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The RK Mission: Judging the Judgment

The story of the Ramakrishna Mission on page one holds implications for Hindus everywhere. No one we know has assessed the matter more adeptly than Shri Ram Swarup, Delhi's discerning defender of Sanatana Dharma. Here is his, our first ever, guest editorial.

By Shri Ram Swarup

Approaching the Calcutta High Court in 1981, the Ramakrishna Mission sought the status of a non-Hindu minority, which request was granted. The maneuver was not popular with RK Mission's rank and file. Years later, on July 2nd, 1995, the Supreme Court of India reversed the High Court judgment, rectifying the RK Mission's mistake, restoring its old identity and salvaging it from a possible internal feud. The judgment is important, important for the Mission itself.

The RK Mission is Hindu in its philosophy and spiritual lineage, deriving its main support, ideological and organizational, from Hindus. Then why did it take a course which brought it no credit and undid all that it stood for? Did it fear no adverse reaction? Did it not care? It knew the Hindu psyche was weak and Hindus are used to being taken for granted. It had many such instances before it. For example, Indian unity and freedom struggle owed to Hindu renaissance, but soon the new rulers took to wooing those who had opposed both. So RK Mission authorities launched on their course without much apprehension and almost got away with it. But it happened that the Times of India published a four-piece article (January 22nd to 25th, 1986) on the subject in which the Hindu viewpoint found articulation and focus. The story also became front page news in Hinduism Today. With this kind of notice, the issue came to life. RK Mission authorities began to be questioned, sometimes by their own rank and file. They were embarrassed and felt uneasy but did not have the strength to say "sorry" and retrace their steps. Now the Supreme Court's judgment has come to their rescue and saved the RK Mission from a great

crisis--the crisis of identity.

The Supreme Court, however, could only make a legal contribution. The rest will depend on the RK Mission itself. Have its authorities taken the decision gracefully? Will they be able to write off their recent past? Could it do any great work for Hinduism if its authorities feel they are Hindus only under legal compulsion? The RK Mission's future role will depend on answers to these questions.

Some say there is no such problem, that the RK Mission has always been Hindu emotionally and intellectually, but it was forced to seek a non-Hindu status for practical reasons--for avoiding disadvantages under which Hindu institutions have to work in a secular India. This is partly true, but unfortunately on this question the Supreme Court provides no relief. This is a larger question that relates to the whole Hindu society and it will have to wage a continuing struggle to fight discrimination against itself. But regarding the question of the RK Mission's self-rehabilitation in the future, there is no simple answer. Much has taken place during the last decade which has to be taken into account. Though it took shape under particular circumstances, the RK Mission now has an articulated philosophy of being non-Hindu, a veritable manifesto of separation. This repudiation is contained in its affidavit and more particularly in its written arguments [see page 4 sidebar for excerpts] submitted to the High Court. The case is badly argued, but is not worse than other manifestoes which have become cornerstones of similar ill-digested ideologies. Now that it is forcefully articulated, the case for separation could exert a continuing influence on the minds of RK Mission authorities.

Moreover, the arguments themselves were not the work of a day. They were in the making over a long time, but lay dormant, awakening under certain psychological and ideological conditions. Pseudo-secularism is abroad, and under its auspices Hinduism is a dirty word, and disowning Hinduism is deemed both prestigious and profitable. Those ideological conditions still obtain, and no court can change them. The philosophy of separation can be revived at any time.

In the written arguments, the Mission had not merely to prove that it was a minority--that was easily done--but also that it was non-Hindu. This it did with great ingenuity and conviction. In trying to prove it was non-Hindu, it spoke quite negatively of Hinduism, borrowing heavily from the missionaries' repertory. The attack itself was not exceptional, but the quarter from which it came was. "Eh tu, Brutus?" Can the RK Mission outlive this manifesto of separation?

In this document, the Mission declares that it has a religion of its own, called "Ramakrishnaism," that this new religion "is definitely no part of Hinduism," that "its separate identity is its inherent necessity." It concludes that the Mission "has its own separate God, separate name, separate church, separate community, separate organization and, above all, separate philosophy." It argues that the RK Mission is not only non-Hindu but is also not inconsistent with Christianity and Islam.

Many wonder how the RK Mission could argue in this vein at all. It is obvious that something had gone wrong somewhere, and the Mission's commitment to Hinduism had become weak. True, it had been preaching rather indiscriminately that "all religions are equal." But that meant a different thing in the past. In those days the RK Mission saw in this thesis the mature fruit of Hinduism, but now it beheld a repudiation. The Mission's broadmindedness was now trans-Hindu. It decided that it could not find adequate expression in Hinduism and needed a new religion--Ramakrishnaism.

To give their new religion a greater plausibility, authorities began to rewrite the history of the RK Mission--if that is a right word to use for so contemporary a phenomenon. They had a second look at Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, giving their lives and thought a new format, one more in agreement with the orientation of the present leadership.

About Vivekananda, they contended that the "aggressive Hindu monk" who had defended Hinduism at the Chicago Parliament of the World Religions in 1893 had ceased to exist by the time he founded the RK Mission, and the latter was no longer Hindu. His "transition" owed, we are told, to his contact with the West. True, Vivekananda saw much good in the West, but that it taught him a new religion is sheer inventiveness. For their authority, they quote Marie Louise Burke, but there is nothing in her book to support this conclusion. The fact is that when Vivekananda went to America his idea was merely to defend Hinduism. But once there, he discovered that it needed and deserved Vedanta. He saw that "Europe, the center 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 Upanishads."

He decided to preach Vedanta to the West. He advised that Vedantic principles, rather than any personality, including that of Sri Ramakrishna, should be taught. Christopher Isherwood tells us that his advice is still followed. "Ramakrishna is

presented always as an exemplar (and not the only exemplar) of Vedanta; and much is said about the relation of Vedanta to the teachings of Christ and the Christian saints." We can believe that. Many RK Mission monks follow the same fashion in India, too, where the audience is Hindu, but the elaboration and commentary are Biblical. For this reason some feel that the RK Mission has been more of a propagandizer of Christianity and Islam among the Hindus than of Hinduism abroad. It was happening long before the RK Mission applied for a non-Hindu status; it could continue after it is legally Hindu again.

RK Mission monks have dealt with Ramakrishna in the same fanciful and slipshod manner and have given a similar orientation to his sadhana. They concede that he was a "Hindu by birth" and also died as one, "at least in the eye of the lay." But they go on to suggest that he realized a spiritual status beyond the ken of Hinduism and, therefore, needed a new identity. Thus, they conclude, the Bengali saint had to be the founder of a new religion. There is however, nothing in the life of Sri Ramakrishna to suggest this even remotely. True, his hunger for things spiritual was immense; but for that he went to the Upanishads, the Tantras, the Puranas and the various traditional Hindu disciplines, and these gave him all that he wanted. He had no thought of founding a new religion, and he did not think it added to one's stature an inch. He was no prophet or founder of a faith or sect. He was satisfied with being in the line of India's old rishis.

RK Mission monks preach that "All religions teach the same thing," and they do it in the name of what they call Sri Ramakrishna's "practice of all religions." True, Ramakrishna taught the message of harmony, spoke of "many paths" and approached other religions with respect. But for that one need not practice all religions, nor be an ecstatic. Many others both before and after Ramakrishna have taught the same message without being ecstatic or even religious.

Moreover, Ramakrishna's practice of all religions itself does not amount to much. It is more myth than fact. Swami Saradananda's Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master, the first RK Mission standard biography of Sri Ramakrishna, speaks of his practice of Islam and Christianity. But in a 900-page book, he gives only one page to each practice! From this book we also learn that each practice--sadhana, siddhi and profession time altogether--took no more than three days to complete! Still, in the course of time, the myth thickened and replaced any facts, until Nehru was writing, apparently without disbelieving, that Ramakrishna "went to Moslem and Christian mystics and lived with them for years, following their strict routine."

It also seems that the practice of Islam and Christianity made a less than deep impression on Ramakrishna, for subsequently he does not mention on his own initiative either Muhammad or the Koran, neither Jesus nor the Bible. Not even once! Nor did he draw from his practice such excessive and indiscriminate conclusions as Mission monks now do.

I am of the view that this Supreme Court decision will be helpful for the Ramakrishna Mission, which would surely have disintegrated otherwise, as its monks and followers who believed in the ancient Sanatana Dharma civilization would have gradually deserted it. This was bound to happen, inasmuch as monks associated with the Mission did not join it because of its identity as a separate religion called Ramakrishnaism. They were attracted to the Vedantic and Hindu views of Ramakrishna Paramahans and Swami Vivekananda. The average monk today is quite happy with the court's decision. Now the Mission has the opportunity to rectify its mistakes. It is time that they sincerely repent. This must be done, so that the collective monks can live in a peaceful manner.

Some of the arguments in the petitions are shameful. Unfortunately, it has become a fashionable thing to disown Hinduism. We will do well to remember that Hinduism has passed through a thousand years of foreign domination. During these centuries, its deepest ideas and its cherished institutions were under great attack. The trauma of this period produced deep psychological scars. Hindus have lost self-confidence. They have become passive and apologetic--apologetic about their ideas, their institutions, about themselves and about their very name. They behave as if they are making amends for being Hindus. They have become self-alienated. What is needed is for us to be proud of being Hindus. This judgment by the Supreme Court allows us to do some loud thinking on issues related to Hinduism.

Ram Swarup, 75, is a distinguished social observer, author and spokesman of renascent Hinduism which, he believes, can also help other nations to rediscover their spiritual roots. His best-known book is The Word as Revelation, Names and Gods. He can be reached at Voice of India, 2/18, Ansari Road, New Delhi, 110002, India.