



RECENT BIOGRAPHIES OF RAMAKRISHNA – A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The spiritual giants are the most tangible form of divinity through which people find solace in difficult times. Their biographies perpetuate their memory as well as promote devoutness and spirituality. Biography of saints is again becoming popular nowadays. It also throws light on the problems in writing a biography of a saint because most of the drama of a saint's life is lived within; and charting the inner dimensions of a saint has always been a challenging task. Such studies are often inspired by veneration instead of deep understanding. On the other hand, there may be a biography written by a detractor in which sublime ideals and transcendental thoughts are trivialized. This becomes evident if we do critical appreciation of some famous biographies. Ramakrishna, who, more than a century after his death continues to dominate secular Hindu consciousness, was a key figure in what is considered to be the Hindu Renaissance of the 19th century. His biographies will be used to show the wide range of perspectives - from abjectly critical to totally objective to rank idolatry - – taken up by the authors.

A big problem in interpreting a person's character arises when the biographer belongs to a different culture. Two foreign interpreters of Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita Malcolm McLean and Jeffrey Kripal fall under this category. In Kali's Child Kripal takes to the hermeneutic of suspicion as he claims to reveal the secret that has been hidden for over a century: that Ramakrishna was a conflicted, unwilling homoerotic Tantric. Kripal has been panned as a shoddy scholar with a perverse imagination who has thoughtlessly ransacked another culture.

Rajiv Mehrotra's book Thakur...Ramakrishna – a Biography is eminently readable. Short and comprehensive, it brings out the infinite power and charm of Ramakrishna. Mehrotra presents that aspect of Ramakrishna which brought a new vitality not only to the Hindu heritage but also to the celebration of divinity in diverse forms by which he reinforced the

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underlying possibility of a real harmony between all religions. Mehrotra writes this biography in a reverent tone, though not indulging in any panegyric or miracle-mongering.

Amiya P Sen's Ramakrishna Paramahansa: The Sadhaka of Dakshineswar illuminates this enigmatic religious figure. The author tries to take a middle path, balancing both approaches - one targets only the faithful, the other out to debunk both religious imagination and faith - intelligently. This book carries a critical introduction to the moral and philosophical undercurrents of Ramakrishna's vibrant theology. This is of interest to lay readers as well as those interested in the cultural and religious history of modern Bengal.

Thus we find that although biography of a man of religion is treated as slightly old fashioned in the modern era, it is still possible to find well-researched scholarly works on the lives of saints.

Key words: Ramakrishna, Schiffman Biography, Spirituality, Jeffrey Kripal, Kali

INTRODUCTION

The spiritual giants are the most tangible form of divinity through which people find solace in difficult times. Their impact on history far surpasses that of kings, social reformers and political stalwarts. Nowadays the world is full of strife and violence, pushing humanity to emotional insecurity. Hence spirituality and religion have regained relevance in the present times. Biography of saints is again becoming popular nowadays.

Writing a biography of a saint is the most difficult task because most of the drama of a saint's life is lived within; and charting the inner dimensions of a saint has always been a challenging task. Such studies are called 'hagiography' and are often inspired by veneration instead of deep understanding. On the other hand, there may be a biography written by a detractor in which sublime ideals and transcendental thoughts are trivialized. Here the very purpose of presenting a saint's biography is defeated because too critical a view fails to arouse interest in the saintly lives. To bring in a balanced perspective, a saint's biography has to be written with deep sympathy and respect for a higher transcendental world, though not at the cost of scientific probing attitude.

We are struck with wonder when we find that even the intellectual stalwart Swami Vivekananda describes his *guru* as *Naradeva* or Man-God. Here we come face to face with the problem of writing the life story of a saint: whether to assess a saint as an Ideal Man or an Incarnation of God, whether to take an irreverent objective view or be reverential; and how to demarcate the line that separates a 'balanced biography' from an 'uncritical hagiography'.



We may discuss this issue in the light of the latest biographies of the 19th century Hindu saint: Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who, more than a century after his death continues to dominate secular Hindu consciousness, and was a key figure in what is considered to be the Hindu Renaissance of the 19th century.

A big problem in interpreting a person's character arises when the biographer belongs to a different culture. It becomes all the more pronounced when such an author tries to analyze the mental map of a mystic of a civilization that is poles apart from his own milieu. An object lesson is the American author Jeffrey Kripal's controversial *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (1995).

The end of 20th century saw a new development taking place in Ramakrishna studies – treating Ramakrishna with the hermeneutical [suspicious approach while analyzing the holy] tool of psychoanalysis. Vrajaprana rightly asserts that Psychoanalysis as a hermeneutical tool vis-à-vis non-Western figures is problematic and she agrees with psychoanalyst Alan Roland who believes that “Psychoanalytic theory and practice is profoundly related to Northern European and North American cultural values and philosophical assumptions involving individualism”. [PB 196]

Psychoanalytic theory therefore presumes Western values and social norms to be universal human values and norms. As such, Western Psychoanalysis was utilized in ham-handed interpretations of Hindu figures. Walter Neevel, who attempts to uncover “Ramakrishna's own position” [“Transformation” 81] authored two studies on Ramakrishna: *Ramakrishna: at Play in his Mother's Mansion* and *The Transformation of Ramakrishna*. With the publication of these articles “begin the arc in the hermeneutic of suspicion.” [PB 196]

Malcolm McLean was the first Western scholar to seriously examine Ramakrishna not by the translated *Gospel*, but the original Bengali *Kathamrita*. He appraised Ramakrishna according to Western cultural norms in his *A Translation of the Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita with Explanatory Notes and Critical Introduction*. McLean displays abundant ignorance of Indian cultural and religious norms than insight on Ramakrishna. For example, McLean interprets the saint's “need for disciples and adulation” as Ramakrishna's “great insecurity”. [McLean lxxi] Because Ramakrishna said that he had a ‘feminine nature’ McLean brands him a ‘homosexual’. McLean is clueless to the fact that ‘feminine’ in the Eastern world does not constitute homosexuality. If McLean clings to Western cultural models in judging Ramakrishna, he is also radical about philosophical models. He writes that Ramakrishna . . . should have realized that a qualified non-dualism is a dualism, that one has to choose between dualism and non-dualism, and that there is no position between them or beyond both. [McLean 77]



Because of McLean's insistence upon European univalent logic and methodology as the ultimate determiner of truth, he basically misses the boat on Ramakrishna. Vrajaprana's comment on this is succinct: "This either/or binary may have a degree of validity in the Abrahamic traditions, but it is for the most part absent in the Hindu traditions." [PB 200]

Psychoanalysis is unreliable in judging a mystic and that Ramakrishna's religious practices were in line with Hindu tradition. Psychoanalysis presumes human beings as body-mind complex and hence cannot measure spirituality [which is beyond the scope of body and mind] of saintly figures. Consequently they are skeptical of spiritual experiences and try to make psychoanalysis absurdly reductionist, universalizing human values and experiences.

Building upon such theses of Narasingha Sil, Masson and Neevel, Jeffrey Kripal takes to the hermeneutic of suspicion as he claims to reveal the "secret" [KC 30] that has been hidden for over a century: that Ramakrishna was "a conflicted, unwilling homoerotic Tantric." [ibid]

Kali's Child was developed from his Ph.D. dissertation on Ramakrishna at the University of Chicago. According to Kripal, he adopted a Freudian approach to uncover the connections between tantric and psychoanalytic hermeneutical traditions. The primary thesis of *Kali's Child* is that Ramakrishna's mystical experiences were generated by the "lingering results of childhood traumas, and sublimated homoerotic and paedophilic passions"; and that "Ramakrishna's mystical experiences...were in actual fact profoundly, provocatively, scandalously erotic." [KC 2]

In this psychoanalytic study of Ramakrishna's life, Kripal claims that Nikhilananda's *Gospel* is bowdlerized - a "cleaned-up", censored text - Kripal professes to support this claim by "recovering the text" by going to the original *Kathamrita* to uncover Ramakrishna's 'secret'. [Preface, KC]

Not surprisingly, *Kali's Child* provoked a flurry of criticism. What is truly peculiar about Kripal's claim is the idea that the *Kathamrita* had to be 'recovered' as if *Kathamrita* was sold clandestinely. A large majority of the book's readers read the text in the original Bengali. Moreover, Kripal says that he read the 31st edition of the *Kathamrita* [KC 363]. When a book is already in its 31st edition, how the content is secret? Anybody with an elementary knowledge of Bengali may check for himself that Kripal's charge about Nikhilananda having "ingeniously mistranslated (or omitted) almost every single secret" [KC 333] is simply untrue.

Given the "highly organized cover-ups of scandalous behaviour by priests in Christian organizations" [Long], a portrait of a scandalously behaving holy man whose faithful followers cover up his sins through "a campaign of obfuscation" [ibid] was entirely believable to the average Western reader of *Kali's Child*, a reader who is conversant neither



with the original Bengali texts in question (texts that are widely read and cherished in India) nor with the saint whose life and teachings these texts record. [ibid]

The lack of linguistic and cultural background may account for Kripal's prejudicial translations, which veer the reader toward his homoerotic thesis. In an article called "The Question of Ramakrishna's Homosexuality" published in a newspaper, Narasingha Sil describes the book as a classic example of what happens when an author's clever use of dictionary, index card and intelligence without an understanding of the history and culture of people other than his ethnic group ... produces a psychoanalysis of the mystical-spiritual experience of a saint from another religion and culture. [Sil, *Statesman*]

Sil's *Statesman* review of *Kali's Child* presented Kripal as "a shoddy scholar with a perverse imagination who has thoughtlessly 'ransacked' another culture". [Sil]

Literary critics severely castigate this sort of attitude in biographers. In his *Art of Biography*, Thayer comments that the author "either sins wilfully or is incompetent." [Thayer 137] The reader is forced to conclude that the biographer "sinned deliberately, in order to gratify his own spite or to push his own opinions". [Thayer 138]

Sir Sidney Lee says in *Perspectives of Biography*, Many a time the biographer, in the name of truth, falsifies the circumstances under which a certain action was done. Either by suppression or by diplomatic evasion appearances will be firmly installed in the place of realities. [*Perspective* 15]

This is exactly what Kripal has done. He deliberately gives a wrongful impression. But as Lee says, "Scurrility is not candour. To pander to a love of scandal is a greater sin in a biographer than in anybody else." [*Principles* 19] When we read Jeffrey Kripal's treatise on Ramakrishna, we understand the full import of these statements. Kripal stands guilty in all counts. He panders rather too much to a taste for scandal and gossip.

To add insult to injury, the American Academy of Religion bestowed upon *Kali's Child* the History of Religions Prize in 1996 for the best new book. What has been most shocking to the Hindus is that mistakes of such a magnitude could be not only forgiven, but also accepted and widely acclaimed, among academic scholars of religion. It is here that the question of "the relativity of the cultural lenses one wears" [*PB* 200] comes to bear upon this issue. Coming from an environment in which most readers do not know Bengali, it was very easy for scholars to accept the claim of *Kali's Child* to be 'recovering' a long-suppressed text. [ibid]

In a review Dr. Jeffery D. Long said that Jeffrey Kripal's highly controversial work on the life and psychology of Ramakrishna, *Kali's Child*, "stands revealed as a house of cards, built on a foundation of faulty translations and tendentious speculations asserted as facts". [Long]



The story of *Kali's Child* becomes a cautionary tale - a case of what can happen when deeply held cultural biases are allowed to go unchallenged in scholarly work on materials from a context very different from that of the author. [ibid]

Rajiv Mehrotra's book *Thakur...Ramakrishna – a Biography* [2008] is eminently readable. Although it is short, it is quite comprehensive. It brings out the infinite power and charm of Ramakrishna. Moreover the author dwells as well on the Ramakrishna Order that was inspired by his spiritual quest.

Rajiv Mehrotra started his spiritual pursuit at the feet of Swami Ranganathananda, who was later to become the President of The Ramakrishna Mission. He has been a personal student of the Dalai Lama for more than twenty-five years and has been a familiar face on national public television in India for more than thirty years. He has won several awards for his documentary films from the President of India. He has published numerous works on the Dalai Lama.

In this book, Mehrotra presents that aspect of Ramakrishna which brought a new vitality not only to the practices, rituals and symbols of the Hindu heritage but also to the celebration of divinity in diverse forms. Mehrotra highlights that characteristic of Ramakrishna by which he reinforced the underlying possibility of a real harmony between all religions. He discusses Ramakrishna's acceptance of other doctrines as he "realized the ideals of religions other than Hinduism". [*Thakur* 110]

Mehrotra points out that "well-intentioned liberals would like to believe that there is no difference between religions and races". [ibid 109] He asserts,

But there *is* a very big difference – on the surface, in the world of dualistic reality. Unity, as Sri Ramakrishna discovered through his own intimate experience, can only be found by going deep into the underlying non-duality of the all-projecting Universal Consciousness that manifests as Ishwar or Ma Kali, and also as Allah. [ibid]

And he comments,

All barriers were removed by his overwhelming love of God. So he became a master who could speak with authority on the ideas and ideals of various religions of the world. [ibid 110] He quotes at length Ramakrishna's explanation of this underlying unity of religions:

Whichever way I turn I see men quarrelling in the name of religion. But they never reflect that He who is called Krishna is also called Shiva and bears the name of the optimal energy, Jesus and Allah as well – the same Rama with a thousand names. [ibid]



And he continues to quote Ramakrishna by way of relating his metaphorical example:

A lake has several ghats. At one, the Hindus fill their pitchers, with water and call it *jal*, but it is also called *pani* and water. The substance is one with different names, and everyone seeks the same substance; only climate, temperament and name create the minute differences. [ibid] It is this vision that makes Ramakrishna one of the greatest religious teachers of all time and so profoundly relevant today.

Even though Ramakrishna lived a transparent life, he has, in many ways, eluded understanding. He does not fit ordinary categories, and his ineffable charisma and the utter devotion that he commanded from his followers has remained somewhat of a mystery to the uninitiated. Hence, in this book, Mehrotra explores the ‘challenge and the riddle’ presented by the great mystic who, more than a century after his death, continues to dominate secular Hindu consciousness. This is because he did not quote from scriptures nor did he fall back on the mute authority of tradition, or retreat into the safety of dogma. He spoke from his own experience. To address this situation, Mehrotra in his book lucidly describes Ramakrishna’s spiritual evolution, sadhanas and practices in detail. Many accept the fact that he was not what a common man’s mind could comprehend. In past generations, divinity was ascribed to many spiritual leaders of all eras by wise men who had no idea or knowledge about what these great souls endured to attain enlightenment. Ramakrishna’s life story throws much light on the austerities of the previous saints as well, thereby making us believe in the sainthood of other practitioners also. Mehrotra’s exposition makes everything quite clear.

Mehrotra has been influenced by western biographers of repute. He echoes Richard Schiffman’s 1989 book, *Sri Ramakrishna – A prophet for the New Age* in many ways. The title of the chapter on Narendra [later Swami Vivekananda] is same as we find in Schiffman: “Taming the Bull”. Mehrotra bases his description of Ramakrishna’s relation with Kali as well as Ramakrishna’s marriage with Sarada Devi, on Schiffman.

Many parts actually read like quotations from Schiffman. Like Schiffman, he too refers to Kali as “Kali, of the terrifying blackness, of the lolling tongue and severed heads. Kali, with blood on her hands” [Mehrotra 55; Schiffman 40]; in both the books we find that “In every possible sense, Ramakrishna’s assumption of the priesthood of Kali was the watershed event of his life.” [Mehrotra 44; Schiffman 23] and that this event “acted as a powerful lens to focus his scattered yearning to the point of flame” [Mehrotra 44; Schiffman 23]; both speak of empathizing with “Gadadhar the truant”, “Gadadhar the dreamer” and “Gadadhar the poet” [Mehrotra 53; Schiffman 23]; Mehrotra, like Schiffman, writes that it was unusual to follow “a frenzied pursuit of a stone goddess for years together” [Mehrotra 53; Schiffman 24]; both use the same phrases for describing Ramakrishna’s ‘dark night of the soul’ [Mehrotra 53; Schiffman 24] and both call him the “madman of God” [Mehrotra 55; Schiffman 40]. In the Preface to his book Mehrotra confesses that he has no record of his studies and acknowledges



that “This book is by all of them.....I crave forgiveness from them all for not acknowledging individual contributions and sources.” [12]

Apart from these unacknowledged but unintended quotations, the book is quite illuminative. Mehrotra presents the two aspects of Kali:

Kali of the two faces: Those seeking false security in Her creations, see only Her horrific faceTo those who strive to unite with Her, recognizing the pointlessness of clinging to things that must change, she shows Her benevolent face. [ibid 56]

About Ramakrishna’s vision of Kali, he elucidates and compares this vision with similar visions of other mystics:

There are similar descriptions in other cultures and other times, of mystics being ‘flooded with light’. And the experience transformed them. However . . . while a lesser soul might bask comfortably in the afterglow of the radiance of one vision, Sri Ramakrishna’s restless spirit could not be satisfied with one charmed interlude. He accepted nothing short of an utter and continuous union with the permanent source of all things. He entertained only continuous bliss. [ibid 54]

In some expositions, we find Mehrotra quite perceptive. For example, he connects Ramakrishna’s dislocating a bone in the arm by an accidental fall to his becoming conscious of his mission:

As his mind compelled him to dwell on the physical plane, he realized that he was an instrument in the hand of the Divine Mother, who had to fulfil a mission through his human body and mind. [ibid 207]

Towards the end of the narrative, it is evident that Mehrotra is convinced, like Saradananda, that Ramakrishna was not merely a human being, he was Divine. He completes his biography in a reverent tone, though not indulging in any panegyric or miracle-mongering.

Mehrotra’s narrative gift is remarkably clear-cut and splendidly suggestive, integrating all details of an element into a visual and verbal complex of significance. In that way, this is an informative and friendly biography. This is a book for all those who want to know more about Ramakrishna, as well as for anyone looking for a brilliant read.

Amiya P Sen is a historian with an interest in the intellectual and cultural history of modern India; and particularly, he is a scholar of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition. His recent book *Ramakrishna Paramahansa: The Sadhaka of Dakshineswar* [2010] illuminates this enigmatic religious figure.



In the Preface, the author makes his intention clear. He says that he is dissatisfied with both official biographies – “partly on account of their hagiographical slant but also for their insipid prose and the lack of analytical rigour” [Sen ix] – and the works that are “justly accused of sensationalism” (he cites the examples of Narasingha P. Sil and Jeffrey J. Kripal), although they are “well-documented and readable”. [Preface x] He says,

My first impression on reading representative works associated with the two genres was that while one targeted only the faithful, the other was out to debunk both religious imagination and faith. [ibid]

The author tries to take a middle path, balancing both these extremes intelligently. He places Ramakrishna within the emerging social and cultural turmoil of the time as well as the larger Hindu-Brahminical world that he was born into. The book traces the several contradictions of 19th century Bengal that the sage embodied: between his Vaishnava roots and Shakti worship; between devotion and knowledge; and between a *guru* and *sadhaka* [spiritual practitioner]. [Book review]

The author keeps an analytical open mind and presents a new perspective even on accepted theories. While the official biographies write that the name Ramakrishna was given by Mathura Nath Biswas, chief patron at Dakshineswar Kali Temple, it has been suggested by this author that this name was given by his own parents: “Considering the close similarity in family names, it is tempting to conclude that ‘Ramakrishna’ was the name given to Gadadhar by his own parents.” [*Sadhaka* 40]

Sen scoffs at people who assume that Ramakrishna’s amazing vision of “the blinding luminous waves of consciousness” [ibid 66] would be in some way incomplete in the absence of vision of the Mother Kali in “anthropomorphic form.” [ibid] He refers to the common phrase Ramakrishna’s “God-intoxicated state”, as not adequately describing the “special qualities relating to this phase in his spiritual life.” [ibid] He highlights the fact that Ramakrishna was convinced now that human self effort being too puny and insignificant to attain the Truth, “spiritual realization was essentially a matter of Grace” [66] and for this one has to totally surrender to the God-head – as a child to the Mother!

Sen refers to Ramakrishna’s total self-surrender to Kali: he writes, “What was unusual in Ramakrishna’s case is the self-effacing manner in which he humbly sought the Mother’s grace.” [ibid 67] He alludes to how Ramakrishna repeatedly confessed in a childlike fashion his utter ignorance of the requisites for God-realization which was at the mercy of the benign Mother’s indulgence. “And asked Ramakrishna, if a mother didn’t hold her child, who would?” [ibid]



Like many other biographers of Ramakrishna, Sen too discusses at length the concepts of Kali, and Ramakrishna's attachment to her. He names a chapter of his book "The 'Sting of Kali'", after Western biographer Romain Rolland. In this chapter the author says that the 'sting of Kali' is the evocative expression that Rolland has used to describe the saint's ecstatic involvement with Kali, the goddess of Dakshineswar. Sen refers to an incident when Bamandas, a rich landlord "imagined Kali as a hungry tigress that had chosen this devotee as her prey" [ibid 59]. He explains that what is hinted at by both Bamandas and Rolland is "the initiative Kali herself took to keep Ramakrishna in a state of spiritual delirium" [ibid], rather than Ramakrishna's deep anguish at being so blessed by the goddess. This later aspect is a perennial theme with most biographers. Sen explains:

It also indicates the Mother's desire to be rewarded by the extraordinary devotedness of a prodigal son as well as the child's intense pining to be with the mother. This is borne out by Ramakrishna's own account of the experiences he underwent, especially after his first vision of the goddess. [ibid 59]

Sen argues that most biographical works on Ramakrishna display a tendency to assume that Kali worship came naturally to him. On the contrary, Sen maintains, prior to his arrival at Dakshineswar along with his eldest brother neither Ramakrishna nor any other member of his family had been known to have officiated as a priest to Kali. The author refers to an interesting testimony from Trailokya Nath, one of Ramakrishna's several Brahmo admirers, who found his attitude to Kali to be somewhat conflicted. He refers to the incident when Ramakrishna refused to attend Kali's vesper service, "complaining that the goddess had tormented him enough and that he never wished to see Her face again" [60]. Sen rightly observes that either this might be "mock anger that children sometimes exhibit towards their mother hoping to receive more love and affection" or it might reveal a paradoxical aspect of his relationship to Mother Kali. [ibid]

Regarding Ramakrishna's use of parables, he places him "among those who tried to revive older narrative strategies in a greatly transformed world." [ibid] He maintains that Ramakrishna occasionally borrowed from the "quasi-Vedantic text, *Yogavasishta Ramayana*" to advance a philosophical point. He comments,

To this, Ramakrishna innovatively added images and metaphors from Bengali rural life – sprawling rice fields and the husking of rice, fish and vendors of fish, toiling artisans, peasants and woodcutters, the housewife and her domestic economy – all of which connected culturally with the audience. Here there was serious introspection but also nostalgia and merriment. [ibid 163]

There are occasions when Indian writers brought up in India [i.e. not in any foreign culture] are carried away by the spicy explanation offered by foreign writers of repute. An example of

an Indian author being influenced by a foreign author's erotic insinuation of Ramakrishna's relation with divine Mother Kali is, sadly, Amiya P Sen.

French author Romain Rolland interprets the intimacy Ramakrishna felt for Kali as very physical in nature. He maintains that Ramakrishna as priest "was associated with all the intimate acts of the day"; "He dressed and undressed Her. How could his hands, his eyes, his heart be otherwise than gradually impregnated with Her flesh?" [Rolland 31]; "Passion for the dumb goddess consumed him. To touch Her, to embrace Her, one look, one sigh, one smile, became the soul object of his existence". [ibid 31-32]

Sen echoes Rolland's implied interpretation when he writes:

Ramakrishna's devotion to Kali may have gradually intensified through his association with the goddess, first as a dresser and decorator, and subsequently as a priest. Here, contrary to general opinion, the role of dresser and decorator may have been significant, for apparently, this is the first recorded instance of Ramakrishna coming into close proximity with the goddess that was, by its very nature, tangibly human. [*Sadhaka* 61]

Sen quotes Romain Rolland and Isherwood while describing Ramakrishna's vision of Kali. [ibid 65] Then he adds: "Psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud later used the term 'oceanic feeling' to describe the mystic experiences described above." [ibid] 'Oceanic feeling' is a psychological term coined by Romain Rolland and popularized by Sigmund Freud in his books *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and Its Discontents* to criticize the psychological feeling of religion, the 'oceanic' feeling of limitlessness.

Sen discusses Ramakrishna's "enduring legacy" towards the end of the book. He finds it strange that the contemporary social reformers did not reciprocate Ramakrishna's broad catholicity for which he is still adored and revered:

Oddly enough, for a man who was to be identified as a key figure in the Hindu 'revival', Ramakrishna was never on intimate term with the well-known men who were associated with these movements. [ibid 159]

Sen concurs with the appraisal that Ramakrishna was "a new type of religious figure" [ibid 160] and echoed the Master's own words: "If it is peace that you seek and if you have abiding faith in me, know that something or the other will be done to secure this." [ibid]

He observes that the popularity of Ramakrishna as a religious figure or teacher "derives essentially from his natural ability to make obtuse matters simple and intelligible, to instil faith in people, to get people to believe in themselves". [ibid 162]



This book also carries a brief but critical introduction to the moral and philosophical undercurrents of Ramakrishna's vibrant theology. This is of interest to lay readers as well as those interested in the cultural and religious history of modern Bengal.

Thus we find that although biography of a man of religion is treated as slightly old fashioned in the modern era, it is still possible to find well-researched scholarly works on the lives of saints. These famous books prove that it is possible to create works of art without compromising on the intellectually acceptability quotient, that is usually lacking in the common biographies of saints, and without compromising on the veracity and attitude of admiration that is usually lacking in the recent biographies.

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