

Strong pillar of the Ramakrishna Math

The birth anniversary of Swami Ramakrishnananda, founder of the Ramakrishna Math at Chennai, was recently celebrated.
LAKSHMI DEVNATH
writes...



was shifted to Castle Kernan. Life at the Math was tough and that is probably saying it mildly. Funds were a major problem for the fledgling Ramakrishna movement.

Sometimes even food was scarce. The Swamiji was a robust and healthy man and used all his physical energy to spread the message of his Master. His days were packed with lectures at different venues in the city. Sometimes they numbered even three a day. Very often, he trudged on foot to these places and sometimes allowed himself a cart ride when money permitted. While his work schedule was formidable, the topics on which he elaborated were even more so.

Other than his Master's teachings, the Swami also waxed eloquent on chapters from the Gita, Upanishads and so on for he was a scholar in Sanskrit. He was also a litterateur who authored several books. One of them, the "Life of Sri Ramanuja" remains till date one of the noteworthy books on the subject.

Service of man is equivalent to Service to God seemed to have been Swami Ramakrishnananda's motto in life. While his service to his Master during his last days, is by now legendary he had a heart

large enough to accommodate the most destitute and indigent. Along with the help of his colleagues, on February 17, 1905, a Student's Home with seven orphans was opened in a small rented house at Mylapore, and this marked the beginnings of the now well-known Ramakrishna Home. The funding came from begging expeditions by his students Ramu and Ramanuju, otherwise known as Sri Ramaswamy Iyengar and Sri Ramanujachariar.

It is often said that a man's success in life is measured by not what he has achieved but in the hurdles that he has crossed while achieving it. Sri Biligiri Iyengar, the owner of Kernan Castle, died.

The place came up for auction and the infant Math at that premises was now left homeless. Begging tours resumed with full fervour. Philanthropists also came to the rescue. A donor gifted a small plot of land on Brodies Road, and the new building was inaugurated on November 17, 1907.

The Swamiji was very happy that he was finally able to provide "a fine house for Sri Guru Maharaj to stay in." For, till his very end, in the eyes of Swami Ramakrishnananda, the Paramahansa was a living personality. Devotees were to recall later, that the Swamiji fanned the image of his Master as if the image also felt the heat he was experiencing.

During rains, when the roof of the Math was leaking, a perturbed Swamiji sheltered the image of Sri Ramakrishna from the rain by holding an umbrella over its head. Food offerings were also made with such care and devotion that it transcended from being a mere ritual to a lesson to be emulated by his followers.

Swami Ramakrishnananda was a wandering sanyasi. Several were the lectures he gave at the neighbouring places of Bangalore, Kerala, Bombay and even at distant Burma. Sometimes the results were almost immediate.

At Bangalore, the reputed Swami Brahmananda inaugurated a Ramakrishna Math in 1909, the then President of the Order. At other places, Maths sprang up posthumous to Swami Ramakrishnananda's demise.

In January 1910, the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi arrived with her entourage at the Madras Math thus marking another milestone in the history of the Math.

The life story of Swami Ramakrishnananda was now nearing its last chapter. The Swamiji was hardly forty-eight years old. Diabetes, and then tuberculosis attacked him. The Swamiji was persuaded to go to Calcutta, and left Madras for the last time.

On August 21, 1911, Swami Ramakrishnananda entered into Mahasamadhi. This time, it was a journey to the other world to serve his Master there.

COMING DOWN the staircase of Castle Kernan, Swami Vivekananda announced: "I shall send you who is more orthodox than your most orthodox men, who is at the same time unique and unsurpassed in his worship and meditation of God." It was the February of 1897. The "orthodox man," Swami Vivekananda was referring to, was Swami Ramakrishnananda, founder of the Ramakrishna Math at Madras. "Who was he?" the gathering there wondered.

Shashi Bhushan Chakravarty, as Swami Ramakrishnananda was known in his pre-monastic days, was the eldest son of Iswar Chandra Chakravarti, a well known tantric of Hooghly district. Shashi Bhushan was born in July 1863.

From his younger days, he showed a predilection for matters spiritual. A brilliant academician, Shashi however did not appear for his B.A. Degree examinations, and that forms the second part of his life story.

Keshab Chandra Sen, head of the Brahmo movement at Calcutta, had cast a spell over the youngsters of his time by his fiery speeches. This dynamic leader was in turn, mesmerised by the Paramahansa of Dakshineswar and paid glowing tributes to him. Impressed by what he had heard, one day, in the October of 1883, Shashi Bhushan along with his companion Sarat (later Swami Saradananda), were at Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa's bed-stead at Dakshineswar. For nearly three years, from October 1883 to August 1886, Shashi was with his master, first as a visiting disciple and during the last eight months as a constant attendant. He gave up his college studies because he wanted to be at his guru's side. He bathed him, fed him, fanned him and cleaned his commode. The master died in 1886. The disciples were distraught but under the leadership of Narendranath organised themselves and started a monastery at Baranagore, Calcutta. They now took monastic names. Narendranath became Swami Vivekananda and Shashi Bhushan Chakravarty started a new life as Swami Ramakrishnananda.

Regarding the life at Baranagore, Swami Vivekananda in later years said, "Shashi was the main pillar of the Math. Without him life in the monastery would have been impossible." Thus was it surprising that when Madras needed a dynamic Swamiji, Swami Vivekananda's choice fell on Swami Ramakrishnananda? Swami Ramakrishnananda arrived in Madras in March 1897. The thirty-four year old Swamiji's first act was to install a picture of the Paramahansa that he had got from Baranagore. The Ramakrishna Math had come into being at Madras. At Flora Cottage, a two-storey rented building near the Ice House was chosen as the Math's premises. In June, the monastery