



## RAMAKRISHNA LITERATURE VIS-A-VIS THE BRAHMOS

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### ABSTRACT

*Much of the present day traumatic situation is attributed to people moving away from spiritual readings. But, it is quite difficult to get reliable accounts of saintly lives because they are heavily dependent on miracles and adulation. Neither the matter nor the manner of portrayal carries noteworthy spiritual instruction or any literary merit. In such situation one eminent exception is the contemporary literature based on the life and teachings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindu saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa. His contact with the influential Brahma leaders brought about the genesis of Ramakrishna literature. These are authentic contemporary accounts of the saint's life and teachings. The writings of the Brahma admirers of Ramakrishna gave rise to the subsequent literature authored by writers of repute in the last hundred years. This article discusses the mutually enriching relationship between the saint Ramakrishna and the enlightened Brahmos that subsequently gave birth to the vast literature known as Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature which occupies the pride of place in spiritual literature as they have become very much part of mainstream literature.*

**Key Words:** Ramakrishna, Brahma, Brahma Movement, Bridge To Eternity, Biography

### INTRODUCTION

The present day “secular” world, full of strife and violence, calls for situating spiritual values in the field of mainstream literature: this is because much of this traumatic situation is attributed to people moving away from spiritual readings. But, it is quite difficult to get reliable accounts of saintly lives. Generally the accounts of saints are either full of veneration



and miracles; or are written by incompetent writers. Neither the matter nor the manner of portrayal carries noteworthy spiritual instruction or any literary merit.

It is therefore of singular importance that many admirers, disciples and devotees of the nineteenth century saint Ramakrishna (1836-1886) left contemporary authentic records of his pure life and teachings. Ramakrishna had a host of university educated boys and high officials of the British Government as his ardent disciples and followers. Development of the printing press in contemporary Bengal too appeared to be timely. Consequently, one can find scores of well-written life stories of this great teacher, not only by Indian disciples and admirers but also by Western intellectuals and Nobel Laureates in Literature. A researcher writes:

*They recorded their wonderful observations in journals, periodicals, and books. They had spoken with Sri Ramakrishna, bowed at his feet, stayed with him, witnessed his divine play, listened to his conversations, and observed him closely. Thus, their writings have a historical value. [Vimalatmananda]*

Most of the biographers of Ramakrishna stress upon the unexpected influence the sage had on his unlikely audience in an overtly Westernized city in India. At that time Calcutta, the capital of the British colony, was flooded with intellectual giants. And the Brahmo movement had immense influence on the western educated youth of Bengal. Raja Rammohan Roy (1774–1833) was the founder of this movement; and after his demise, the mantle of leadership rested successively on Debendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen, Shivanath Shastri, Pratap Chandra Majumdar and others. The renowned speaker, Keshab Chandra Sen, who was honored by Queen Elizabeth, was exerting impact on the minds of the educated class with his exciting speeches and his *Nababidhan*, a book on the principles of Brahmo Samaj. Debendranath Tagore wrote *Atmatattwavidya* - his interpretations of *Upanishads* and attracted much reverential attention. Pandit Sashadhar Tarkachudamani was mesmerizing the educated crowds with his scientific interpretations of the tenets of Hinduism. . Ramakrishna was in close terms with all these movers and shakers of modern Bengal. The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* records Ramakrishna meeting all these social stalwarts. Ramakrishna went to see Debendranath, the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's father at his Jorasanko residence in Kolkata with his patron Mathur Babu; and completely won over the erudite person by his immaculately pure God-centric life.

1875 became a defining moment for Ramakrishna, for the Westernized elite and for the religious history of Bengal. This year Ramakrishna met the influential Brahmo Samaj leader Keshab Chandra Sen for the first time. Although Keshab could not fully understand Ramakrishna at the first meeting, the latter could grasp Keshab's spiritual potential. And the budding relationship flowered gradually to finally attaining maturity, which changed the religious face of Bengal for good.

Soon, Keshab himself was deeply influenced by Ramakrishna. Pratap Chandra Majumdar, a close associate of Keshab, wrote that Ramakrishna had “a powerful effect upon Keshab’s catholic mind”. [Majumdar, *Keshab* 357] Formerly, Keshab had rejected idolatry, but under the influence of Ramakrishna he accepted Hindu polytheism and established the “New Dispensation” (*Nava Vidhan*) religious movement, based on Ramakrishna’s principles: “Worship of God as Mother”, “All religions as true” and “Assimilation of Hindu polytheism into Brahmoism”. [Masih 198–199] Caught in a web of mental anguish and adverse criticisms following the marriage of his under-aged daughter with the prince of Cooch Behar, Keshab spontaneously accepted the Motherhood of God. It became altogether a new feature of the revival which Keshab was bringing about in the Brahmo Samaj. Majumdar wrote,

And now the sympathy, friendship, and example of Paramahansa converted the Motherhood of God into a subject of special culture with him. The greater part of year 1879 witnessed the development. [Majumdar, *Keshab* 359]

Keshab’s autobiography *Jivanveda*, Trailokyanath Sanyal’s biography *Keshabcharit* and Pratap Chandra Majumdar’s *Life and Teachings of Keshab Chander Sen* corroborate this point. Another Brahmo stalwart, Vijaykrishna Goswami admitted that, inspired by the Paramahansa, Keshab started to cook his food himself [an orthodox Hindu habit] and tried to instill the spirit of renunciation into the Brahmo Samaj. [Goswami 52-3]

It must be mentioned that before their contact with Ramakrishna, most of the Brahmos were

*“too smugly well established in life, too self-satisfied, and too respectably sober to stake all on God.” It was fashionable to talk about religion, and they indulged in that, like the modern day coffee table social reformers. But they did not have the fire in them that drives a man to God. “Many of them were not religious men at all. Some led bohemian lives that were the very antithesis of conventional piety.” [Schiffman 116]*

At the same time, for all their modern ideas, Keshab and his Brahmo followers were not ultimately insensitive. But unlike the uncritical devotees they were not at all ready “to accept anything and everything on the authority of tradition or on the demands of faith”. They did not offer Ramakrishna “unquestioning acquiescence”. [ibid] Biographer Richard Schiffman makes a very insightful observation in this matter:

*What they did offer – bold challenges, the resistances of prejudice and a skeptical, materialistic bend of mind – turned out to be even better, because it was more stimulating, drawing out of the priest of Kali a spirited defense of divine reality which remains to this day an unequalled clarion call to God. [ibid 99]*



After testing him from all angles, many prominent people of Calcutta like Pratap Chandra Majumdar, Vijaykrishna Goswami, Shivanath Shastri, Trailokyanath Sanyal and other modern Brahmos accepted him, became his admirers and re-organized their own lives in the light of his ideas and also took up the charge of propagating those ideas. This led them to reorient their socio-religious outlook.

The detection of Ramakrishna and bringing Ramakrishna to the notice of a wide public was one of the greatest gifts of the Brahmos to the Bengali intelligentsia of the nineteenth century. Previously Ramakrishna was known to many spiritual aspirants as a highly evolved God-loving soul. But the general public at large was as yet unaware of him.

Luckily, it was Keshab Chandra Sen who first thought of making Ramakrishna widely known through the Brahma Samaj's organ the *Indian Mirror*. Keshab requested Ramakrishna: "Sir, I want to make known your message to the public. It will definitely do people good and bring peace to the world." Ramakrishna replied in an ecstatic mood:

*It is not the time to spread the message of this place [i.e. my] through lectures and newspapers. The power and ideas that are within this body will automatically spread all around in course of time. Hundreds of Himalayas will not be able to suppress that power. [How to Live With God 91]*

Nevertheless, Keshab delivered lectures on his piety and published the first press report on Ramakrishna in the *Indian Mirror*, 28 March 1875 under the title "A Hindu Saint". He recorded his experience of meeting 'a sincere Hindu devotee' as follows: "We met one not long ago, and were charmed by the depth, penetration and simplicity of his spirit." He admitted further, "Hinduism must have in it a deep sense of beauty, truth and goodness to inspire such men as these." [Quoted in *Kathamrita* 870]

History shows that many Brahmos not only became Ramakrishna's admirers, but also proclaimed his message to the educated public of Bengal through their speeches and writings since 1875. In this connection the reports published in the *Indian Mirror*, *Sunday Mirror*, *New Dispensation*, *Dharmatattwa*, *Sulabh Samachar* and *Parichariki* deserve special mention. [Mookerjee, Nanda 2-5] In the 14 May 1875 issue of *Dharma Tattwa*, a Bengali journal, a life sketch of Ramakrishna was published by Keshab. It was again Keshab who first collected Ramakrishna's teachings and published them in *Dharma Tattwa* on 31 July 1875. Keshab also publicized Ramakrishna's teachings in the journals of *New Dispensation* over a period of several years. Quite a few of these are reprinted in *Adi Kathamrita*. Keshab continued to publish news about Ramakrishna till his death in 1884; and after that his disciples followed in the footsteps of their leader. [Samasamayik 63] The *Dharma Tattwa*

published news of Ramakrishna's passing in the issue of 31 August 1886. It reflected the close relationship that the Brahma devotees had with him.

Shivanath Shastri, another Brahma leader whom Ramakrishna loved much, recorded his reminiscences in the book *Men I Have Seen*. He observed:

*'I was convinced that he was no longer a sadhak or a devotee under exercise, but was a siddha purusha or one who had attained direct vision of spiritual truth.... My acquaintance with him, though short, was fruitful by strengthening many a spiritual thought in me. ... He was certainly one of the most memorable personalities I have come across in life.'* [Shastri 66]

Vijaykrishna Goswami embraced Brahma Dharma and had become an *acharya* of the Brahma Samaj. He visited Ramakrishna many times at Dakshineswar and accepted him as an incarnation. Once Vijaykrishna said,

*I have travelled to various parts of this country and across mountains, and have met many sadhus and great souls, but, I have never seen anyone like him (pointing to the Master). Here I see one hundred percent spirituality. Elsewhere I have seen twelve percent, sometimes six, sometimes two and sometimes one percent, but I have never found even twenty-five percent in any other soul.* [Gospel131]

Reputed journalist Nagendranath Gupta, a follower of the Brahma Samaj wrote about a meeting of Ramakrishna and the Brahma elite in his book *Reflections and Reminiscences*:

*Practically all the talking was done by the Paramhansa, and the rest, including Keshab himself, were respectful and eager listeners. ... I have never heard any other man speak as he did. It was an unbroken flow of profound spiritual truths and experiences, welling up from the perennial spring of his own devotion and wisdom. The similes and metaphors, the apt illustrations, were as striking as they were original.* [ibid]

Upadhyay Brahmabandhava, who travelled across Europe to deliver lectures on Vedanta, met Ramakrishna and wrote articles on him in the Bengali daily *Sandhya* and the monthly *Swaraj*. He expressed his ideas beautifully in *Swaraj*:

Who is this Ramakrishna? He is the prince of Sadhakas, who through his spiritual practice, so rich with emotion and fervour, gathered round him all the peculiar spiritual attitudes of the different sects and faiths of the world, and thus demonstrated the all-comprehensiveness of his Brahma-realization.



Pratap Chandra Majumdar had travelled and preached the Brahmo ideas of religion in different parts of India, Europe, Japan, and the US. He is also credited with writing the first English biography of Ramakrishna, entitled “Paramahansa Sreemat Ramakrishna” in the *Theistic Quarterly Review* [October, 1879], which played a vital role in introducing Ramakrishna to Westerners like the German Indologist Max Muller. The long article has been reprinted in *Bridge to Eternity*. He said:

His religion is his only recommendation. And what is his religion? It is Hinduism, but, Hinduism of a strange type. Ramkrishna Paramhansa (for that is the saint’s name) is the worshipper of no particular Hindu God. He is not a Shaivaite, he is not a Shakta, he is not a Vaishnava, he is not a Vedantist. Yet he is *all these*. He worships Shiva, he worships Kali, he worships Rama, he worships Krishna, and is a confirmed advocate of Vedantist doctrines. He is an idolater and is yet a faithful and most devoted meditator of the perfections of the one, formless, infinite Deity whom he terms ‘*Akhanda Sachchidananda*’. [*Bridge*]

Another Brahmo stalwart Girish Chandra Sen wrote two books in Bengali on him entitled *Paramahamser Ukti* and *Sankshipta Jivani*. Now these two booklets come together with the name *Adi Kathamrita* [1983] published by Ananya Prakashan, Calcutta. It is claimed that this original book was sent to Max Muller. [*Adi i*]

The young Rabindranath Tagore met Ramakrishna at a Brahmo Samaj festival in Kashishwar Mitra’s house at Nandan Bagan, Calcutta (*Gospel* 219). Later, in 1936 Tagore composed beautiful poems on Ramakrishna in Bengali and English to commemorate the latter’s birth centenary. In these poems he expressed his views on the life, spirituality, and universal teachings of Ramakrishna, and also on his contribution to religious history. A parliament of religions was held in Calcutta between 1 and 8 March 1937, in connection with the centenary celebration of Ramakrishna. Eminent speakers from across the globe participated in the fifteen sessions of the parliament. Tagore presided over the evening session of 3 March at University Institute Hall, College Square. He paid tribute to Ramakrishna in these words:

*I venerate Paramahansa Deva, because he, in an arid age of religious nihilism, proved the truth of our spiritual heritage by realizing it, because the largeness of his spirit could comprehend seemingly antagonistic modes of sadhana, and because the simplicity of his soul shames for all time the pomp and pedantry of pontiffs and pundits. [Vimalatmananda]*

And he continues:



*Great souls, like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, have a comprehensive vision of Truth, they have the power to grasp the significance of each different form of the Reality that is one in all - but the masses of believers are unable to reconcile the conflict of codes and commands. Their timid and shrunken imagination, instead of being liberated by the vision of the Infinite in religion, is held captive in bigotry and is tortured and exploited by priests and fanatics for uses hardly anticipated by those who originally received it. [ibid]*

Contemporary newspapers reported that Ramakrishna was spreading “Love” and “Devotion” among the educated classes of Calcutta. [The *Indian Mirror*, 11 December 1881] In its issue of 19 August 1886, the paper reported that Ramakrishna had succeeded in reforming the character of some youths whose morals had been corrupt. Graduates and undergraduates of the University of Calcutta vied with one another in becoming his followers, and some of them had already renounced the world and become ascetics. [Adi 137-151]

These lectures and the press reports in the Brahmo journals were instrumental in bringing Ramakrishna to the attention of a wider range of people; especially the English educated upper classes of Bengal and also the Europeans residing in India. At a time when the Westernized and self-proclaimed ‘rational’ Brahmos cut themselves off from Hindu moorings, such admiring comments about Ramakrishna from their topmost leaders proved to be a turning point in Bengal’s socio-religious life.

Among the followers of Keshab Chandra Sen quite a few were “idealistic young men whose lives still seemed rich with infinite possibilities, lives that were about to be revolutionized in ways they would not have anticipated”. [Schiffman 116] These youngsters were western educated and they prided themselves as atheists, or even agnostics. They were open-minded enough not to totally turn back against the gods of their fore-fathers, but at the same time they were the products of their rational secular education; and their materialistically trained intellects did not let them connect with the gods with simple faith. Still, inwardly they were not at peace. “They had turned to the Brahmo Samaj in the restless search for deep values in a world seemingly cut loose from the moorings of tradition”. [ibid] When they first ventured to Dakshineswar to meet Ramakrishna, they came with skepticism but to their pleasant surprise they found Ramakrishna had nothing in common with the “wild-eyed religious fanatic” of their idea of god-men. There was a ‘class’ to his presence, something indefinable but vital and intensely real, that stimulated them profoundly. One felt rejuvenated in his presence by an invisible spring of purity. It was a new experience for the young men from Calcutta. His “straightforward and practical approach toward spirituality” impressed them greatly. Here was someone who spoke directly from out of his own “living experience of God, who didn’t insist on blind faith, but asked only for a sincere willingness to put his propositions fairly to the test”. He spoke plainly “without mystification or the priestly double-talk that the religious use to veil their own uncertainties”. These same boys later formed “the nucleus of



Ramakrishna's own brotherhood of the heart" – The Ramakrishna Order. [Schiffman 100; 116 -118]

In this way through their writings Keshab Chandra Sen and other Brahmo Samaj leaders introduced Ramakrishna to the liberal intellectual elite of Calcutta and, through them, to India and the world. Consequently they also introduced Ramakrishna to a world of life and thought previously unknown to him – a world which was alien to everything that Ramakrishna had cherished. The contact with the Brahmos opened a suitable avenue for Ramakrishna to study the mentality of the educated community of Bengal. They gave him an idea of the way the wind was blowing. He saw that they were more influenced by the philosophers of the West than by the seers and prophets of India. Hence they found the greatest difficulty in accepting wholly the ancient truths of the Hindu religion. But Ramakrishna was not at all dismayed by this state of things. For his broad catholic mind even such a world was not in the end impenetrable or invincible. So, with undiminished confidence he told the Brahmos all about his realizations and gave out the essence of his teachings, such as the necessity of renunciation, the sincere pursuit of one's own course of discipline, faith in God, the performance of one's duties in the world without thought of results, and the discrimination between right and wrong. Through them his message reached a wider circle of people, who now began to flock to him in large numbers for spiritual comfort and guidance. [*Short Life* 81-82]

Thus we see that Initially, Ramakrishna's influence on the Brahmos acted as the genesis of subsequent literature based on his life and teachings. And Ramakrishna's teachings took a particularly progressive, liberal and open-minded form through this contact with the Brahmos and their brave new world of enlightened reason: so that he was able to speak directly to the finest minds of his own day, as well as to the best minds of our own time.

These life sketches and articles on Ramakrishna by the Brahmos are contemporary records of his life and teachings. Hence they are authentic, genuine and reliable: first, because, coming from men of repute, they had ready readers; and secondly, because they were immediately verifiable by cross checking with the other witnesses and people who knew Ramakrishna first-hand. This aspect of a saint's authentic life story is indeed rare in spiritual literature. Moreover, coming as they were from the pens of erudite scholars and the elite of the society, these writings were valuable pieces of literature too. Later generations of scholars and the elite followed the footsteps of the Brahmos and produced rich literary works on Ramakrishna. Thus the Brahmo writings get the credit of genesis of the vast Ramakrishna literature. Hence, Ramakrishna literature occupies pride of place in spiritual literature and they have become very much part of mainstream literature.





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