sukta of this Veda, the Divine Mother declares Herself as the Primal energy: 'I am the Energy behind Siva's bow when He goes to destroy evil for the good of humanity.... Those who neglect Me perish.' This is also the voice of the law-giver Manu who sees that progress of any society depends on the respect it offers to women: 'Where women are worshipped, there the gods rejoice. Where women are not respected, there all actions turn ineffectual.' The Upaniṣads which generally discuss about the nature of the Ultimate Reality or Brahman, also give us similar ideas. The *Kena Upaniṣad* (3.12) (belonging to *Sāma-Veda*) first speaks of 'Uma Haimavati', of great beauty, who came to teach the gods about the power of Brahman. Subsequently the idea was extended in the later Upaniṣads. In the *Devi Upaniṣad*, the cosmic Mother Power says to the gods seeking ultimate knowledge: 'I am, verily, the form of Brahman. From me all the world of men and women have sprung into existence. I am the void. I am the voidless space; I am bliss; I am the cessation of bliss; I am Knowledge; I am ignorance. I am the creator, I am the destroyer.' The *Bahvr̥chopaniṣad* says: 'Brahman (the Creator), Visnu (the Sustainer) and Rudra (the Destroyer) all are born from Śakti, the Primal Energy behind the universe.'⁵

Agamas or Tantras do not belong to the Vedas, although they date back from the periods of Mohenjodaro or Harappa. But Vedic philosophers accept Agama with respect. According to Śaivāgama, Siva is the basis of this universe. Sakti is the

1. Elizabeth Mann, Borgese, *Ascent of Women* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1963) p. 65.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 223.

4. Ibid., p. 62.

5. *Udbodhan* (A Bengali monthly) (Calcutta: Udbodhan) B.S. 1305 p. 549.

manifestation of Siva's power. Of this Sakti the major manifestations are Cit (pure intelligence), Ānanda (bliss), Icchā (will), Jñāna (knowledge), and Kriyā (creative energy). That is why Śakti or Mother is also known as Chidanandasvarūpā and Jnana-Iccha-Kriyamayi. According to Sakta-agama, Divine Mother is none other than Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, the embodiment of Sat-Cit-Ananda. The universe is created from the fundamental space which is of infinitesimally small dimension (the super dense supernova of astrophysics). It is known as Bindu and creations are vibrations (spandana) of nāda (the primordial sound or Word) of this bindu. This vibration (spandana) of Agama is itself the vikṣepa (the projection power) of Vedanta. That is why ultimate Reality in Indian concept is Ardhanar-iswara.⁶ The well-known *Chāṇḍi-Saptasati* is the crowning glory of India's devotion to the Supreme Mother of the universe, who comes, at the prayer of her children, to destroy evil and save the earth.

* * * * *

The extremes of the new women's liberation movement are being reflected in many unusual ways. Hellen Peek, founder and special Projects Director of the National Organization of Non-parents (NON), remarked in 1976 that many parents in the West today are preferring to have no children, as they 'threaten the happiness of marriage' and, 'mean the dissolution of romance and the loss of freedom'. Children according to the survey of some psychologists have brought crisis to 83% to 87% of the parents⁷. The results of this extremist thinking in women's liberation are frightening. Families are

fast breaking. In 1914 there were 100, 000 divorcees, while in 1970 some 750, 000 divorcees in U.S.A. were granted, writes Rebecca Stanford, Professor of Sociology at the University of Nevada, Reno. The divorced women feel themselves 'morally condemned as a failure'. In the pre-liberation days, family life, writes Prof. Stanford, was not a life of 'endless fulfilment, but more a series of hurdles to be gotten over and duties to be performed. Fulfilment was the satisfaction of a job well done'.⁸

In today's pleasure-seeking societies, the primary goal is individual happiness. 'In this search for individual happiness, marriages lose that cohesive quality and conflict increases.' The old glory of motherhood and family stability has been lost today, writes German writer Kyeserling, in a 'conflict between self-interest and duty, between personal ambition and social obligation'.⁹

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Vivekananda reminded the Indians that 'marriage' was not for personal happiness, but for serving the great society for the good of many, for the welfare of many. Sister Christine learnt from her master, Vivekananda, that marriage in Indian life is a great austerity, and that the strength of great Indian monasticism depended always on the austere life of the householders.

The prospect of long years of rearing children in 'selfless dedication' have frightened many votaries of women's liberation. This fear has resulted in the withering away of well-knit families in many cases. Despite these extremes of the liberation movement, the old voices persist. Many mothers feel that being mother is the 'profound goal' and 'beautiful destiny' of all women.

6. *Udbodhan*, op. cit., B.S. 1356. p. 449.

7. *PHP* (Japan: PHP Institute International Inc.) November, 1976 pp. 20-21.

8. *PHP*, op. cit., March 1976, p. 3.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

In Indian tradition this selfless dedication to the family and children is the way of liberation for all mothers from the hundreds of psycho-physical bondages of life. A growing awareness of these noble responsibilities of motherhood towards children is emerging all over the world. Two women leaders admit, 'Children themselves, although objects of a growing consumeristically oriented love in the modern family, were lost from sight as subjects of concern.'

Despite some success in establishing the equal rights for men and women, the protagonists of this liberation movement have started feeling the need of a change in their outlook. Say the same two women leaders in the West: 'Since the early campaigns for universal suffrage, women have made great strides in society. Equal rights and equality of opportunity in employment are within reach. But women's perception of themselves must change to fulfill their future destiny in the coming century.'¹⁰ At the same time there is a deeper awareness for the need of complete independence for women who feel that 'equality', the much-shouted slogan since the French Revolution was 'just as ruthlessly disregarded during and after the Revolution as ever before.'¹¹ Today, of course, the scene is changing fast. The voice for liberation from the unhealthy psycho-social bondages of a male-dominated society, is being respected everywhere, except in most rigid and mediocrally oriented fundamentalist societies. Women's roles as leaders are being recognized. Mrs. Betty Williams and Mrs. Maireada Corrigan, co-founders of Women's Peace Movement, were jointly awarded the 1976 Nobel Prize for their efforts towards seeking peace in Northern Ireland. In

recent years India has honoured two outstanding women-scientists as Presidents of the Indian Science Congress. Last year in 1986 P.T. Usha brought four Asiad golds giving a silver lining, almost single handed, to India's drooping performance in Seoul Asian games. The names of outstanding women in the fields of politics, society and science, in the world today are too well-known to be mentioned.

* * * * *

In modern times this respect for the Mother Power is making a comeback. J. J. Bachofen in his book, *Myth, Religion and Mother* for the first time asserted the need of Mother Rite idea in this age. Psychologist Erich Fromm in his book, *Crisis in Psychoanalysis* stresses the need of a successful combination of Father principle and Mother rite, for solving the deeper psychoanalytical problems of this age. According to the Chinese tradition all societies run in a cycle of *Yan* and *Yin*. *Yan* is the principle of action, reason, father-power, domination, and patriarchal tradition. *Yin* is the principle of intuition, affection, meditation, love, mutual understanding and matriarchal tradition. Whenever *Yan* dominates any culture for a long time, it loses its power at the end, until it ultimately yields place to *Yin*.

Physicist Neils Bohr in his Nobel prize acceptance speech first mentioned the need of complementarity of these two aspects in our life—the *Yan* and the *Yin*. Today this is, in fact, the foundation and philosophy of Quantum physics. Physicist Fritjof Capra deals on this paradigm shift from the *Yan* to the *Yin* way of thinking in modern science and society as a whole. In his Schamacher lectures he quotes the famous Chinese wisdom:

The *Yan* having reached its climax retreats in favour of the *Yin*.

¹⁰. *PHP*, op. cit., October 1979, p. 12.

¹¹. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

The *Yin* having reached its climax retreats in favour of the *Yan*.¹²

The reaction against the patriarchal Judeo-Christian tradition is also reflected in the new attempt to translate the Bible in a radical new version free from 'the male-bias'. These unconventional translations are not the product of some votaries of women's liberation but of the National Council of Churches (N.C.C.), supported by 32 Protestant and Orthodox denominations with 40 million members. The Council sought to provide Bible readings for worship services that were free from the 'male bias'. Against the old Bible the militant feminists have been complaining for nearly a decade. To proponents, the book is an advance towards equal treatment. To opponents, the translations are tasteless and ridiculous, if not heretical. The task of taking the male orientation out of the scriptures began in the 1970s. Protesting women's groups in several Protestant denominations persuaded the N.C.C. to establish a Task Force for this new translation of the Bible. God in heaven is no longer just the Father but the 'Father (and Mother)'. The Deity is addressed as 'Sovereign One', but never as the 'Lord'. The N.C.C. book of readings, offered for 'experimental and voluntary use in churches', remarkably affects the imagery and impact of many of the best known Bible passages. Additions to the original text are printed in brackets. For instance, 'All things have been delivered to be by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him', (Matthew 11:27) becomes 'All things have been delivered to me by (God) my Father (and Mother); and no

one knows the Child except God, and no one knows God except the Child and any one to whom the Child chooses to reveal God.' Again, 'Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." ... and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man', (Genesis 2:18,22 Old) becomes: 'Then God the Sovereign One said, "It is not good that the human being should be alone; I will make a companion corresponding to the creature"...and God the Sovereign One built the rib which God took from the human being into woman and brought her to the man'. (Genesis 2:18,22 New).¹³

Swami Vivekananda found in his Master Sri Ramakrishna a complementary combination of the transcendence of Siva and the Power of the Divine Mother. Ramakrishna became identified with the Divine Mother of the universe. That is why in his salutations Vivekananda wrote—*sasaktik namitava pade* (I bow down at the feet of yours, along with the Sakti inseparable from you). That is why he used two powerful *hija mantras* at the very beginning of his prayer on Sri Ramakrishna—*Om hrīm ṛtam*—Om symbolizing the transcendental aspect of Brahman, and *hrim* representing the Sakti, the immanent and the Mother power. Vivekananda accepted the idea that in future Ramakrishna will be worshipped as an incarnation of Kali. After Sri Ramakrishna passed away Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi cried aloud, 'Mother Kali! where did you go leaving me alone!' Today the Kali worshippers of Bengal keep almost invariably an image of Sri Ramakrishna besides the image of Kali.

12. *The Schumaker Lectures*, Edited by Satish Kumar (London: Abacus, 1983) p. 123.

13. Richard N. Ostling's article on 'O God our (Mother and) Father', *Time* (New York) 24 October 1983 pp. 40-41.

Swami Saradanandaji in his book entitled *Bharate Sakti Puja* said that the greatest manifestation of Sakti in this universe is the life of an incarnation. Saradanandaji quotes a simile of Sri Ramakrishna in this context. 'An incarnation is like a powerful king in disguise who goes out at night in the dress of a poor beggar to look after the welfare of his subjects. As soon as he is recognized as the symbol of supreme power, he retreats into the palace.'¹⁴

Vivekananda explained this Mother-power manifested through the life of his Master, 'In this age the *Brahma-kundalini*—the Mother who is responsible for the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe—has been awakened by the fervent prayers of Sri Ramakrishna.' Swami Shivananda, another disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, expatiated on this idea, 'No wonder the individual *kundalini* will be awakened now! That is why we see symptoms of a great spiritual upsurge everywhere. The Mother, the Primal Energy, is sporting for the good of the world using the body of Sri Ramakrishna. We need have no worry this time.'¹⁵ Through Sri Ramakrishna's life, in fact, India saw the regeneration and glorification of Divine Mother in all women, irrespective of caste, creed or nationality. Sri Ramakrishna raised women to their pristine glory of Divine Motherhood and saved them from the age-old exploitations of male-dominated societies.

If in Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda saw the saviour of the masses and the women, in Holy Mother Sarada Devi he saw the emergence of the Great Mother Power that will purify society by inspiring the rise of countless Gargis, Maitreyis, and

such other Brahmavidinis—the women-knowers of God—of the Upanisadic age. To one of his brother disciples he wrote in 1894:

You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life—none of you. But gradually you will know; without Sakti (power) there is no regeneration for the world. Why is it that our country is the weakest and the most backward of all countries? Because Sakti is held in dishonour there. Mother has been born to revive that wonderful Sakti in India, and making her the nucleus, once more Gargis and Maitreyis will be born into the world.¹⁶

And Vivekananda's disciple Nivedita whom her master offered at the feet of the Holy Mother, realized this truth. About the Holy Mother she wrote, 'To me it has always appeared that she (the Holy Mother) is Sri Ramakrishna's final word as to the ideal of Indian womanhood.' And Nivedita, in her inquisitiveness wondered, 'But is she the last of an old order, or the beginning of a new?'¹⁷ Today we know that Vivekananda was emphatically right. Following the footsteps of Holy Mother Sarada Devi hundreds of women all over the world are coming forward to enlighten the world with the development, in themselves, of a personality which is ancient and yet **modern**, which is a combination of 'the mother's heart and the hero's will', a combination of purity of the Holy Mother and the dynamism of the Rani of Jhansi or Joan of Arc.

'Total freedom and independence is the symbol of total womanhood', Vivekananda intensely believed.¹⁸ But Vivekananda

14. Swami Saradananda. *Bharate Sakti Puja* (Bengali) (Calcutta: Udbodhan) pp. 36-37.

15. *Prabuddha Bharata* (Calcutta) December 1986, p. 501.

16. *Letters of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964) p. 181.

17. *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' school, 1972) vol. 1, p. 105.

18. *His Eastern and Western Admirers, Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1961) pp. 226-228.

knew full well that total freedom means physical, mental, and spiritual freedom. Unless a person, man or woman learns to cultivate a sense of freedom from the mere biological demands of the body, the thousand cravings of the mind, and an unobstructed feeling of the essential divinity within, there is no freedom for an individual. With the true emancipation of women, Vivekananda believed that a race of 'Supermen' and 'Superwomen' would emerge in future.¹⁹ And his disciples knew that the dream would come true one day. Sister Christine, another western disciple of Vivekananda, wrote, 'Some of us believe that if Swami Vivekananda's ideas regarding the education of woman are carried out in true spirit, a being will be evolved who will be unique in the history of the world. As the woman of ancient Greece was almost perfect physically, this one will be her complement intellectually and spiritually—a woman gracious, loving, tender, long-suffering, great in heart and intellect, but greatest of all in spirituality.'²⁰ About her master's thoughts Christine wrote:

The emancipation of women meant to him a freedom from limitations, which disclose their real power.... This Shakti must be roused. If woman's power is often for evil rather than for good, it is because she has been oppressed; but she will rouse the lion in her when her fetters drop. She has suffered throughout the ages. This has given her infinite patience, infinite perseverance.²¹

But who will take the initiative for bringing about this historic emancipation for women? Here Vivekananda took a step which not even Buddha dared to do. 'Am I a woman that I shall solve the problems of women? Hands off! they can solve their own problems.' He saw the

weakness of body consciousness behind chivalry. 'Why should I help you?' he told a western woman disciple. 'That is chivalry and don't you see that chivalry is only sex? Don't you see what is behind all these attentions from men to women?''²² In his master Sri Ramakrishna he saw the great saviour of women. Jesus, despite his Christhood, failed to give 'woman an equal place to man'. He failed, in Vivekananda's view, to rise above the Jewish custom. No woman was made an apostle with him. Buddha initially stood against the spiritual emancipation of women. But later on, he 'recognised women's right to an equal place in religion.'²³

It is his master Sri Ramakrishna's life which made him utter the prophetic words about the great role women were destined to play in the coming age. In India he saw that women *brahmavadinis* would appear in future and flood the world with India's spiritual message. Standing on the American soil he saw that 'free America' will one day fulfil this prophetic dream. In the Thousand Island Park he prophesied,

At the present time God should be worshipped as 'Mother', the Infinite Energy. This will lead to purity, and tremendous energy will come here in America. Here no temples weigh us down, no one suffers as they do in poorer countries. Woman has suffered for aeons, and that has given her infinite patience and infinite perseverance. She holds on to an idea. It is this which makes her the support of even superstitious religions and of the priests in every land, and it is this that will free her. We have to become Vedantists and live this grand thought; the masses must get it, and only in free America can this be done. In India these ideas were brought out by individuals like Buddha, Shankara, and others, but the masses

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972) vol. 7, p. 70.

did not retain them. The new cycle must see the masses living Vedanta, and this will have to come through women. 24

24. Ibid., p. 95.

And Vivekananda's disciples saw in their master a boundless faith in the unmistakable presence of the 'Divine Mother, the embodiment of Sakti' in all women.

POET SUBRAMANYA BHARATI AND THE RAMAKRISHNA VIVEKANANDA MOVEMENT

G. VENKATARAMANA REDDY

Subramanya Bharati is widely known as the morning star of modern Tamil literature, a poet seer and a great patriot. But very little is known about the eminent role played by him in spreading the message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda among the Tamils. Therefore it will be necessary to know about the circumstances under which he came to be influenced by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda and the extent to which their influences were reflected in his political life and writings in the shape of soul-stirring poetry, essays, stories etc.

Subramanya Bharati was born on 11 December 1882 at Ettayapuram in Thirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu in the family of scholars who were living in the glorious Tamil poetic heritage. When Bhagawan Ramakrishna attained Mahasamadhi, the age of Bharati was little less than four years. His father dreamt of seeing him as an English educated officer or engineer. But Subramaniam himself had no particular fondness for studies. He roamed at will in and around Ettayapuram and spent long hours with his maternal grand father who was a scholar in Tamil language. Another great Tamil scholar S. Somasundara Bharati who was his childhood classmate said: 'I have personal knowledge of the praises bestowed on Bharathi's father for his child's amazing

poetic gift. When he was barely eight he would compose brilliant verses on the lead given by others. Well known versifiers used to be wonderstruck at this phenomenon.'

The year 1893 is notable in the history of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement. Swami Vivekananda sailed for America for expounding the greatness of Sanatana Dharma before the Parliament of Religions at Chicago. In this same year, for a display of his phenomenal poetic talents in the assembly of poets, the eleven year old Subramaniam was crowned with the title 'Bharati' by the Raja of Ettayapuram.

However his father was unhappy and sent his son to a High school at Thirunelveli town. While Bharati created a stir among the student community by his impromptu wit and spontaneous versification, he failed to get selected for the matriculation examination.

In 1897 the year of triumphal return of Swamiji to his motherland, Bharati, who was then 14 years old, married a young girl of seven. Within few months his father died and the strained circumstances at home made him leave for Benaras for continuing his studies in Hindu College. There he completed matriculation examination and also passed with credit the entrance examination of Allahabad University. His

stay of four years at Benaras also gave him an opportunity to gain fair knowledge of Sanskrit, Hindi and English. In the year 1902 in which Swamiji passed away, at the request of the Raja of Ettayapuram, he returned to Ettayapuram as the court poet. During this period, the abundant leisure at his disposal had been utilized by him for a deep study of the Puranas, Vedantic literature comprising the Upanisads, the Brahma-Sutras, and the Bhagavad-Gita etc. As this assignment was not to his liking, he gave it up in the year 1903. For the first time one of his poems was published in *Viveka-Bhanu* published from Madurai. In the year 1904 at his age of twenty-one, he was appointed as Tamil lecturer in Sethupathi College at Madurai. It was at Madurai, that Bharati came in direct contact with a great soul Sri Gopala Krishna Aiyer who received Swami Vivekananda at Pamban along with Bhaskara Sethupathi—Raja of Ramnad. Sri Iyer was then serving as Tamil professor in Native College. This poet and scholar translated and published in Tamil the poem, 'Song of the Sannyasin' of Swamiji. The close friendship of Bharati with Sri Gopala Krishna Iyer must have given him a golden opportunity to know in detail about Swami Vivekananda and his Guru Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. So long as he lived in Madurai, Sri Gopala Krishna Iyer had been his admirer and well-wisher. When Bharati decided to leave the post of lecturership, Gopala Krishna Iyer introduced him to his good friend Sri G. Subramanya Iyer who was then the Editor of the famous Tamil national daily *Swadesa Mitran*. G. Subramanya Iyer was one of the earliest disciples of Swamiji. On the evening of Saturday 13 February 1897 Swamiji addressed a very large audience in Pacchiyappa's Hall on 'The Vedanta in its application to Indian Life'. G. Subramanya Iyer was one of the eminent men

who were seated on the platform on that day. Under Subramanya Iyer, in the year 1904 Bharati was given an assignment as sub-Editor of *Swadesa Mitran*. G. Subramanya Iyer was also one of the important functionaries of Triplicane Literary Society and Madras Social Reform Association which enthusiastically provided platform for Swamiji for spreading the message of Bhagawan Ramakrishna during his first visit to Madras, as an unknown Parivrajaka, and during his second and last visit, as an internationally known monk. Especially Triplicane Society is the first organization which introduced Swamiji to the citizens of Madras. Through G. Subramanya Iyer, Bharati came in direct contact with other ardent disciples of Swamiji, that is, Alagia Singa Perumal (more known as Alasinga Perumal, most loved disciple of Swamiji), B. Rajam Iyer (first Editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*), C. Nanjunda Rao, Mandapam Srinivasachariar; M. P. Tirumalachariar, S. N. Thirumalachariar, S. Doraiswami Iyer, Prof. Sundararama Iyer, P. R. Sundara Iyer, Thyagi Subramanya Siva etc. This chain of acquaintance with ardent Vivekanandists of the South, ultimately resulted in Bharati's becoming one among the inner circle of the disciples of Swamiji who took the *diksa* (vow) to spread the message of Sri Ramakrishna under the guidance of Swami Ramakrishnananda, the then President of the Ramakrishna Math, Madras. Bharati highly respected Alasinga Perumal who appears to have taken special interest in shaping Bharati as a true devotee of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda.

As a sub-Editor of *Swadesa Mitran*, a Tamil news daily, perhaps Bharati's writings were confined to only editing the news as it was received for publication and there was no scope for exposing his talents in poetry and prose writing. There-

fore in addition to the duties of a sub-Editor of *Swadesa Mitran*, he accepted the editorship of a literary monthly journal by name *Chakravarthi*. In the capacity as Editor of this monthly journal, Bharati came in contact with Mahesh Kumar Sarma, who was known to Swamiji. By his scholarship Sarma brought the cultures of Bengal and Tamil Nadu closer to each other. He had abundant devotion for Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda and wrote their biographies in Tamil. Several of his articles were published in *Chakravarthi*. *Ananda Math* the famous novel of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya was translated into Tamil by Mahesh Kumar Sarma, and the poem 'Vandemataram' which forms part of this novel was translated for him by Bharati. The affectionate friendship among them had further strengthened the faith of Bharati in the message of Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

The message of Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna turned Bharati into a true Vedantist and a great devotee of 'Divine Mother', Sakti. The published talks and writings of Swami Vivekananda turned him to be a great patriot. According to him *deśa bhakti* is a part of *daiva bhakti*. As a matter of fact, during those days politics in India revolved round *deśa bhakti* only. Many a time in his writings Bharati declared that Vivekananda was made by Ramakrishna, and that the foremost maker of the modern India was Vivekananda. The sensitive genius of the energetic and young Bharati was now inflamed with patriotism. His heart was filled with sorrow at the ignorant, passive, and resigned life of his people. At the same time he was brimmed with anger at the tyrannical misrule of the foreign rulers of his country. He now became a 'revolutionary' and plunged into the

freedom movement. His political guru was Bala Gangadhar Tilak.

At this stage, in the year 1905, the ill-conceived partition of Bengal provoked and embittered the entire nation. Bharati attended the All India Congress Seminar at Benaras. On his way back he visited Calcutta and met Sister Nivedita, the Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda.

This meeting with Nivedita, the fiery angel of Indian nationalism, and inspired preacher of her master's universal message to mankind, was destined to have a very far-reaching influence on the life and poetry of Subramanya Bharati. Bharati's contempt for the foreign rule and foreign culture was reflected at this very first meeting. According to the biography of Sister Nivedita by Pravrajika Atmaprana, 'Bharati said he felt that though Sister Nivedita was the Swami's disciple, she was a foreigner. Nivedita understood the feeling; so she quietly asked him to get rid of this narrow feeling of religion, caste and creed and get the separatist tendency out of his mind. The words of the noble spiritual daughter of Swami Vivekananda effected immediate transmutation in Bharati, who now accepted her as his spiritual guru and pledged himself to three major tasks: the political liberation of India, the eradication of casteism, and the emancipation of Indian womanhood. Throughout his life Bharati remembered Sister Nivedita with gratitude, indeed as Mahashakti herself in a human garb. The following poem 'Nivedita Devi' by Bharati will abundantly reveal his reverence for her:

Nivedita, Mother,
 Temple consecrated to love,
 Sun dispelling my soul's darkness,
 Rain to the parched land of our lives,
 Helper of the helpless and lost,
 Offering to grace,
 O you divine spark of Truth,
 My salutations to You.

Bharati also dedicated his first two volumes of patriotic poetry, *Swadesh Gitangal* (1908) and *Janma Bhoomi* (1909) to Sister Nivedita. Bharati wrote: 'Who without words, in a split second, taught me the nature of true service to the Mother and the greatness of sacrifice.'

On 29 June 1906 Swami Abhedananda along with Swami Ramakrishnananda and Swami Paramananda, landed in Tutuquorin port, and after visiting several towns of Tamil Nadu arrived at Madras on 15 July 1906. During the stay of Swami Abhedananda at Madras for over a month, Bharati appears to have met him several times. All the activities of this Swami during his stay in Tamil Nadu and Madras were covered by Bharati in his journal *India*. He also took this opportunity to publish the translations of the various talks and speeches of the Swami, not only in Madras but also abroad. He also penned a long poem on Swami Abhedananda highlighting his contributions to the preaching of Vedanta and the message of Bhgawan Sri Ramakrishna.

Now Bharati's determination was keener than ever to plunge into the arduous and perilous uncertainties of the Independence Movement. But all his impetuous contributions could not be published in the rather 'moderate' paper *Swadesh Mitran*. Bharati felt irked and almost imprisoned. To provide a free outlet for his flaming words, a new Tamil weekly *India* was launched in 1906 by the patriotic Mandayam brothers—Tirumalachariar and Srinivasa-chariar who were also the ardent devotees of Swami Vivekananda. They were ready to spend their large inherited fortunes in the cause of the Independence movement. Then came the Congress split at Surat session between the moderates and extremists. It was hardly surprising that Bharati's fiery nature should push him to the side of the extremists led by Lala

Lajpat Rai, Aurobindo Ghose and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He also unleashed pointed darts at the spineless moderates in politics and the self-centred Indians who still kept out of the freedom struggle. Even for making his political views clearly understood by his readers he skillfully used, whenever possible, incidents from the life of Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna and his parables. One such piece of political satire reads:

At one time when the seasonal rains failed, few devotees met Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa for guidance as to what to be done when there was no rain in spite of the fact that it was mentioned in the Panchanga of the year, that there will be regular seasonal rains. Paramahansa heckled at them by suggesting that they may squeeze the Panchangam for water; likewise it is rather funny to note that the moderates believe that it is possible to save our country merely by their speeches.

The burning 'Brazier of Patriotism' that lighted up the poems of Bharati, fascinated even his political opponents. Inevitably the British Government came down heavily upon the front line extremists in the national politics and imprisoned V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, and Aurobindo Ghose. Tilak was deported to Mandalay in Burma to suffer solitary confinement. The net was tightened around extremist papers like *Bande Mataram* (Calcutta) and *India* (Madras). When a warrant was issued to Bharati, on the advice of his friends, in the year 1908, he migrated to Pondicherry to continue the war against the British despotism. Bharati continued the publication of *India* from Pondicherry till its circulation was totally banned in British India in the year 1910.

Soon after reaching Pondicherry, Bharati also launched the publication of a Tamil daily newspaper titled *Vijaya*, a Tamil weekly *Suryodayam*, an English weekly

Bala Bharatam and an English monthly magazine, *Karma Yogi*. But their publication had to be stopped abruptly by the end of the year 1910 due to the ban imposed on their circulations also in British India. Thereafter Bharati had to face a hard life. The spirit of Vedanta now inspired him to boldly face his life and cling to his ideals even at the verge of starvation. Number of other revolutionaries who took shelter in Pondicherry were his only solace. Having given up politics, in the month of April 1910, Sri Aurobindo had arrived in Pondicherry in order to begin a long and arduous yoga in his selected 'cave of tapasya'. Bharati and other fellow self-exiles received him at the port and made all necessary arrangements for his stay. In course of time, these self-exiles in Pondicherry and else where in India tried their best to persuade Sri Aurobindo to re-enter politics. But they could not succeed. For a period of eight years (right upto 1918) Bharati had an opportunity to live in close contact with Sri Aurobindo and share the fruits of his intense sadhanas. These eight years of utter poverty and hardship in the life of Bharati was a period of tapasya and deeper study of Vedanta and Shaktism. Writing poetry was considered by him as an integral part of Yoga sadhana. Even during these hard days he never failed to celebrate the birth anniversaries of Swami Vivekananda. This auspicious day in each year was marked with the inflow of poems on Bhakti or Vedanta. He also rejoiced by telling stories of Swamiji, and Sri Ramakrishna to the children around him. Most of his songs on Bhakti, Vedanta, Divine Mother Shakti and Kali were written by him only during the period of self-exile coupled with misery and starvation.

In sweet and simple Tamil which was understandable by all, he serialized the biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and

Swamiji in the journals edited by him. The parables and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna were widely used in all his writings whether on politics, philosophy, religion or any other subject. The extracts from the talks and speeches of Swami Vivekananda were freely used in many of the articles on social reforms and politics. He was not merely a poet, but also a forceful essayist and imaginative story-writer. In his poetic prose on Shakti he begins:

Ramakrishna Muni said

It is possible to lay a fence on earth.

Is it possible to fence the sky ?

An object can be controlled. But is it possible to control Shakti ?

The body can be controlled; is it possible to control the life in it ?

Regulate the way of life, it is possible to control the mind.

Shakti dwells in *prana* and mind. For this Shakti build temple within.

In another short poem on Shakti he pleads:

O Mother,

Bless me to reach the desired goal

Bless me for filling with virtue

Bless me to have noble convictions and determination,

Biess me to gain Jnana with Viveka

With devotion to you, all my sins shall vanish like vanishing of the dew in the sunlight.

Bharati is a true Vedantist. He advocated Shakti-worship without conflicting with the principles of Vedanta. In his essay on 'Nava Shakti Margam' he defined Shakti as follows:

Though Shakti-worship is common among people, they have not yet understood the principles behind it. Gods will not bestow blessings to those who worship the images and scriptures without understanding their underlying principles.

It is wrong to consider that Parasakti is different from Paramatma. In the form of

Sakti, paramatma creates, preserves and destroys the entire universe. Therefore the Saktas, in the saguna stage instead of worshipping nirguna Brahman in the masculine form, worship Brahman in the feminine form as 'Lokamata'. Ramakrishna Paramahansa in his conversation always used to refer as 'May Mother Kali'. The true significance of worship of 'Lokamata' shall be made known to them. Nava shakti is not new to us, but Nava Shakti margam would mean the worship with full understanding of the underlying principles.

In his article on 'Bhakti' in *Karmayogi* he says:

You should be aware as to what Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa said. Bhakti and implicit belief are the only easy ways to attain *mukti*. Other considerations will not affect them in the least. True Bhakti alone is capable of bestowing you the vision of God. It is impossible to attain it by mere bookish knowledge.

Bharati in all his writings condemned the idlers and vain philosophers who carried on their arguments on fate and effects of Karma. According to him practice of Vedanta shall be coupled with tireless work. The life of Sri Ramakrishna had become handy to illustrate his view.

Ramakrishna always used to do 'japam' saying that 'You exist'; 'You exist'; but I am not; I am not, I am not. Do you consider him to be an idler? Ah! Ah!! Ramakrishna created Vivekananda. And the foremost among those who created our modern India is Vivekananda.

Always man has to work. One who surrenders to God and undertakes any work will never feel tired. It is needless to say that such work will have strength, speed, superiority, beauty and abundance.

Bharati wrote several stories and all of them were intended to convey certain noble message for the purpose of reforming the society or to illustrate certain truth. They are not for mere pleasure of reading. The language used in them were always simple and forceful. The teachings of Sri Rama-

krishna lie buried in many of the stories. 'Chandrikayin Kathai' is one of the long stories written by him for propagating the widow re-marriage. Sri Vireesalingam Pantulu, one of the great social reformers of Telugu desam, is one of the key character in this story. Following is the extract from this story which reveals the Jivanmukti state of Sri Ramakrishna:

Finally Somanathaier got down from upstairs and asked as to the matter on which they were arguing.

Jivanmukti once attained, will it remain permanent? Is it possible that one who attained it, will be again dragged into worldly ties? This is the matter on which we are discussing.

Muthusubba Dikshatar asked Somanathier 'What is your opinion in this matter?'

Somanathaier replied, 'I do not have adequate knowledge relating to Vedanta'.

At this juncture Visalakshi entered the scene and asked, 'I do not believe that any one in this world can become a Jivanmukta. Have any one of you attained it or have seen any one who attained it?'

Somanathaiyer intervened and affirmed, 'Ramakrishna Paramahansa was there. He was a great Jivanmukta'.

The above cited extracts are intended, only to illustrate the deep involvement of Bharati in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda ideals and philosophy.

In matters relating to several social reforms, Bharati never totally accepted the views of Swami Vivekananda. On certain items he was critical, especially regarding the eating of non-vegetarian food by Swamiji. Yet in most of his writings pertaining to social reforms and politics and philosophy, Bharati freely quoted extracts from Swamiji's talks, speeches, letters and writings etc. Thus non-English knowing Tamils were exposed to the message of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna and the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita, Swami Abhedananda and others who were in the forefront in the

Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement in India and abroad.

During eight years from 1910 to 1918. the forced leisure had given Bharati a golden opportunity to dwell deep in Vedanta. The great poems like 'Kannan Pattu' (worship of Kṛṣṇa on all Bhavas), 'Panchali Sapatham', 'Kuif Pattu', 'Pappa Pattu', 'Suya Charitam' (autobiography in poetry), songs on Vedanta, Shakti and Kali were written only during this period. His devotion in the form of patriotism to his Motherland is reflected in all his songs whether they are on Bhakti, Vedanta or Shakti. He had also translated Bhagavad-Gita in Tamil verse. Gandhiji wrote a foreword when this book was published later. Keeping Swami Vivekananda's ideas as base, he wrote in Tamil an exhaustive commentary on Patanjali Yoga Sutras. In this attempt he also made use of certain other famous commentaries then available on this ancient scripture. When this literary work was read out to Sri Aurobindo, he is reported to have expressed his deep appreciation for the work.

Teachings of Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna made Bharati accept the universality of Religions. His songs on Bhakti include songs on Jesus Christ and Alla. He wrote for the young, youth and the old. And they had, during those days, a tremendous and the desired impact on the minds of people. His writings had turned many to sacrifice their all for the freedom of our country. Even today there are no parallels to his soul-stirring songs of Himalayan heights. His devotion to Shakti was so great that he never cared for his mundane needs. Perhaps this exalted state of mind enabled him to face life with courage and determination in spite of utter poverty which would have driven any one else with a weak mind to resort to suicide.

At the end of ten years of his life of poverty in Pondicherry, the revolutionary

spirit of Bharati was mellowed down, and the deep study of scriptures coupled with sadhanas turned him an illumined soul with indrawn mind. As he became disgusted of the self-made prison he bid farewell to Pondicherry and entered the British territory on 20 November 1918. At the border itself he was arrested and lodged in Cuddalore sub-jail. Happily at the intervention of Annie Besant and C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar he was released after four days. He spent two more years of poverty at Kadayam, the birthplace of his wife Chellammal in Thirunelveli district. His appeals for help to promote a publishing venture was met with rebuff at every turn. On request he went to neighbouring places and gave brilliant speeches on philosophy and religion. His dynamic and arresting personality drew large admiring crowds. In the month of March 1919 he met Mahatma Gandhi in the residence of Rajaji. This meeting gravitated Bharati towards the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, especially the ethos of non-violence and non-cooperation. It was at this crucial time (December 1920) that his old paper *Swadesh Mitran* welcomed him back to its fold. Bharati was elated and he bade farewell to uncertainties, and lacerations of enforced idleness. In the first quarter of 1921 he seemed to have had a premonition that his life would be cut short, and his writings were accordingly often tinged with the pale cast of other worldliness. He was often seen to discuss the problem of death in his writings and speeches. One evening late in August, Bharati went to Parthasarathi Swami Temple at Triplicane and as usual offered a coconut to the temple elephant. Unfortunately the elephant which was in rut, struck out at him with its trunk. The unconscious Bharati was however rescued and saved by his friend. But the shock had done already irreparable damage to Bharati's weak body. Despite

devoted attention, on the mindnight of 11 September 1921 which happened to be the 29th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's address to the World Parliament of Religions, he cast away his mortal remains to join the realm of immortals.

All through his short span of life he gave his all to his countrymen but got little or nothing in return.

Bharati left behind a glowing and imperishable mass of poetry which had bequeathed a new hope, a new self-confidence, and a whole new generation looking forward to the future. For Tamil literature, the 'Bharati age' of renaissance had begun. Subramanya Bharati remains, even half a century later, the supreme maker of modern Tamil literature, foremost among the patriots and social reformers of Tamil Nadu.

In the state of infancy of Ramakrishna-movement in South India, the message of Bhagawan Ramakrishna and the teachings of Swami Vivekananda were familiar only among a few intellectuals including Bharati who knew English. Only after Bharati began writing, it was possible to bring Ramakrishna and Vivekananda closer to a larger section of non-English knowing people through the incandescent poetry and virile prose of Bharati. Bharati's reverence for Swami Vivekananda was remarkable. He addressed Swamiji as Rajarshi, Sadguru, Srimat Swami, Avatara Purusha, Mahajnani, Jnanarupendra, Hindu Desika and Maha Jyothi. etc. It is our firm conviction that Bharati made

an outstanding contribution towards the spread of the Ramakrishna movement among Tamil knowing population in the earlier years of the movement. The devotees of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda can pay no better homage to this selfless soul than by publishing a book containing all what he said about Sri Gurumaharaj and Swamiji. We conclude by quoting the eloquent homage to Bharati paid in the Madras legislative council in 1928, by Sri S. Satyamurthi, a great patriot and an orator in Tamil and English:

'Sir, the late Subramanya Bharati was a man on whose tongue the Goddess Saraswati can honestly be believed to have danced the dance of patriotism. If he had been born in any other country of the world except India, that man would have been made the poet laureate of that country, would have been given honours and titles by a government which knows how to respond to the feelings of the people, and would have lived and died among the most honoured of the nation. But Sir, being the slave country that we are, he had to live as an exile in Pondicherry enjoying the hospitality of French Government and die a broken wreck, because he found no use for himself under the auspices of this government. But, Sir, martyrs and patriots before him have gone to the same fate. Subramanya Bharati lived and died a patriot.... I have no doubt that so long as a single Tamilian lives, these songs will remain the priceless heritage of the Tamil race.'

PRACTICAL VEDANTA FOR TEACHERS

SWAMI YOGESHANANDA

Some of us are under the impression that religion is a spare-time affair. 'If I get time, I'll...' is the phrase with which we begin many of our best resolutions. 'If I get home early enough this evening, I'll have time to meditate a little before dinner.' 'I'm going to get myself out of bed earlier in the morning, if I can, so I can do meditation or japa before going to work every day.' 'I'll be at the service on Sunday (or the class on Tuesday) if I can arrange my schedule for the week. I hope something doesn't come up...'

Personally I have told myself all these things at one time or another, and lived to see my own mind cook up, sometimes in very roundabout ways, circumstances that prevent the execution of my promises. When we do this we only deprive ourselves and very often take it out on ourselves in the form of negativity or feelings of guilt and hopelessness. We begin to think we may never be able to take spiritual life seriously.

Vedanta, at least as taught in the Rama-krishna-Vivekananda movement, is *lived* religion; this is exactly what it means. There are no lukewarm Vedantists; either you are practicing or you are not. The question is how to do it. In the suggestions which follow, the message is that we need to discover spiritual practice as virtually a twenty-four-hour concern. We need not wait until we 'get home'; or until we are too tired to meditate; or until the lunch-break or for the stall in freeway traffic. Our spiritual practice goes on from the moment we wake, throughout the day and even on into our dreamlife at night. When we wake to this fact it is a welcome sign that our 'honeymoon' with the lure of spiritual experience is over!

The following remarks are offered not as preachings on what Vedantists ought to do, but as suggestions which have been tried by others in the past, are being tried in the present, and may be found helpful.

The Noble Profession

In Indian, even more than in other cultures, this is what education has been called. Although one branch of learning (the Veda) was held to be more so than the other (the Vedangas), all knowledge was considered sacred. Learning is the domain of Saraswati, Goddess to all students and teachers; Lord Siva is known as the Teacher of teachers.

The Attitude of Teachers toward Students

In what sense(s) can we say the teacher is "superior" to the student?

In age? In having a larger store of facts? In knowledge or wisdom? Or in experience? Every teacher has to ponder this question, not just make assumptions which are quite possibly unjustified. According to Swami Vivekananda, religion is 'the manifestation of the divinity in man'; education he calls 'the manifestation of the perfection in man'. Now as we realize in Vedanta, man's divinity and his perfection are not different. The teacher is the awakener of secular perfection if you will, but the sublimity of that knowledge is not to be forgotten. The teacher has manifested certain aspects of perfection and not others. No one knows what aspects the student will manifest as a result of the educative process. 'Each soul is potentially divine'. All this points to an attitude of samesightedness: both student

and teacher are learners, both are also in fact teachers, and yet there is a practical distinction between the two.

Do we think of the student or child as a tabula rasa?

Are these young individuals in the classroom or home, 'material to be molded'? Is the student a blank slate on which to write what we think should be written? Vedanta would discourage us from thinking in this way. It is true only in a very superficial sense, for the mind is a many-layered thing, 'bearing beneath its deceptively simple surface the storehouse of impressions 'from a beginningless past'. Virtually the whole world of education and psychology is rising now to protest the manipulation of others as objects, especially the young.

As Vedantists we hold firmly to the view that knowledge is within. That is, the real meaning of the word is the *capacity* to judge, discriminate, absorb, compare with past experience and profit by, stimuli from the "outside". The teacher is one such source of stimuli, and a very important one. He or she offers, suggests—worships! One does not force one's worship on the Deity, and the best teachers know without all this philosophy that 'Hands off!' is by far the best rule.

Does this mean no discipline?

Far from it. Many, hearing the Vedantic teachings, ask in wonder how anyone can regard the student as God and yet administer discipline. We must remind them of the instruction of Lord Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield: ('Though all these are forms of Myself), be merely the instrument: I am the accomplisher of every thing.' And that highest vision Sri Ramakrishna had: 'I clearly saw that it

was the Divine Mother who had become the executioner, the block and the victim.'

Discipline too is service and worship. At one period it was necessary for me to nurse a very senior Swami of our Order who was unavoidably placed for the time being in an unaccustomed condition of dependence. That service of mine, the guidance I had to give, was no less a service to God in spite of the roles we had to play! Someone has said the student is in the position of a block of stone or wood in the hands of the sculptor, begging to be cut. True. Cut we shall; disfigure we shall not.

We are not saying that this is easy. Here is a passage from Swami Ashokananda's *Spiritualizing Everyday Life*: "You look upon a child as God and at the same time you have to thrash him when he becomes naughty; it is not easy. It requires a great deal of cleverness; you must inwardly say, 'Lord, you have come to me as a child and therefore when I take the cane and give you a hiding that is my worship, O Lord, so don't take it amiss.' Or if you go to a sick person, you recognize that the sick person is God, but you do not prepare all kinds of sweets and such things to offer him; you bring him sick diet, maybe sometimes you scold him, or hold him down in the bed if he tries to get up. All these things can be done in a worshipful spirit. I do not really see any difficulty about it; it is all in the attitude of mind you have. If you say that it is not possible to have proper reverence while you are engaged in disciplinary action, I shall give you my own testimony in this regard. I have practised this and I have found that it works. You may discipline a person and be very hard on him when it is a necessity of your service to him—not because of any emotion or impulse on your own part, not because you have become annoyed or irritated, but because you think it is the

attitude that will accomplish what you want to accomplish for that person. Inwardly you think, 'Lord, this is an offering to You. An offering on my part to You.' You can be as hard as the occasion requires, and yet at the same time you can maintain the attitude of worship, and it is wonderfully effective."

What about aggressive hostility?

It may sound naively pious today to speak of prayer as response to the taunts of the denizens of our classrooms. Actually this was the answer given to us by a senior Swami living many years in the West and far from naive. Asked about the best response to someone showing us hostility, he replied, 'I pray for that person, then and there.' This was counsed for monastics, and professional teachers will sometimes have to take sterner steps! Still, the prayer part cannot be left out. And if you have to employ restraints, remind yourself that we are here to please God, not man. This may seem to be a different, more devotional behaviour than the one just given, but in reality they do not differ; in both, you have to think of the Divine.

The delinquent, in a large number of cases, is an individual with talent and energy who has not been given sufficient responsibility in the right directions to develop faith in himself, and has had to compensate for inferiority feelings by bullying.

The charge of favoritism

If one recognizes this in oneself, a process of conscious correction should be initiated. Sama-darsana, same sightedness, is a prime Vedantic principle and practice—trying to see the same divinity potential in all. The solution for favoritism is a matter of subtlety and sublimation rather

than a lessening or suppressing of affection. Where a special fondness for one student over another persists in spite of ourselves, we can, I think, discover a way of carefully expressing it by which others do not become conscious of it.

Racial social and religious hurdles

Suppose we know that what we are attempting to teach runs counter to the students' upbringing: their minds being filled with social and religious prejudices we would dearly love to undo! A great deal of frustration can be worked up by the teacher who tries to repair all the damage done in the home. I am not saying the classroom experience cannot be therapeutic but it is no match for the home background. One simply cannot force liberalism. If one has it, some is bound to rub off. Let us never forget what Swami Vivekananda said: 'If you want to reform John Doe, go and live with him. Don't try to reform him. If you have any of the Divine Fire, he will catch it.' As teachers we are therefore limited.

Has the teacher the right to the fruits of his or her labor?

This is the celebrated question addressed by the *Bhagavad Gita*. We have the right to work—we have also the right to expect that sincere labor will bear fruit—but we have no right to enjoy those fruits ourselves. We need to know the effects of our systems of education, the efficacy of the processes we use: that is simple feedback. What we have to learn is not to look for the reward of gratitude and appreciation.

I knew a man whose high-school history teacher changed the whole aspect of life for him, opening his mind in a way that few teachers are able to do. He never forgot it, sent her cards, called on her

whenever he was in the hometown and cherished her before others. This is rare. All of you who teach know just how rare it is. You have to sow seeds in soil of uncertain quality with great patience. How true this is I discovered for myself when teaching in a school in India. There I once read this wonderful statement: 'Remember, if you are a history teacher, only a few of your pupils will grow up to be historians; but all will grow up to be adults.'

What shall we educate for?

What is it, exactly, that we want to produce? Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago spent years over this question and wrote volumes in reply. You and I know what it all boils down to—not the production of these or those professions but just to make the student *think*. There is all too little originality in American culture. We tend to homogenize all our achievements. An apple pie recipe is liked in a particular place; it is circulated and used in restaurants all over the country. A television formula, an opera-presentation format, a movie plot, proves popular and is copied by every big producer. All become standardized to the point of monotonous mediocrity. In some other countries education still has the power to make the student think for himself or herself, and to generate creative variation in art, style, habit, taste and thought. May India retain her genius for variety and may the United States discover it! Sings *The Prophet*: 'The vision of one man lends not its wings to another man.'

Sri Ramakrishna told his elder brother, "What shall I do with that schooling which enables one to bundle rice and bananas?" He wanted to know the meaning of life. Vedantists can help students always to look for the *integrating* principle; to see

how physics and philosophy, theology and anthropology, psychology and sociology are all paths up the same mountain.

Those who have read the teachings of Swami Vivekananda know well what it was he would have us teach our youth: the positive, not the negative; not sin, but strength; not the destructive pulling down of ideas, ideals, social frameworks and institutions without offering better substitutes. There is plenty of 'self-fulfilment' and 'self-improvement' being taught today and the motivation for these is largely egoistic—the success of the lower self. Whatever subject we teach, at whatever levels, we are to realize we are to some degree inculcators of value-systems. We may, if we are fortunate and skilful, awaken the spiritual instincts. Then we may be true 'makers of men.'

Thus far we have looked at the attitudes of the teacher. Now what about those of the student?

The attitude of students toward teachers

From the most ancient times in Indian civilization the imparting of knowledge has been regarded as an intrinsically non-commercial activity. To understand all the reasons why teachers (usually Brahmins) never became an organized body of professionals, expecting their due remuneration from a paying society, would require a long discussion. Suffice it here to say that teachers of olden times were content with the thought that their priceless treasures were being passed on down the line of generations and content, too, with the donations of food and other necessities, brought by grateful parents and students, which sustained them. Such was the idealism of a great culture.

The only way any of this attitude can be restored today is to try to cultivate in our children as early as possible a feeling of respect and reverence for teachers (includ-

ing parents) and for scholarship. There must be the understanding that study is a kind of sacrifice and a form of worship. What are the 'gods' but the guardian angels and presiding deities of the culture and way of life of a people? A student is one who, through the austerities and sacrifice of study, strives to absorb and transmit the treasured values of his people to their descendants, taking the heritage from his esteemed teachers, the whole process as a service of worship to the Protectors of the society.

The younger the child, the simpler the terms; but the awareness of this philosophical basis of worship must be reinforced at every stage.

This can hardly be effective in the one-life framework of the Semitic faiths and related cosmology. I like to tell the story of the octogenerian in our ashrama library in Shillong, Assam. One day the head of the Center found him studying a Sanskrit grammar. Surprised, he asked the old gentleman, who he knew did not know that language, why he was bothering to pore over it at his age. 'Why, Swamiji,' he replied, 'You see it was a matter of great regret to me that I could not study Sanskrit in this life; now I am trying to prepare myself for the next one.'

Well, we need not be so literal; the important thing is to help our students to have the firm conviction that their study-sacrifice is not dependent on the fortunes of one life alone.

Today there are so many aids to teaching! It really is debatable how much blame for the ills in education should be put upon the young. They *may* excel us; they cannot if we do not lead the way.

Fatigue in the course of our teaching

There is no question about it, teachers today face the greatest challenge they have ever had. Theirs is now possibly the most

difficult profession in the realm of public contact. After a day in 'the blackboard jungle' many feel that there is nothing left of them, and scores leave the work every year in larger cities.

In pleading fatigue, however, if we are true to our Vedantic convictions, we know that a careful self-analysis (which is incumbent upon us) often reveals ours is more a case of emotional frustration than of limited energy. We have, after all, the entire storehouse of divine energy to draw on; if we together with our attachments, resentments and emotional hang-ups can step out of the way, renewed strength and energy will flow through us. This happens with all creative, objective persons, whether or not they know why. How much more so should it be for us! If we can cultivate, as indicated above, the habit of offering our teaching and all our work to the Lord, trying to see him in the student, the co-worker and in ourselves, and resigning to Him the results of our sincere labor, we should find ourselves buoyed up and sustained and even provided with fresh energy.

A practical tip for meditation

This is a simple thing recommended for all busy persons but which has been found especially helpful for those in active teaching. When we are beginning our period of meditation the initial act of quieting and concentrating the mind often brings up things we have forgotten to do or wish to remember to do. Perhaps we try to file these away mentally, promising to carry them out when the meditation is over. But by then our mood has changed; we have lost all that! So take a little notebook in with you. As such reminders arise, jot them down and clear them from the mind with a few words on paper: then be at peace.

In closing I will tell you a story about

the Swami who founded our Chicago Center, Swami Gnaneshwarananda. He was a young man fresh from college when he first became interested in joining the Order. The day at Belur Math when he first met Swami Premananda, that great

disciple of the Master asked him about his college career. 'I have finished my education,' he told the Swami.

'Then why have you come *here*?' Swami Premananda asked. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'So long as I live, I learn.'

'SRINVANTU VISHVE AMRITASYA PUTRAH' (HEAR YE, CHILDREN OF IMMORTALITY)

A Recitation-Drama on Swami Vivekananda

BODHISATTVA

Characters: 1. *Swami Vivekananda*
2. *Three citizens of modern India,*
A, B, C.

(Enter Swami Vivekananda and stands at the other corner of the stage)

Chorus in the background:

'Hear ye, children of Immortality. Even those that dwell in higher spheres. I have known the Great Being who is like the effulgent sun and beyond all darkness. Knowing Him alone one can reach the shore beyond death. There is no other way. There is no other way to Immortality.'

Enter A, and B. They stand in one corner of the stage

A: That was the voice of the Upanishads, of the Vedas, of the ancient *r̥sis* that India heard five thousand years before.

B: But it died down; the Moghuls, the Shakas, the Hunas, the French, the Portugese, and the English—all trampled on the neck of our motherland. And we lost everything, we lost everything....

A: Yes, we had nothing to be proud of, until the world heard once again the thunderous reverberations of the same voice, of that 'wonderful voice of God', in the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893.

Sw. V: 'Children of immortal bliss'—what a sweet, what a hopeful name. Allow me to call you, brethren, by that sweet name—heirs of immortal bliss—yes, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth! sinners? It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature. Come up, O lions, shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal spirits free, blest and eternal; ye are not matter, ye are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter.

(Enter C)

C: Whose voice is this? Who blows this trumpet of Hinduism in the very West which had so long looked upon India as heathens, people destined to be ruled by others?

Sw. V: I addressed the assembly as 'Sisters and Brothers of America'. A deafening applause of two minutes followed, and then I proceeded and when it was finished, I sat down, almost exhausted with emotion.

C: Who is this wonderful speaker?

A: He is Swami Vivekananda, the Hindu monk of India.

B: He is an orator by divine right and his strong intelligent face in its picturesque setting of yellow and orange was hardly less interesting than these earnest words and the rich rhythmical utterances he gave them.

A: Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him, the West felt how foolish it was to send missionaries to this holy land, India.

C: Who sent this monk to the Parliament? His name was not in the list. All the invited Indian delegates went in special chartered ship and they were received at the port by the New York Mayor. What was this monk's credentials?

A: Vivekananda went alone, uninvited, floating on the mercy of the Lord. He went almost penniless and was faced with unbearable hunger, insult and cold. He appealed to his countrymen for help and one group answered.

C: Let the devil die of cold.

B: But the devil was destined neither to die nor surrender.

Sw. V: I may perish of cold or hunger in this land, but I bequeath to you, young men, this sympathy, this struggle for the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed. Trust not to the so-called rich, they are more dead than alive. The hope lies in you—in the meek, the lowly, but the faithful. Have faith in the Lord; no policy, it is nothing. Feel for the miserable and look up for help—it *shall come*. I have travelled twelve years with this load in my heart and this idea in my head. I have gone from door to door of the so-called rich and great. With a bleeding heart I have crossed half the world to this strange land, seeking for help. The Lord is great. I know He will help me.

B: It is the voice of the prophet of India's resurrection, that spoke through him.

A: And the American newspapers gave an unprecedented ovation to the dark Hindu of the sleeping subcontinent.

A: Behold! He brings a new life in the moribund nation that was waiting only for death and extinction. Listen, listen how the Europe heard his message. Listen to Romain Rolland.

B: His words are great music, phrases in the style of Bethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Hanel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his scattered as they are through the pages of books at thirty years' distance without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock.

Sw. V: I came to this country not to satisfy my curiosity, nor for name or fame, but to see if I could find any means for the support of the poor in India. If God helps me, you will know gradually what these means are.

C: He is an outcaste. Did Sankaracarya or Buddha go to preach Hinduism and live among the mlecchas? Vivekananda is a sudra, an untouchable. He commits the sin of crossing the seas.

Sw. V: Come be men. Come out of your narrow holes and have a look abroad. See how nations are on the march. Do you love man? Do you love your country? Then come, let us struggle for higher and better things; look not back, no, not even if you see the dearest and nearest cry. Look not back, but forward.

B: He dreams of raising India without the wealth of the rich men and the support of the pundits.

A: He dreams of raising India through the power and zeal of her younger generation.

Sw. V: A hundred thousand men and women, fired with the zeal of holiness, fortified with eternal faith in the Lord, and nerved to Lion's courage by their sympathy for the poor and the fallen and the down-trodden will go over the length and breadth of the land, preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of help, the gospel of social raising-up—the gospel of equality.

C: Gospel of social-upraising? Gospel of equality? Foolish! No, No. India will retain the ancient tradition of caste superiority of Brahmins, and the others must listen to the priests, the only mediators to God. That is the basis of our Sanatana Dharma or Hinduism.

Sw. V: No religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism. The Lord has shown me that religion is not in fault, but it is the pharisees and sadducees in Hinduism, hypocrites, who invent all sorts of engines of tyranny in the shape of doctrines of Paramarthika and Vyavaharika. I have been dragged through a whole life full of crosses and tortures; I have seen the nearest and dearest die, almost of starvation; I have been ridiculed, distrusted, and have suffered for my sympathy for the very men who scoff and scorn.

C: It is because he was fit for scorn and hatred. Did not we warn him in the past not to proceed too far, not to break the holy custom of our pundits and priests, not to cross the seas, not to preach the Sanatana Dharma in the mleccha land? He is a renegade. Let him not return to India.

Sw. V: I will not return to this society until I burst upon it like a bombshell and make follow me like a dog.

C: He is an iconoclast, a rebel, a destroyer of old values.

Sw. V: No, I come not to destroy, but to fulfil, I come not to break, but to build the new on the old foundations.

B: Did not you hear what the Indian pundits at Bombay decided about this shudra's impending homecoming?

A: Yes, they decided that Vivekananda committed the sin of going to mleccha land. Now he can enter India only after

prayaschitta and that too only in the presence of shudras. He will never be able to eat with the Brahmins.

Sw. V: No man, no nation, my son, can hate others and live. India's doom was sealed the very day they invented the word mleccha and stopped from communion with others.

A: Vivekananda says he is a sannyasin and therefore above all caste.

C: The son of a non-brahmin parading as a sannyasin, a Paramhansa, a dandi, a yatiraj. My goodness! what can be more ludicrous?

Sw. V: I do not care what they say, I love my God, my religion, my country and above all myself, a poor beggar. I love the poor, the ignorant, the down-trodden; I feel for them—the Lord knows how much. He will show me the way. I do not care a fig for human approbation or criticism. I think of most of them as ignorant, noisy children—they have not penetrated into the inner nature of sympathy, into the spirit which is all love.'

C: Did India receive him on his return?

A: 20,000 men and women stood upto midnight in Colombo, to receive the returning here.

B: The Raja of Ramnad offered his head at the Swami's feet even before they touched the soil of India. Is not it strange? In Madras people just went mad and 20,000 gathered round him and he spoke from the chariot in the manner of Kṛṣṇa at Kurukshetra.

A: In Calcutta, his hometown, thousands pulled his car.

B: In Punjab the kings knelt at his feet.

C: The Avalanche indeed, rode down the continent with its tempestuous fury! Strange! How could it happen?

A: Millions of Indians heard him with frenzied expectations.

Sw. V: My India, arise. The longest night seems to be passing away, the sorest trouble seems to be coming to an end at last, the seeming corpse appears to be awakening and a voice is coming to us; away back where history and even tradition fails to peep into the gloom of the past, coming down from there, reflected as it were from peak to peak of the infinite Himalaya of knowledge, and of love, of work, India, this motherland of ours— voice is coming unto us, gentle, firm, and yet unmistakable in its utterances, and is gaining volume as days pass by, and behold, the sleeper is awakening. Like a breeze from the Himalayas, it is bringing life into the almost dead bones and muscles, the lethargy is passing away, and only the blind cannot see, that she is awakening, this motherland of ours, from deep long sleep. No one can resist her any more; never is she going to sleep any more; no outward powers can hold her back any more; for the infinite giant is rising to her feet.

A: He speaks like a prophet and breathes a new life in the dead bones of the nation. He stands like Christ near the dead Lazarus and utters 'Lazarus, rise forth'.

B: And there was a stir of resurrection, of a new life everywhere from Kashmir to Kanyakumari.

A: Kanyakumari. Ah, do you remember his historic meditation there years before?

C: What was that meditation? We only know that Sankara meditated on the eternal transience of this world and Buddha meditated on the extinction of all desires, Nirvana.

A: Vivekananda meditated not on God but on the deprived and distressed humanity, the mute down-trodden millions of India counting their days for a saviour to raise them.

Sw. V: Remember that the nation lives in the cottage. But alas, nobody ever did anything for them. Our modern reformers are very busy about widow re-marriage. Of course, I am a sympathiser in every reform, but the fate of a nation does not depend upon the number of husbands the widows get, but upon the condition of the masses. Can you raise them up? Can

you give them back their lost individuality without making them lose their innate spiritual nature? Can you be an occidental of occidentals, in your spirit of equality, freedom, work and energy, and at the same time, a Hindu to the very backbone in religious culture and instincts? This is to be done and we will do it. You are all born to do it.

C: Can we too follow him? We, the common men? How does he expect us to be like him?

Sw. V: I have done nothing as yet; you have to do the task. If I die tomorrow the work will not die. I sincerely believe that there will be thousands coming up from the ranks to take up the work and carry it further and further, beyond all that my most hopeful imagination ever painted. I have faith in my country, and especially in the youth of my country.

C: Did India listen to her prophet's words?

B: Yes, she did. She had to. His words are the gospel for this age. He is verily the pathfinder for our glorious rejuvenation.

C: What is his gospel? What did he really come to say?

B: He came to show by his life the essential divinity of all souls and the essential unity of all religions.

C: Did the great Indians listen to him?

B: Listen to what Rabindranath Tagore spoke of him.

A: 'In the recent times in India, it was Vivekananda alone who preached a great message which is not tied to any do's and don'ts. Addressing one and all in the nation, he said: "In everyone of you there is power of Brahman (God); the God in the poor desires you to serve Him."'

B: And now speaks Aurobindo, the sage of Pondicherry.

A: 'Behold. Vivekananda still lives in the soul of his Mother and in the souls of her children. Vivekananda was a soul of

puissance if ever there was one, a very lion among men. We perceive his influence still working gigantically, we know not well how, we know not well where, in something that is not yet formed, something leonine, grand, intuitive, upheaving that has entered the soul of India.'

C: But who cares for the words of religion in this age of science? Who cares?

Sw. V: Modern science and its sledgehammer blows are pulverizing the porcelain foundations of all dualistic religions everywhere. In the first place we have to stop the incoming of such a wave in India. Therefore preach the Advaita to every one, so that religion may withstand the shock of modern science. Materialism prevails in Europe today. What will save the West is the philosophy of Advaita, of non-dualism. And India will send this religion of the Upanisads to face reason and modern science.

C: We only knew one philosophy—'jagat teen kaal me nei hai' What is this strange Advaita philosophy?

Sw. V: Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within. Do it either by work or worship or knowledge or psychic control, by one or all of these and be free. This is the whole of religion.

C: What shall we do with this philosophy? We better go back to our ancient traditional religion of flower-throwing, coconut breaking, head-shaving and Ganga-bathing.

Sw. V: Religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man. Temples and books and churches and dogmas—are but secondary details.

A: The Harvard scholars asked him to relate the Advaita philosophy to the modern civilization. And he answered.

Sw. V: Civilization is not the amassing of wealth and riches. Had it been so, Rome,

Greece and Babylon would not have been buried in the Aegian seas. Civilization is the manifestation of divinity that is in man. That civilization is the greatest which produces the highest number of Buddhas and Christs. That is why, the 'mild Hindu' still lives and lives triumphantly even when many other have died.

C: Will the other religions accept Vedanta?

Sw. V: Even the Christians cannot understand their New Testament without understanding the Vedanta. The Vedanta is the rationale of all religions. I come to preach a religion of which Buddhism is but a rebel child and Christianity a distant echo.

C: Oh! He is then nothing more than a champion of orthodox Hinduism.

B: But he never spoke of an exclusive Hinduism. The world stands today in the need of a harmony of religions as his master practised. He only preached the message of his master—Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

Sw. V: Brothers, you have touched another chord in my heart, the deepest of all, and that is the mention of my teacher, my master, my hero, my ideal, my God in life—Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. If there has been anything achieved by me, by thoughts, or by words, or by deeds, if from my lips has ever fallen one word that has helped any one in the world, I lay no claim to it, it was His. His life itself was a Parliament of Religions.

A: With all the eminent qualities of head and heart, Vivekananda was egoless and pure like a child. For him the world was not, only God was. He was destined to live like a wanderer on the face of the earth, a parivrajaka scattering the seeds of his master's message for a rich harvest in this draught of the soul.

B: He had the intellect of Sankara and the heart of Buddha.

A: He had the Bhakti of Caitanya and meditation of Siva Himself.

B: He was energy personified and action was his message to men.

A: He saluted Napoleon, the Lord of war.

B: To him virtue was another name of *virya*, heroism.

Sw. V: I speak nothing but the Vedanta and I quote nothing but the Upanisads.

C: But the Upanisads are a forest of complex and difficult philosophy. And then, how can this be spoken in the mleccha land, and to the mleccha people? Hinduism is, after all, a religion of devotion, prayers and acceptance of karma. God's grace is the only way out for the weak and sinners like us. What did he say on this?

Sw. V: Strength, strength is what the Upanisads speak to me from every page. This is the one great thing to remember. It has been the one great lesson I have taught in my life; strength, it says, strength O man, be not weak. Are there no human weaknesses? Says man. There are, says the Upanisads, but will more weakness heal them, would you try to wash dirt with dirt? Will sin cure sin, weakness cure weakness? Strength O man, strength, says the Upanisads, stand up and be strong.

A: And he wanted men and women who are physically powerful, intellectually brilliant and spiritually strong. 'Man-making is my mission. I want a man-making religion. I want a man-making education.' That was his slogan.

Sw. V: We have had lectures enough, societies enough, papers enough. Where is the man who will lend us a hand to drag us out? Where is the man who has sympathy for us. Ay, that man is wanted.

C: Did his countrymen appreciate the man-making mission? Did those men of his dream ever come?

Sw. V: But appreciation or no appreciation. I am born to organize these young men; nay,

hundreds more in every city are ready to join me; and I want to send them rolling like irresistible waves over India bringing comfort, morality, religion, and education to the doors of the meanest and the most downtrodden. And this I will do or die.

B: And the power that emanated from these prophetic words engulfed India shooting up its heroes to great heights of achievement. Did not you hear what Netaji Subhas Chandra said about Vivekananda?

A: Had he been alive today I would be at his feet.

B: And what did Nehru realize?

A: Rooted in the past and full of pride in India's prestige, Vivekananda was yet modern in his approach to life's problems, and was a kind of bridge between the past of India and her present... He came as a tonic to the depressed and demoralized Hindu mind and gave it self-reliance and some roots in the past.

B: But a prophet never comes for a single race or nation. Did not he speak of his global mission?

Sw. V: Remember, my mission is nation-making and world-moving. I belong as much to the whole world as to India.

C: Did the world outside India recognize him?

B: Through the filter of British Newspapers Vivekananda's words reached the table of Tolstoy who read Vivekananda's works all through the night. Listen to Tolstoy.

A: I was reading Vivekananda again. So far humanity has gone backward from this true and lofty and clear conception of the principle of life but never surpassed it.

Sw. V: The goal of life is to realize the divinity within all of us. Be not an imitation of Jesus or Buddha. But be a Buddha or a Jesus. Religion is being and becoming. Christs and

Budhas are but waves on the infinite ocean which I am.

C: But the world is too preoccupied with greed and power to listen to this mystical prophet.

A: Yes, the world can ignore this prophet only at its own peril! The first world war came and Europe had been turned into a vast cemetery.

B: The second world war came and the atomic bomb exploded on our mother earth bringing the dark prospect of a total global disaster.

C: Today the conflict among nations has brought the prospect of a thermonuclear Third World War and this time it will be the end of civilization. What did your prophet say about this?

A: Listen, listen to what the prophet said ninety years before.

Sw. V: The whole of western civilization will crumble to pieces in the next fifty years if there is no spiritual foundation. It is hopeless and perfectly useless to attempt to govern mankind with the sword. You will find that the very centres from which such ideas as government by force sprang up are the very first centres to degrade and degenerate and crumble to pieces. Europe, the centre of the manifestation of material energy, will crumble into dust within fifty years if she is not mindful to change her position, to shift her ground and make spirituality the basis of her life. And what will save Europe is the religion of the Upanisads.

A: This he spoke ninety years before. Europe did not listen and Europe suffered.

C: Did the other nations listen to your prophet's words?

Sw. V: Truth does not pay homage to any society, ancient or modern. Society has to pay homage to truth or die. Indian thought, philosophical and spiritual, must once more go over and conquer the world.

C: Strange! His words sound like thunders! But after all, what is the use

of glorifying India's thought, when millions still live below the poverty line? Should we not get the material prosperity of the West before all tall talks of Indian culture and Indian heritage?

Sw. V: I am one of the prodigal men ever born, but let me tell you frankly, it is not for myself, but on account of my ancestry.... Do not be in a hurry, do not go to imitate anybody else. This is another great lesson we have to remember: Imitation is not civilization.

C: Did the other nations listen to your prophet's words?

B: Here is the Russian thinker Y. Chelysev.

A: Many years will pass, many generations will come and go, Vivekananda and his time will become the distant past, but never will there fade the memory of the man who all his life dreamed of a better future for his people, who did so much to awaken his compatriots and move India forward, to defend his much-suffering people from injustice and brutality.

Sw. V: Liberty of thought and action is the only condition of life, of growth, and well-being. Where it does not exist, the man, the race, the nation must go down.... All are marching towards freedom. We are all journeying towards freedom.... All the social upheavalists, at least the leaders of them, are trying to find that all their communistic or equalising theories must have a spiritual basis, and that spiritual basis is in Vedanta only. I have been told by several leaders, who used to attend my lectures, that they required Vedanta as the basis of the new order of things.

C: Strange! Even socialists and foreigners are accepting Vedanta!

B: Here is Huang Xin Chuan, a leading thinker of China speaking of Vivekananda.

A: Vivekananda stands out as the most renowned philosopher and social figure of modern China. His philosophical and social thought and epic patriotism not only inspired the growth of nationalist move-

ment in India, but also made a great impact abroad.

C: Strange! Not even the greatest Vivekanandist of India could make such a confession! Yet, yet, we know all too well....

B: Wait, wait. History is yet to begin. The Prophet's dream is coming true. India is conquering the world through the power of spirituality and Vedantic ideas. Listen to the famous indologist Prof. Basham speak on Vivekananda.

A: It is Vivekananda who initiated the counter-attack from the East to the West. It is a friendly counter-attack of peace and spirituality of India.

C: Strange! But will these dreams come true through the youth of India many of whom are westernized, drug-addicts and foster only hatred for the nation, after getting their degrees?

Sw. V: I consider every man a traitor who having been educated at the expense of millions pays not the least heed to them... But I have faith in the youth of my country. One day they will come and veer round me. This I see clear as daylight.

A: Yes, hundreds of youth followed him and died on the gallows. Hundreds and hundreds made sacrifice of whole lives. And millions of Indian youth have come today to respond to the prophet. Today the national youth day in India rings with Vivekananda's message. He is our national hero, our leader and saviour. India today

resounds with the inspiring prophecies of young prophet of modern India.

Sw. V: India will be raised not with the power of the flesh, but with the power of the Spirit; not with flag of destruction, but with the flag of peace and love... The national ideals of India are renunciation and service. Intensify her in those two channels and the rest will take care of itself... I do not see into the future, nor do I care to see. But one vision I see clear as light before me that the ancient Mother has awakened once more, sitting on her throne, rejuvenated, more glorious than ever. Proclaim Her to all the world with the voice of peace and benediction.

B: That time has come; India strides the world scene today like a gentle colossus.

A: Today India is fulfilling the prophecy of her prophet. And the world respects Vivekananda as the prophet of modern times.

C: Incredible! Verily, verily it is true that a prophet is honoured everywhere save in his own country.

A, B & C: Hail to thee, the Great Teacher, the Prophet and the Pathfinder who came to us from higher spheres to lead us from slavery to Freedom, from darkness to Light, from death to Immortality.

(Chorus)

*asato mā sadgamaya
tamaso mā jyotirgamaya
mrtyormā amṛtam gamaya.*

AKSHAY KUMAR SEN

SWAMI CHETANANANDA

The advent of an avatar signalizes a renaissance, a juncture in history when a new age of civilization is ushered in by a massive cultural revival. The life of the Divine Incarnation is a force, and his ideas are new and inspiring. In particular, his mysterious charm and sublimity hold a special attraction for writers, poets, dramatists, painters, sculptors, and musicians, energizing their talents. One of the artists to feel the avatar's attraction was the poet, Akshay Kumar Sen, whose masterpiece was *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi*, a long narrative poem of Sri Ramakrishna's life.

Akshay was born in 1854 at Maynapur, a small village in the Bankura district of Bengal. Because his father Haladhar Sen and mother Bidhumukhi were too poor to afford a good education for him, Akshay was brought up in the countryside and educated in a village school. Little is known about his early life beyond the facts that he was devoted to Lord Krishna and lived humbly. In the course of time he married, was widowed, married again and had two sons and one daughter.

To escape poverty in his native village Akshay moved to Calcutta and found a job as private tutor to the children of the Tagore family of Jorasanko. It so happened that Devendra Nath Majumdar, a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, was working in the office of the Tagore estate and lived under the same roof as Akshay. But Akshay did not dare to introduce himself to Devendra because of his inferiority

complex—he felt himself to be unattractive, unlearned, and poor. He felt even further removed from his aristocratic employer.

As a humble devotee of Krishna, Akshay took formal initiation from his family guru a year before he met Sri Ramakrishna, and practised japam and meditation at night on the bank of the Ganga. In time, however, he became discouraged because, in spite of all his spiritual practices, he still had not received the vision of God.

One day Akshay was enjoying a smoke on the verandah when he overheard Devendra and Dharendra, a young man of the Tagore family, talking about a paramahansa (a man who has realized Brahman and renounced the world). Akshay was intrigued and wanted to know more about this paramahansa. He knew that such a high soul was a knower of God—one who could help others to see God.

Later, when Devendra was alone, Akshay approached him, saying: "Sir, you were talking about a paramahansa. Could you tell me where he is?" Brushing the question aside, Devendra asked him, "What good could it possibly do you?" Akshay was hurt, but his curiosity increased. Later he came to know from Dharendra that Sri Ramakrishna was the paramahansa, and that he lived in Dakshineswar.

Six months passed. Akshay's mind was possessed by Sri Ramakrishna. Coming from a village, he had no idea where Dakshineswar was located. Without the

help of Devendra he would never have the opportunity to meet Sri Ramakrishna. Summoning his resourcefulness, Akshay decided to serve Devendra anonymously. Knowing that he smoked early in the morning, Akshay, before Devendra arose from his bed, prepared perfumed tobacco with burning charcoal, and left his hubble-bubble in front of the door to Devendra's room. Devendra, of course, was delighted to have his favourite smoke, but wondered who was serving him. Within a few days he found out that it was Akshay who was preparing the tobacco for him. When he asked why, Akshay said, "Sir, would you please take me to meet the paramahansa?" Seeing his sincerity and humility, Devendra agreed.

On a Saturday, probably in the early part of 1885, Mahima Charan Chakrabarty had arranged a festival and invited Sri Ramakrishna and the devotees to his house at 100 Cossipore Road, in North Calcutta. Akshay heard that Devendra was planning to attend the function and that Dharendra was going with him. His heart was pounding, for it was unbearable to wait any longer to see this paramahansa. As the two men were getting into their hired carriage, Akshay rushed to Devendra and holding his feet with both hands, pleaded with him, saying, "Sir, please allow me to accompany you to the place you are about to visit." Devendra consented.

The carriage arrived at Mahima's house at five o'clock in the afternoon. Ram, Manomohan, Surendra, "M:", Vijay Krishna Goswami, and other devotees were present. Devendra and others took the dust of the Master's feet, and Akshay followed them. Akshay noticed that the Master smiled a little and cast a gracious glance towards him. Then he sat in a corner and looked intently at the Master. Forgetting his body and surroundings, he was captivated by Sri Ramakrishna's charm and conversation. He

felt as though he was being carried away on a current of bliss. After awhile the devotees began a kirtan in the courtyard. As soon as the Master heard the sound of the drum and cymbals he hurriedly joined the kirtan party and started to sing the following song:

Behold, the two brothers have come,
 who weep while chanting Hari's name,
 The brothers who dance in ecstasy and
 make the world dance in His name!
 Behold them, both weeping, and making
 the whole world weep with them,
 The brothers who, in return for blows,
 offer to sinners Hari's love.

Intoxicated with divine joy, Sri Ramakrishna began to dance with the kirtan group. At times he went into samadhi and remained motionless like a statue; at other times, in partial consciousness, he danced slowly and rhythmically. The Master created such a tangible spiritual atmosphere that Akshay felt as though he were in heaven. Vijay Krishna Goswami, a Brahma leader, was dancing next to the Master. Suddenly he pointed to Sri Ramakrishna and exclaimed: "This is our Krishna!" These words were a revelation to Akshay, and he directly experienced their truth—that the Master was none other than Sri Krishna for whom he had been yearning since his youth. The Master appeared to him as the very incarnation of love.

The kirtan ended at nine o'clock in the evening, and the devotees began to tend the Master. One fanned him and another brought ice water for him to drink. Meanwhile Mahima arranged a dinner with various delicacies for Sri Ramakrishna and the devotees. After dinner Sri Ramakrishna was taken to a room where he talked with the devotees. Akshay thought to himself: "The Master has revealed his divine nature to his close devotees. Without his grace and without devotion, none can understand him." Suddenly Sri Rama-

krishna began to sing Lord Krishna's words in his melodious voice:

Though I am never loath to grant salvation,
I hesitate indeed to grant pure love.
Whoever wins pure love surpasses all;
He is adored by men;
He triumphs over the three worlds.

Listen, Chandravali! I shall tell you of love:
Mukti a man may gain, but rare is bhakti.
Solely for pure love's sake did I become
King Vali's doorkeeper

Down in his realm in the nether world.
Alone in Vrindaban can pure love be found;
Its secret none but the gopas and gopis know.
For pure love's sake I dwelt in Nanda's house;
Taking him as My father,
I carried his burdens on My head.

When the festival was over the Master left for Dakshineswar. Akshay got into Devendra and Dharendra's carriage along with Ram, a householder disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Ram had befriended him that evening, telling him many wonderful things about the Master. Thus, when Ram got out of the carriage in Simulia where he lived, Akshay got out with him. In Ram's house he listened to many more stories about Sri Ramakrishna. At two o'clock in the morning he finally went home.

After that first meeting Akshay longed to see the Master again, and his mind was absorbed in thoughts of him. A couple of days later Akshay had the opportunity to go to Dakshineswar with a friend. This time Sri Ramakrishna asked Akshay many things about his life, including whether or not he was a Brahmo.

Generally the Master did not allow Akshay to touch his feet, a refusal which hurt him greatly. Instead, Sri Ramakrishna would say: "Let your mind be purified. Then you may do so." Nonetheless, after three visits Akshay was convinced that if anyone could give him the vision of Krishna, it was Sri Ramakrishna. Later he realized

that Krishna and Ramakrishna were one and the same. He wrote in his *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Mahima*:

I neither talked with Sri Ramakrishna nor asked any questions, but this I knew: that whosoever received the touch of the Master on his chest, would lose outer consciousness and in that state would see Krishna. Expecting this, I continued to visit him. Not only that: Whenever I would see him I would feel myself to be a different person. I used to think how it would be when the Master, out of mercy, touched my chest. Many days passed, but he did not fulfill my desire. I used to go to him with great hope and return home with tearful eyes and disappointment.

I only talked to him twice in my whole life. One day, seeing him alone, I said: "Master, I am blind [i.e., ignorant]." To this the Master replied: "God exists." [What Sri Ramakrishna meant was: "You might be blind, but God has eyes to see you."] Another day I carried an ice cream cone for the Master, but he did not touch it. I asked: "Master, why did you not eat the ice cream I feel terrible!" He answered with a smile: "If you had brought the ice cream at noontime, I would have eaten it. I would have been sick if I ate that cold thing at night, so I did not."

The way the Master treated me! If he had treated any other person in that way, he never would have returned. So many devotees touched his feet, and yet whenever I would try to touch them, he would withdraw his feet and sometimes even move back, saying: "All right! All right!" The Master used to speak about abstruse spiritual matters and I could not follow what he meant, so I would sit silently in a corner, my eyes always on him.

It is difficult for an ordinary person to understand the actions and behaviour of an avatar. He may eradicate the bad karma of a devotee through harshness, or he may crush the ego through indifference. If a devotee can endure such ordeals, he achieves something. Akshay tried to wipe away the impurities of his heart through tears and prayers, and gradually he felt the Master's silent benediction. Later he wrote in his book: "What Sri Ramakrishna

demonstrated and explained to me led me to the firm conviction that he is God Himself. He is an avatar, Lord of the universe, the Almighty. He is that Rama, that Krishna, that Kali, indeed, that Satchidananda. He is beyond mind and intellect, but again, he is known only through the pure mind and intellect.”

During that trial period Akshay lived in fear and agony. He was afraid of the Master, and yet he felt that the Master was like his father. He was irresistibly attracted to Sri Ramakrishna and yet did not know how to express his love. On one occasion Akshay begged Devendra to ask the Master to bless him. Devendra went to Dakshinewar and delivered Akshay's request to the Master. Sri Ramakrishna said: "What shall I say? You give him some advice." Accordingly Devendra told Akshay to chant the name of Hari (Krishna). Akshay took this advice and began to practise japam with longing.

On April 6, 1885, Devendra arranged a festival at his house in Sri Ramakrishna's honour. Akshay was included among the crowd of devotees. Because Devendra was busy supervising the dinner, he asked Akshay to fan the Master. Sri Ramakrishna was sitting in the parlour surrounded by devotees. To Akshay's great delight, he and Upendra sat near the Master and massaged his feet.

On January 1, 1886, Sri Ramakrishna became the Kalpataru (wish-fulfilling tree) and blessed many devotees, saying: "Be illumined." The occasion was the Master's afternoon walk in the Cossipore garden. As the Master entered the garden, the devotees followed him. Akshay, who was seated with a few others on the low bough of a tree, saw him. He rushed to where Sri Ramakrishna was standing and found the Master, absorbed in samadhi, in the middle of his devotees. Akshay picked two champaka (Michelia Champaka)

flowers and offered them at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna.

After awhile the Master came down to the normal plane of consciousness and touched the devotees one-by-one. This act created great emotional fervour and excitement among the devotees. Some received the vision of their Chosen Deity; some experienced the awakening of the kundalini; some felt unspeakable bliss; and others out of ecstasy, began to laugh, cry, and shout. Akshay watched the entire scene from a distance. Then suddenly the Master's eyes fell on him, and he called to Akshay: "Hello!" Akshay ran to the Master, who touched his chest with his hand and whispered a mantram in his ear. At once Akshay experienced the effect of the Master's blessing. He could not contain the onrush of bliss, and unable to withstand such an upsurge of emotion, he fell to the ground. His limbs twisted as if he were deformed, and he burst into tears.

On August 15, 1886, Sri Ramakrishna's physical condition became critical. Swami Vivekananda had arranged for Akshay to fan the Master that night. When evening came, Sri Ramakrishna tried to eat a little farina pudding, but could not swallow it. Exhausted, he again lay down on his bed and went into samadhi. Sashi (later, Swami Ramakrishnananda) cried out and asked Akshay to call Girish and Ram, two of the Master's close devotees, from Calcutta. Akshay immediately rushed to Calcutta, reported the Master's critical condition to them, and then hurriedly returned to Cossipore.

After his samadhi the Master was extremely hungry and asked for food. This time he ate a full bowl of pudding without any difficulty, which greatly relieved the devotees. Then in a clear voice the Master repeated thrice: "Kālī, Kālī, Kālī", and slowly lay back on his bed. After some time he again went into

samādhi. His eyes were fixed on his nose, his face covered with a sweet smile. Sri Ramakrishna passed away on August 16, 1886, at 1:02 a.m.

After the Master's passing Akshay used to decorate Sri Ramakrishna's photograph with sandal paste and sing his glory to the tune of a one-stringed instrument. Although he had no literary skills, Akshay felt a compelling urge to write something about Sri Ramakrishna. The scriptures say: "By the grace of God, the dumb become eloquent and the lame scale mountains." Devendra Nath Majumdar, who had first taken Akshay to meet Sri Ramakrishna, now suggested that he write about the Master's life. (Akshay acknowledged this encouragement in his book).

Still, Akshay had doubts about his ability, which he expressed to Swami Vivekananda. Though something was urging him from within to write about the Master, he felt that he did not have the literary skill to do so. Seeing his sincerity, Swami Vivekananda told him the story of the English poet, Caedmon. Caedmon was an illiterate herdsman, who did not even know the alphabet. One night he had a vision of an angel, and by that angel's grace his poetic faculty came to life. Caedmon composed extemporaneously and even recited his hymns and poems in public.

Inspired by this story, Akshay began to write Bengali verse in 1887. After he had finished the early life of Sri Ramakrishna, he read it to Swami Vivekananda at the Baranagore monastery. Swamiji was deeply moved and took him to Holy Mother, who was then staying at Belur. Holy Mother, after listening to the manuscript, blessed Akshay. Later, while she was at Kamarpukur and Akshay was also there, the Mother invited the village women, who had known the Master personally, to come so Akshay could read

his book to them. On this occasion the Mother, in an ecstatic mood, again blessed Akshay and asked him to write more about the Master. Akshay gratefully acknowledged that Girish and Swamis Yogananda, Niranjanananda, and Ramakrishnananda had given him the materials for his book.

Akshay wrote the life of Sri Ramakrishna in the style of Krittivasa's *Ramayana* and Kashiram Das' *Mahabharata*. The book was first published in four parts between 1894 and 1901 under the title *Bhagavan Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadever Charitamrita*. Later, on November 25, 1901, all four parts were published in one volume under the title *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi*. His Bengali poem of the Master's life has not yet been translated into any other language.

On one occasion Swami Shivananda explained how *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi* came into being:

Akshay Sen, the author of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi*, helped many people of the world. He was a good man, and a great devotee, but extremely poor. The facts which he presented in the *Punthi* are really beautiful. We did not know many of those stories. Akshay collected all the material from contemporaries of the Master at Kamarpukur, Sihar, and other places. He then wrote the life of the Master in the poetic style of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in simple village language. Now, even the learned appreciate the *Punthi*. Akshay was not a scholar, but he had tremendous sincerity. We heard that when he started to write this book, he held an ordinary job in Ahiritola, and used to write at night. We further heard that at night he would go to the bank of the Ganga and call to the Master with a longing heart: "Master, please give me strength so that I can write something about your precious life." Immediately he would feel inspiration from within and, returning to his apartment, would start to write. This *Punthi* is well written.

In 1895, during the birthday celebration of Sri Ramakrishna, Akshay publicly read for the first time *Sri Sri Ramakrishna*

Punthi on the northern verandah of the Master's room at Dakshineswar. Swami Adbhutananda was present. Impressed, the Swami said: "Akshay Babu, you have performed a great service for the people. You have written the life story of the Master in such a beautiful way that even the women [the majority of whom were not educated at the time] will be able to understand him."

Akshay sent a copy of his book to Swami Vivekananda, who was then preaching Vedanta in America. In the beginning of 1895 Swamiji sent a letter to Swami Ramakrishnananla from the U.S.A., in which he wrote:

Just now I read Akshay's book. Give him a hundred thousand hearty embraces from me. Through his pen Sri Ramakrishna is manifesting himself. Blessed is Akshay! Let him recite that *Punthi* before all. He must recite it before all in the Festival. If the work be too large, let him read extracts from it. Well, I do not find a single irrelevant word in it. I cannot tell in words the joy I have experienced by reading his book. Try, all of you, to give the book an extensive sale. Then ask Akshay to go from village to village to preach. Well done, Akshay! He is doing his work. Go from village to village and proclaim to all Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. Can there be a more blessed lot than this? Akshay's book and Akshay himself must electrify the masses. Dear, dear Akshay, I bless you with all my heart, my dear brother. May the Lord sit on your tongue! Go and spread his teachings from door to door. There is no need whatever of your becoming a sannyasin [monk]...Akshay is the future apostle for the masses of Bengal. Take great care of Akshay; his faith and devotion have borne fruit.

In this letter Swamiji wrote out a few ideas which he wanted Akshay to include and expand in the next edition of the book.

In the *Punthi*, Akshay divulged that he had received the humorous title of "Shankcunni Master" from Swami Vivekananda in 1885. "Cunni" literally means "a female ghost wearing bangles"; and because he was a schoolteacher, he was

called "Master". Swamiji called him "Shankcunni Master" because of his appearance—small eyes, thick lips, a flat nose, a thin body, and a dark complexion. In later years Akshay grew a long grey beard and moustache, wore thick glasses, and often donned a turban. All this contributed to his rather strange-looking appearance.

Akshay's poetic talent did not end with the writing of Sri Ramakrishna's biography. He also put the Master's teachings into simple, melodious verse. This book included 141 teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and was published in 1896 under the title *Padye Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadever Upadesh*, or *The Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa in Verse*. Fourteen years later, in 1910, Akshay wrote *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Mahima* (The Glory of Sri Ramakrishna) in question-and-answer form. In this Bengali book, not yet translated into any other language, the reader will marvel at Akshay's literary craftsmanship, rational outlook, and deep understanding of Sri Ramakrishna's life and philosophy.

Akshay worked for some time at the Basumati publication office, which was owned by Upendra Nath Mukhopadhyay, a lay disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. After retiring from that job Akshay left Calcutta for his village home and there passed the remainder of his life. Once, however, Doctor Umesh Babu and other devotees took him to Mymensingh (now in Bangladesh), where he lived for several months, reminiscing about the Master. He was helped financially by devotees from Mymensingh, Dacca, Madras, and Lucknow.

Once, when Akshay was visiting Udbodhan, Swami Saradananda presented him with a set of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lila Prasanga* (*Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master*) and requested him to read it. Akshay later said to a young monk:

Brother, I took those books and put them in my room. I was a little conceited, thinking that "M." and I had written about the Master, so what else could Swami Saradananda write about him? Then one day it suddenly flashed in my mind that my monastic brother had given me all those volumes free, and I, out of ego, had not even opened them! Brother, I was dumbfounded after reading them. I realized that in the *Punthi* I had made some mistakes because I had received the information second-hand, whereas he had based his stories on direct evidence. Then, though I was old, I corrected my book as much as I could. This is my last corrected edition of *Punthi*. I hand it over to you. I shall not live long. I entrust you to give this volume to Swami Saradananda. Let him publish it in the future if he wishes. My request to Swami Saradananda is to please send a certain percentage of the profit from the book sales for the worship of the Master here.

In spite of his poverty and other family problems Akshay passed his days in recollectedness of the Master. Every morning before his worship he would pick flowers and clean the vessels. Then in a sweet voice despite his age, he would sing the name of God, accompanied by his one-stringed instrument. After bathing and performing the worship he would either read *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master* or write something. In the summer months at noontime Akshay would go to the shrine and fan the Master. During the last three years of his life, when he could not perform worship because of asthma and other physical disabilities, his daughter-in-law, to Akshay's great relief, took the responsibility of the Master's worship.

Akshay was sincerely devoted to Holy Mother. His home and the Mother's parental home were in the same district, so whenever the Mother was in Jayrambati, Akshay would go barefooted with a staff in his hand to meet her. He would always carry something on his head for Holy Mother. Bowing down to her, he would pray for liberation. Once in Jayrambati

Akshay called: "Mother," and the Mother answered: "Yes, my son." Akshay then boldly said: "Mother, I called you 'Mother' and you answered 'yes,' so I have no fear anymore." To this Holy Mother said: "My son, do not talk like that. 'Success comes only to a careful person.'"

Emotional and oversensitive by nature, Akshay expected love and affection from all, especially from the Master and Mother. At one time he wrote to Holy Mother in Jayrambati complaining that she was paying more attention to her Calcutta devotees than she was to him. The Mother replied in a letter: "...I understand the contents of your letter. You have written about your visit to Jayrambati, but I did not know about it. So long as I am alive you are welcome to visit me. I have no like or dislike for anybody; I consider everyone as my own. There is no division in my mind. When you took refuge in God you became my own. Please do not lament. Whenever you have the opportunity you are free to come here. Your letter surprised me. Keep your mind free from all impurities."

Holy Mother had told Akshay: "There will be a little suffering towards the end of your life." Four days before his death he had a fever and suffered from blood dysentery. When Akshay's end came near, his younger brother started to chant the name of Sri Ramakrishna. All of a sudden Akshay said to those around him: "Please keep quiet now. I see the Master and the Mother." Everyone present noticed that his face was luminous and his eyes were half-closed. Then he breathed his last. Akshay died at 9 a.m. on Friday, December 7, 1923, at the age of seventy-three.

In the divine drama of Sri Ramakrishna, Akshay played the role of minstrel, and his ballads are still spreading the immortal life and message of the Master.

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS *

SNOW-WHITE MAYAVATI OF SHIVA

There are certain days when Mayavati becomes the seat of Mayadhisha, a vast white cremation ground of Shiva. 19 December 1986 was such a day. From 18th morning onwards it was raining torrentially. The temperature went down below 0°C. At night came the shower of small ice-balls. Then it was all silent. All winds stopped. Even the bell-bird's midnight sounds could no more be heard. There was an awful silence and freezing cold.

On the 19 December early dawn we saw the first snowfall of the year. It was all white in three-inch thick snow. The mountains, the hills, the gorges, the trees and bushes, everything were covered with snow-white ice. The sky was covered with black clouds. A mysterious light emanated from the ice and the sky. Everything looked unknown, remote and mysterious. There was no sign of life anywhere, no stir in the trees, no song or flight of birds. Mayavati brothers stood in awe and silence in that early dawn looking at the wondrous view of nature. Thick icicles hung from the branches of huge tall cedars. The bushy tops of cypresses were all white. The lawn was all white, except for the bare stem of rose trees now jutting out as remnants of some happy summer. The mountain paths all got blurred in the all white panorama. The deep gorge below was all white, with dark tree trunks standing here and there.

We touched the ice thrice on our head and then stepped with deep reverence on the snow-white body of Shiva. From the mountain tops He came that day to envelop the world of Mother Prakriti in His white mantle of purity and transcendence. Everything turned white like ashes in a vast cremation ground. The seven

coloured panorama of the Himalayas suddenly changed into a world of white and black. Forms of hills and trees were indistinct. Only Shiva remained within and without. Some green leaves were scattered here and there on the white body of Shiva as if Mother Prakriti did her last worship before merging in her eternal companion, the Purusha. The experience of the vast snow-white cremation ground brought a strange blankness in our heart. It was even difficult, during the first few moments, to think that there was a world outside Mayavati. It was a foretaste, even though temporarily, of Nirvana.

As the sun rose, the ice began to melt and the vast panorama slowly started returning to its old form. After this ascetic period of staying in Shiva's transcendence nature now looked greener. It got its first seasonal bath of ice. It was indeed a rebirth. For some days the white ice remained unmelted in nooks and corners, in gorges and terraces. Even after seven days when we were walking on the valley above the Mayavati Ashrama, vast stretches of fields were full of thick ice. In the morning sunlight the wheat fields up in the valley, with all the surrounding fields, looked strangely beautiful and new.

In the Indian tradition, Shiva is all-white like the mountain of silver (*rajatagirinivah*). Shankara describes this all-white Shiva in one of his hymns: 'Oh Shiva Thy body is white like ashes, and white is Thy smile. The human skull on the hand is white. Thy axe is white and white are Thy bull,

*This month's 'Notes and Observations' has been contributed by Swami Ajitatmananda, of Mayavati Charitable Hospital, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati.

and Thy ear-rings, white is the Ganga flowing in foam from thy matted locks, and white is the crescent moon on thy forehead. Oh all-white Shiva, give us the boon of complete freedom from all sins forever and ever.'

Despite all love for Shiva's white transcendence, one cannot stay long in the realm of the Absolute (Nitya) and has to come down to the plane of relative existence (leela). Unity in diversity is the law of creation. The final vision of Reality must be a vision of complementarity. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that in order to know the belfruit we must take it in all

its aspects, its outer shell, its seeds and its kernel. Similarly we must accept both the transcendent (Nitya) and the immanent (leela), both the unmanifested and the manifested, both Purusha and Prakriti. Purusha is only the transcendent form of Prakriti, just as Prakriti is the immanent form of the Purusha. The final Reality in the Indian vision is both Purusha and Prakriti, the Ardhanarishwara, Uma and Maheswara, Hara and Parvati. On this memorable morning of 19 December 1986 Mayavati made us realize the truth of the Indian vision of Uma-Maheshwara, of Ardhanarishwara.

REVIEWS AND NOTICES

ADAM AND EVE (*The Spiritual Symbolism of Genesis and Exodus*):

BY S. D. FOHR. Published by University press of America, 4720 Boston Way, Lanham, Maryland 20706 U.S.A. 1986. Pp. 147 + xiii. \$ 10.25.

In this book the author gives us some original insights concerning the interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures. He starts with the conviction that the Bible contains deeper truths as one really gets into its symbolism than when one merely remains at the superficial level either by taking the accounts as literal and historical or by discarding them as merely fairytales for entertainment. The author's attempt is in this way praiseworthy in so far as it helps the religious man perceive the truth concerning the Bible. Another positive note concerning the work is the endeavour to point out that the Bible contains the same basic truths as expressed in other (religious) traditions. One may at the same time doubt whether one can extend the symbolization so far as, for example, to assert that the waters in which Jesus walked are 'the ocean of birth and death' (p. 40).

After giving an enlightening introduction regarding the esoteric (internal) and exoteric (external) aspects of religions (Chapter 1) the author goes on to show the correspondence

between the four ages and the Hindu cyclic view of history (Ch. 2). Cain and Abel are interpreted as symbolizing the lower and higher tendencies in all of us (Ch. 3). Here the author offers fascinating interpretations. Cain is for example the elder brother. This symbolizes the phenomenon that lower tendencies are the first that develop in us. Cain's being a farmer suggests also the lower tendencies, whereas Abel is a shepherd which has spiritual connotations (leader, guide, protector). A farmer, being sedentary, has a tendency to store up material possessions whereas the shepherd cannot afford that luxury; he symbolizes the spiritual view of life in which we see ourselves as visitors (or pilgrims) on earth. Concerning the murder of Abel, Cain's marks on forehead, Cain being bringer of technology etc we find possible interpretations and explanations.

In this way there are 12 chapters which offer interesting material for reflection. Chapter 4 and 12 draw our special attention on account of the profound interpretations concerning the Ark of Noah in terms of cosmic egg, the waters as Prakriti, the fall of man as splitting of androgynous Adam into Adam and Eve corresponding to the universal splitting of Purusha and Prakriti.

The book contains a good index of keywords. The bibliography demonstrates books

and authors of various important religious traditions and philosophies of religion. The success of the work depends upon the reader's understanding of what a symbol is. The author would have better included also some insights of Karl Rahner's theology of symbols (Theological Investigations, vol. 4).

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FROM THE UNREAL TO THE REAL:
BY SWAMI BHASHYANANDA. Published by Vivekananda Vedanta Society, 5423 South Hyde Park Boulev. Chicago, Illinois 60615, U.S.A. 1986. Pp. vii + 403. Available in India at the Ramakrishna Maths, Nagpur, Bombay etc for Rs. 40.

From the Unreal to the Real is a compendium of Swami Bhashyananda's lectures, writings, class-notes and talks in the U.S.A. for over last twenty years. Swami Bhashyananda from his early youthful days led a life of hard spiritual discipline in the Nagpur center of Sri Ramakrishna Math where Swami Bhaskarashwarananda, himself a monastic disciple of Swami Shivananda (a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and brother monk of Swami Vivekananda), inspired him to dedicate himself to life, spiritual. Swami Virajananda, a monastic disciple of Swami Vivekananda and the 6th President of the Ramakrishna Math, to whom the present volume is dedicated initiated Swami Bhashyananda with the sacred word. After spending a few years of his early monastic days in the Ramakrishna Mission's Institute of Culture in Calcutta, Swami Bhashyananda went to Chicago in the sixties and since then is patiently building up the Vedanta movement in the States. His practice and precept of spirituality in the light of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have charmed the American spiritual aspirants, many of whom have become his ardent admirers. A few of them have become monastic members of the organization as well.

Swami Bhashyananda believes that the acceptance of the Vedanta way of life will bring about peace and harmony in the world.

The spread of 386 pages of his book has been conveniently spaced in four parts viz. I Religion, II Hinduism, III spiritual Practices and IV Sri Ramakrishna. Each part contains

readable chapters covering a number of aspects of these four broad topics. The part I on religion thus comprises of 13 chapters, more interesting of which are (1) Essentials of Religion, (2) Apparent and Real Man, (3) Potential Divinity, (4) The Religion that can satisfy a Modern Seeker, (5) Religion and Human Fellowship, (6) The Universal Religion (7) The future of Religions.

Part II deals with Hinduism in outline. The universal elements in Hinduism have been highlighted here and goals of human life, set according to Hinduism, have been detailed. One chapter deals with worship of God in the form of Mother. There are two chapters on the spirit of the Bhagvad-Gita and Buddha's Message of Peace and enlightenment respectively. The Hindu theology accepts Buddha as an incarnation and the Hindus have imbibed in their ethics, Buddha's message of love and peace.

The third and perhaps the most important part is about 'spiritual Practices'. This is full of information and practical hints for the safe journey of a *Sadhaka* on the path of Realization. The essentiality and limitations of rituals have been described here. Various types of *upasanas* or meditations have been described and the efficacy of the paths of Bhakti, Karma and Jnana has been discussed. It is this part of the book which would prove immensely useful for the ardent seekers of Truth.

The last part of the book deals with Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. Throughout the book Swami Bhashyananda copiously quotes from the sayings of these divine personages and juxtaposes them vis a vis the quotations from the Gita, the Bible and the Upanishads. The quotes from the Bible, thus make it easy for the western readers to comprehend the subtle spiritual truths which are basic to every religion. This also reinforces their faith in their own scriptures.

Prof. Sam Fohr of the University of Pittsburg at Bradford has rightly said in the introduction of the present volume that scattered through these essays are gems of insight and memorable analogies which are bound to help any aspirant go further along the spiritual path. Prof. Fohr further says that although the term 'religion' is derived from Latin word meaning 'to bind', it is ironic that religions have tended to divide people into opposing groups. Swami Bhashyananda's book is an attempt to reverse this process. The book emphasizes unity in diversity and can very well serve as a guide for

all those who want to tread on the right path of religion.

The book has an appreciative foreword by Swami Vyomarananda and an evaluative introduction by Prof. Sam Fohr.

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A NOTE

The review-article on *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* published in P. B. April 1987 was written by Swami Sarveshananda of the Ramakrishna order, now preaching Vedanta in Florida.

Florida. U.S.A.

NEWS AND REPORTS

RAMAKRISHNA MISSION HOME OF SERVICE, VARANASI

REPORT FOR APRIL 1985 TO MARCH 1986

The Home was started in 1900 as an independent institution under the name 'Poor Man's Relief Association' by a few young men who were inspired by the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. The work was begun with a capital of only four annas. These young men used to take care of the poor and the diseased, sometimes collected from the roadside. Swamiji was delighted to see their dedicated service and renamed the institution the 'Home of Service'. It was affiliated to the Ramakrishna Mission in 1902. From this modest inception, the Home of Service has now grown into a fully equipped modern hospital taking care of the poor and the suffering as living manifestations of God.

The activities of the year are outlined below:

Indoor General Hospital: The total number of cases admitted during the year was 6,299; of these 3,168 were relieved, 1,897 cured, 525 discharged otherwise, 560 died and 149 remained under treatment at the end of the year. Surgical cases totalled 3,256, intramuscular injections 52,434 and intraarticular injections, aspirations and lumbar punctures was 49,221. During the year there were 2 ailing destitutes picked up from the city roads in the hospital. The percentage of patients treated free was 34.83 and the average daily occupancy of beds was 167.

Outpatients' department: The number of patients treated, including those treated at the branch at Shivala, was 2,44,363 (new cases: 65,983) and the daily average attendance was 783. There were 3,312 surgical cases and 5,341 intravenous and intramuscular injections.

Homeopathy: The homeopathic sections at the Sevashrama campus at Luxa and at the Shivala branch, attended by 5 homeopaths served 22,853 patients (new cases: 5829).

Clinical and Pathological Laboratory: 34,117 different tests were conducted in the laboratory

during the year in the areas of clinical pathology, serology, chemical pathology, L.F.T. (liver function tests) and bacteriology.

X-ray, electrotherapy and E.C.G. department: 4,670 X-ray exposures were taken during the year under report. 648 cardiac patients were helped by the ECG section and a considerable number of others by the electrotherapy section.

Invalid's Home: Two separate homes maintained 18 men and 38 women, the men being mostly old and retired monks of the Ramakrishna Order. The women were poor widows who have no one to look after them.

A newly constructed extension building of Female Invalid's Home and renovated and upgraded old block of the same were declared open by the President-General of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission on 14 February 1986.

Outdoor relief to the poor: Monthly pecuniary help amounting to Rs. 6,183 was given towards food, house-rent, school-fees etc. to 47 persons. Besides books were provided free to the poor students and dhotis and cotton blankets were distributed among the needy.

Goshala: The home maintained a Goshala for the supply of good milk for its patients.

Immediate needs: 1. Funds for the maintenance of 200 beds in the hospital. 2. Endowments for beds: the cost of endowment for a single bed is Rs. 30,000 but Rs. 10,000 or Rs. 5,000 may also be given as partial endowments to perpetuate someone's memory. 3. Endowments for the Invalid's Homes: Similar endowments are essential to maintain the old men and women in these two homes. 4. Donations to meet the accumulated deficit of Rs. 15,064.25 5. Construction of residential quarters for the nursing and other staff: Rs. 5 lakhs. 6. Construction of a bigger cowshed and a fodder store-room for the Sevashrama-dairy: Rs. 1,50,000.

Contributions may be sent to the Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, Varanasi, 211-010.

PRABUDDHA BHARATA: 90 YEARS AGO

'He who knows the Supreme attains the highest'—Tait. Upa. II. 1. 1

Vol. I
No. 12

MADRAS, JUNE 1897

Published
Monthly

Retrospect

The present number concludes the first volume of the *Prabuddha Bharata* and it is now time enough to ask what we have learnt from it. Thus questioning ourselves, we find we have learnt many things. Indeed, even its short history is remarkably full of lessons and one of the most important which we, i.e., those who are connected with it, have learnt and which we shall do well to carry with us to the very end of our lives is this—sincerity of purpose and purity of heart work wonders even in this 'iron age'. We had no grand ambitions when we started the journal such as bettering the world and so on. All that we wanted was to improve ourselves, and we had a conviction that what is good for us may at the same time be useful to some others. Nor had we any such motives as fame, position, money, &c. The idea of starting the journal struck us providentially, as it were, and whatever may be its fate in the future, we should be eternally grateful to God for having allowed us to enter into the work with singularly pure hearts. We were at the time perfectly free from both rajasic self-confidence and tamasic ambition. In such a happy state which we shall ever remember with pleasure, we sought and obtained permission from where such permission should be obtained and 'commenced operations'. What success has attended us is due entirely to the blessings we received and the purity of our hearts. And that success has been of no small measure. On every side were 'crammed' as it were, with sympathy, and everywhere, men—for whom we cannot be sufficiently thankful—identified themselves with the cause *quite unsolicitedly* and worked for its success—so that at the very starting we had 1,500 subscribers and every month the number has been steadily increasing and now it stands at about 4,500. Our journal thus happens to be the most widely circulated monthly in all India. The first two issues have had to be reprinted and we have a very limited number of copies of the other issues though we printed 5,000 copies of every number.

Besides such patronage from the public at large, we were unsolicitedly favoured with expressions of encouragement and appreciation by several eminent personages, whose words are always entitled to our respect.

Mr. H. Dharmapala, General Secretary, Mahabodhi Society wrote, for instance, 'All hail to the *Prabuddha Bharata*. I send herewith one pound sterling in the name of the Mahabodhi Society for the *Prabuddha Bharata*. May its mellifluous fragrance purify the materialistic atmosphere of fallen India! Your efforts will be crowned with success and *Prabuddha Bharata* will surely awaken the lethargic sons of "Bharat Varsha." '...

In conducting the journal we always keep in our minds the advice Swami Vivekananda gave to us at the very outset:—' Avoid all attempts to make the journal scholarly: it will slowly make its way all over the world I am sure. Use the simplest language possible and you will succeed. The main feature should be the teachings of *principles* through stories. Do not make it metaphysical at all... Go on bravely. Do not expect success in a day or a year. Always hold on to the highest. Be steady... Be obedient and eternally faithful to the cause of truth, humanity and your country and you will move the world. Remember it is the person, the life, which is the secret of power and nothing else...'