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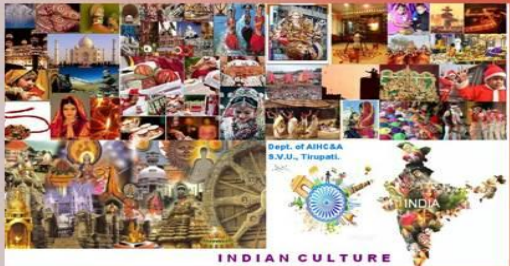
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Paper : **Indian Religion and Philosophy**
Module : **Śrī Rāmakrishna Paramahansa**

 INDIAN CULTURE

 **ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये**

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Component-I (B) – Description of module:

Subject Name	Indian Culture
Paper Name	Indian Religion and Philosophy
Module Name/Title	Sri ramakrishna paramahamsa
Module Id	I C / IRP / 34
Pre requisites	Knowledge of contemporary Indian social philosophy
Objectives	To study philosophical and religious aspects of Śrī Rāmakrishna, and their impact on the Indian Renaissance movement
Keywords	Kāli, Gospel, <i>Tantra</i> , Vedānta

E-Text (Quadrant-I):

1. Introduction:

The Renaissance in India in the nineteenth and twentieth century's was both a renewal and purification. Its stimulus was both internal and external. It was the result of internal social, economic, political and religious conditions which had developed over a long period of time. Renaissance thinkers of India analyzed ancient Indian socio-political thought, accepted its philosophical bases, endorsed its world view and the concept of human nature, condemned social evils like casteism, communalism, regionalism, colonialism and economic exploitation and suggested remedies. They cherished the ideal of spiritual nationalism and so almost all of them propounded the message of internationalism and humanism. Renaissance in India had not meant the abandonment of one tradition for another, but the discovery of the true meaning and significance of a continuing tradition. It signifies not only the revival and restoration of the past, but a new awakening and expression of the genesis of her tradition and culture. None of the modern Indian thinkers had in their search for modernity, cut themselves off from the main springs of Indian culture and tradition. Instead, they laid great emphasis to build their foundations of change on old Indian traditions. As stated by Sri Asianand, "modern Indian renaissance represents not only the coverage of the nationalist mainstream of the pre-independence period but also reflects the total throb of the Indian spirit, the civilizations soul as personified by a large number of national leaders from Ram

Mohan Roy and Śrī Rāmakrishna to Vinoba Bhave.” The Renaissance thinkers presented us with a blue print for a better society, a more whole some world and fuller lives as individuals. They held that self realization was needed to provide a solid ground, a definite and consistent indigenous ideal to the rejuvenated society. It was needed to resolve controversies and turn the mind inward. For reaching this goal, the guidance of a man having direct perception of Absolute Truth was essential. Such a man was Gangadhar Chattopadhyaya or Sri Ramakrishna. Here we will have a brief look into his philosophical ideas.

1. A Brief Biographical Sketch

Śrī Rāmakrishna was born on 18th February 1836, in Kamarpukur in West Bengal. His name was Gangadhar Chatterji and was the son of Kshudiram Chattopadhyaya and Chandra Devi, an orthodox Brahman couple. Kshudiram spent most of his time worshipping the family deity, Raghuvira (Rama) and Chandradevi was a simple woman who did her household chores. But a thing that she never missed was feeding guests who called at meal times. As a child of his parents, Śrī Rāmakrishna was the beloved of the whole village but he was averse to formal schooling. From his very early years, Śrī Rāmakrishna had an intensely spiritual streak, which is not surprising considering that both his parents were very pious individuals. Occasionally, Śrī Rāmakrishna would go into a spiritual trance and temporarily lose consciousness. One of the first occasions, when he was barely six, he went into a state of rapture while watching some cranes in flight covering across a storm cloud. And on another occasion, he was lost to the outer world while playing Lord Śiva in a school play. Even though Ramakrishna did not go to school he knew the epics and *purāṇas* well. He had a good memory and a strong common sense.

In 1852, his brother Rāmkumar called Sri Ramakrishna to Calcutta, where he was serving as a temple priest at the Dakṣineśwar. Kali temple, established by a lady called Rāni Rashmoni. Although not the most popular calling even in those days, this was one occupation that allowed Śrī Rāmakrishna to indulge in what he loved most- immersing himself in intense meditation and other spiritual rituals that would take him closer to God and God-realization. He made it clear that his sole aim in life was to know the ultimate Reality in the world commonly called God. Rāmkumar died in 1856 and this meant that Śrī Rāmakrishna was now the sole priest of the temple of Goddess Kāli. Ramakrishna’s thoughts were glued to the service of the divine Mother, and soon he became intoxicated with a greater yearning for seeing the goddess in her glory. Nothing else could appease the great hunger of his soul. He craved to see God face to face. He sought to have the vision of the Goddess Kāli. For this he advanced fearlessly along the hazardous path pointed out to him by his own

unsophisticated mind. When he didn't have the vision of Goddess Kālī for quite some, he became frustrated and threatened to kill himself with a ritual dagger normally held in the hands of the Goddess. When he rushed frantically to put an end to his life, all of a sudden, the Mother's grace descended upon him. The veil was off, the beautiful vision was unfolded before his eyes and he became immersed in an ocean of ecstasy.

As time passed, Śrī Rāmakrishna's behavior seemed more and more eccentric, becoming a cause of concern to mother and other relatives. Hoping to curb this mental instability his mother decided to get him married as she felt that celibacy could be causing him problems. At the age of 24, he was married to Śārada Devi. When their marriage took place, Ramakrishna was 24 and Śārada Devi was seven. After marriage, Ramakrishna went to Dakṣiṇeśwar. On return, Śrī Rāmakrishna immediately plunged into his spiritual practices and he had his Mother Kālī granting him visions as and when he wanted.

Śrī Rāmakrishna tried various paths to reach God and one teacher after another came to him each representing a way. One of the teachers was a holy woman called Bhairavi Brāhmaṇī. She became his first guru and she taught him yoga and *tantras*. She made it clear to him that his intense physical sufferings were the invariable consequences of the highest phase of love for God. She concluded that Śrī Rāmakrishna's was a 'spiritual madness' and nothing else and so thereafter people treated him with more respect.

The next important guru of Śrī Rāmakrishna was Tota Puri, a wandering ascetic from the Naga sect. From him, Ramakrishna received instructions in non-dualism and also vows in monasticism. He learnt about the non-dualist philosophy of Advaita Vedānta. Tota Puri communicated to his pure concentrated and luminous mind the fundamentals of the Advaita Vedānta that the entire phenomenal existence is only a fabric of illusion wrought by *avidyā* or primal ignorance. During this period, Ramakrishna experienced a deep form of trance referred to as *Nirivikalpa-samādhi* a state of complete absorption of the soul into the Divine Ocean of consciousness. It marks the summit of all spiritual attainments according to non-dualism and only a few really attain it. Some thinkers believe that it was Tota Puri who gave the name 'Ramakrishna' and also the surname 'Paramahansa' (the Great Swan).

Having tried Hinduism in all its aspects, he tried Christianity and Islam. He found the essence of each religion was the same, however different it might look outwardly. His constant absorption in spiritual thoughts ensured he had frequent spiritual and mystic experiences where he would merge with the Absolute Reality. He believed in the universalism of all religions. From idol worship to Advaita, *Vaiṣṇava*, *Yoga*, *Tantra* and all other forms of practices of Hinduism, he tried them all to reach Divine Consciousness. He was not satisfied with just the practice of Hinduism. He went further and applied these

timeless laws of spiritual domination in seeking God through other religions. He said, 'I had to practice each religion for a time- Hinduism, Islam, Christianity. Furthermore, I followed the paths of the Śāktas, Vaiṣṇavas, and Vedāntists. I realized that there is only one God towards whom all are travelling; but the paths are different.' Not content with this, he turned to Christianity and Islam. He found that all paths led him to the same experience of Divine Bliss or Ultimate Reality. Having thus had first-hand experience of the Divine Truth, he proclaimed that all religions of the world were essentially one, as all the different paths lead to the same goal.

Because of the austerities Śrī Rāmakrishna practiced, he had become very frail of body and needed constant care. He sent word to Sārada Devi asking her to come and she came. He taught her everything he felt she should know and she absorbed everything. When her apprenticeship was complete, Śrī Rāmakrishna worshipped her as Universal Mother. Later Sārada Devi was also recognized as a realized soul.

Seeking to reaffirm the ancient truths of Hinduism, Rāmakrishna trained a devoted band of followers. Slowly he became popular and the man who gave the widest publicity to Ramakrishna and his teachings was Keshab Chandra Sen, the leader of the Brahmo Samāj. He also met Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, and Swami Dayānanda Saraśwati. Rāmakrishna's circle of admirers began to grow with the passage of time. But the man he appointed as his torch bearer was his disciple Narendranath, popularly known as Swāmi Vivekananda. Rāmakrishna singled him out as 'the future educator of mankind.' He often clashed with Rāmakrishna, but secretly admired his character. He was not impressed by Rāmakrishna's mystic experience which he thought were mere hallucination. Yet Rāmakrishna, the man, attracted him. He was attracted by the purity of character, selflessness, humility, love for each and everybody and the wise talks of Rāmakrishna. Like great religious teachers, Rāmakrishna spoke in parables. His approach was practical and not theoretical. His only concern was to point man to his highest moral and spiritual possibilities. According to him, man's destiny was not merely physical, but also spiritual. He believed that man is at his best when he is spiritual. So without getting into any argument with any point of view, he kept harping as man's spiritual destiny. He realized that Vivekananda had understood his mission and was prepared to carry it out to the best of his ability in collaboration with other disciples.

In the middle of 1885, it was detected that Rāmakrishna had throat cancer. He breathed his last on 16th august 1886. Three or four days before Rāmakrishna passed away, he called Naren alone to his side and passed on to him all his powers. Vivekananda grasped the deeper imports of Rāmakrishna's life and propagated the same practically all over the world.

As Socrates ideas are known through the dialogues of Plato, similarly the teachings of Ramakrishna are better known through the speeches of Vivekananda. He saw in Rāmākrishna “the highest expression of Divinity on the human plane, a combination of the intellect of Śāṅkaracārya and the heart of Buddha or Caitanya.” His teachings inspired his disciples in forming the Rāmākrishna Mission-the first monastic order in India devoted to serving humanity. His disciples dedicated their lives ‘to our own salvation and of the good of mankind.’ This is the order known as the ‘Rāmākrishna Math and Mission,’ whose headquarters is at Belur, near Kolkata.

2. Śrī Rāmākrishna’s Gospel of Religious Harmony

Śrī Rāmākrishna was not at all an academic philosopher, still less a social reformer or a politician. But his great religious status and a power of consciousness force influenced all. To a world sick of the strife of faith, Śrī Rāmākrishna brought his gospel of religious harmony- a reiteration of the ancient Hindu wisdom. He held that though the paths men follow are numberless, the ultimate principle in which they end and merge is the same even as the rivers flow in to the boundless ocean. In the tradition of ancient Indian philosophy and religion he preached monism. According to him reality is one though it manifests in different ways at different places. Through the help of small stories he explained that ultimately the essence of everything is the same.

The life of Śrī Rāmākrishna was laboratory for the synthesis of great religions. He believed that all the religions of the world were true and any one may lead salvation. He experienced that the spiritual practices in any religion were equally effective. Every religion leads to the path of salvation. He preached that the essentials of all these religions are the same and there is hardly any occasion to fight on this issue. In Śrī Rāmākrishna’s view, the existence of many sects and religions merely does not stand as obstacles in the way, but actually helps the realization of universal religion. With the disappearances of sectarianism, the ideal of universal religion can be realized. In fact, it already exists, no one has to create it, and only each one has to discover it for himself. But its symphony is marred and distorted by sharp and dissonant note of sectarianism. And sectarianism will disappear only when the world understands this new ideal of religious harmony taught by Śrī Rāmākrishna when men will learn to see truth in every sect and when they are taught to sympathize with and appreciate every sincere longing of the human heart, knowing it be an urge towards light and truth, they will realize the ideal of Universal Religion. This was the idea of Śrī Rāmākrishna and he held that no religion can inspire individually to become universal. Unity in variety is the test of universality and not a dull and dead uniformity.

Another of Śrī Rāmakrishna's conviction was that, although all religions are true and all spiritual paths lead to one and the same goal, one must choose the path best suited to him and stick to it with unwavering determination. This steadfast devotion to one's chosen path, or *niṣītha*, was one of the dominant characteristics of Śrī Rāmakrishna's spiritual life. But it should be noted that Ramakrishna's perfection in the Vedāntic discipline of non-duality logically led to his stand against religious exclusivism. He insisted on perception of Truth from different angles and perspectives. He realized that all religions of the world are different manifestations of one Eternal Religion. He felt that every religion should grow according to its normal law of growth retaining its own individuality. He discouraged conversion, established absolute freedom of thought and broke down barriers of dogmas and sects. He based his teachings in Vedanta which taught the unity of the Atman and did not recognize any distinction between man and man.

It is well known that Śrī Rāmakrishna explored in his own life all the varied approaches to the supreme realm of external wisdom. Every form of religious faiths unfolded to his vision a new world of spiritual significance. He said, "as water is called by different names in different languages, so different religions call God by different names like Hari, Śiva, Allah, Christ etc; but all denote the same God.' This spirit of catholicity and tolerance is the essence of the teachings of Śrī Rāmakrishna. This was clearly stated by Swami Tejasarananda when he wrote, "we find that in the Vedānta all religious ideals and aspirations of humanity have been generalized into three principal systems i.e., dualism, qualified monism and absolute monism, according to the graduated scale of spiritual experiences in the lives of different individuals. In the life of Śrī Rāmakrishna also, we witness the eloquent vindication of this very fact, for he realized that these three orders of metaphysical thought are stages on the way to the supreme truth; that they are not contradictory, but rather when added the one to the other are complementary. For all religions alike, from the lowest fetishism to the human soul to grasp and realize the Infinite and in these three systems, we find nothing but a gradual working up of the human mind towards higher and higher ideals till everything is merged in that sublime unity which is reached in the highest spiritual experience." Here he was insisting the oneness of all existence which is the message of Vedanta. He looked upon all religions as many paths for the realization of the Supreme. He declared that, when followed with steadfast zeal and sincerity, each and every path would eventually lead the aspirant to the same goal, and no caste, colour or creed would be a bar to the sacred temple of self-realization. Thus, Śrī Rāmakrishna's ideal of universal religion enables religions to work for human welfare as co-operating parts instead of remaining as colluding units. According to him, religious fellowship will bring in the sense of human kinship and

brotherhood and enable the collective wisdom and effort of man to work towards the evolution of complete civilization of humanity and a world culture.

3. The Message of Śrī Rāmakrishna

Śrī Rāmakrishna was a prophet of contemporary India who experienced the truths embedded in the Vedānta which is a philosophy and also a religion. The Vedānta philosophy, which is a repository of all spiritual ideas, emphasizes several key ideas. The two basic ideas of Vedānta are the oneness of the entire universe (Brahman) and the divinity and uniqueness of the self (Ātman). The same self is manifested in various ways- various faces, various forms, and various stages of evolution. Vedānta forcefully asserted that it is the self of man, the undying, immortal Ātman, which is man's real basis. So one of Vedānta's basic positions is that the individuality of a person consists not merely in his psycho-physical self, but in the deeper spiritual self. Therein lies his individuality. As religion, it supplies the connecting link between one religion and another. Śrī Rāmakrishna proclaimed the truths of the different religions of the world, and came to this Vedāntic conclusion: that all religions are right in their inner core, they are speaking of the same God, and of the same spirit in man. So Vedānta tries to harmonize the various religions, and especially the various methods of realizing the real nature of man which is also, according to him realizing the God. This is the special service that Vedānta, both as a philosophy and as a religion, renders to the religions of the world.

Śrī Rāmakrishna gave the Indian awakening a proper spiritual content it lacked. So the relevance of Śrī Rāmakrishna can be explained in terms of renaissance of spirituality in an absolute sense. Purity of mind, simplicity of life and keeping the ideal of reaching the highest spiritual state as the goal of life- Śrī Rāmakrishna simplified and straightened up the whole idea of spirituality itself. At the same time, his spiritual experience resulted in a practical philosophy applicable to day-to-day life. He could strike a balance between reason and faith, free will and self surrender. He offers a solution to many problems of life. But he made it clear that our real individuality is found when we are one with God. He held that 'seeing Brahman or God in all things is the last word of *'sādhana'*. This takes us to his dictum of Divinity of Man, which was nothing but reassertion of the age-old truth of Vedānta. He asserted that service to man was the highest form of worship and this god-centric humanism was unique. Today there is a growing concern for human rights. Śrī Rāmakrishna had taught to respect the rights of others, and what was more important, was to respect the dignity of man.

Śrī Rāmakrishna was by no means a social reformer in the conventional sense of the term. But his concepts of women's position in the household and in the society, social duties and

responsibilities of each individual and, above all, of human dignity were strikingly original and left a permanent imprint on Indian social ideas and public welfare missions. Every woman, even a prostitute, was a mother to him because all of them were the veritable images of Śakti. The deep sense of respect for women that he sought to inculcate was an essential precondition for the success of any effort aimed at the elevation of women's position in society.

Śrī Rāmakrishna taught that every woman, old or young, was the representative of the Divine Mother on earth. For him, all women represented Divine Motherhood on earth. It was he who by his own example established the truth of spiritual marriage on the social plane alone, and not on the physical plane. He had a wife whom he always treated with reverence and whom he always looked upon as the representative of his Divine Mother. His wife, the Blessed Virgin, Sārada Devi, lived like an embodiment of Divine Motherhood with innumerable spiritual children around her. He uplifted the ideal of womanhood on the spiritual plane by accepting his guru in the form of a woman. No other spiritual leader has ever given such an honor to womanhood in the annals of religious history. Through his consort Sārada Devi, Śrī Rāmakrishna presented his own ideal of womanhood—an asset in household and a partner in higher avocation.

Śrī Rāmakrishna said categorically, 'Religion is not for empty stomach' and this formed the bedrock of Vivekananda's philosophy. Though he had no direct contribution to the ideas of economic and political freedom, we can read a flash of socialistic principles from the sayings of Śrī Rāmakrishna. He rediscovered and revitalized India's eternal message of humanism and universalism and made it a property of mankind. According to him, through self control, discipline and self-purification, man can realize his divine nature. By this method even the most degraded can be pushed towards perfection. This continuous process of inner growth towards perfection is the essence of practical Vedanta. Śrī Rāmakrishna's deep concern for men demanded a change in the contemporary society's outlook on man. Though he did not consider the individual in isolation, he stressed on the individual rather than society. He was essentially a believer in human development and he considered material development only coming in as an adjunct to the development of man. He aimed at the growth of the goodness inherent in man leading him to the realization of the divinity already in man.

We see that the teachings of Śrī Rāmakrishna transcended religious barriers. Their relevance did not remain confined to religious sphere only but was applicable to every sphere of life. Its practical value in a multicultural and multi-religious country like India was inestimable during his time. It is of greater value and significance even today as cultural integration is the major problem of modern India. The teachings of Śrī Rāmakrishna and the

inimitable way in which he underlined the hollowness of communal dissension provide solid bedrock on which the edifice of secularism can effectively to be built up in modern India.

Śrī Rāmākriṣṇa upheld spiritual idealism as the goal of man and his society. He pointed out that realization of God was the essence of religion and the aim of human life. With the rise of materialism, which was result of scientific and technological development of the nineteenth century, religion was about to lose its hold on society. Śrī Rāmākriṣṇa by his life and percepts brought home, once again, to the modern world the relevance of spiritual life. Rightly did Mahatma Gandhi remark after reading Sri Ramakrishna's life, the story of Śrī Rāmākriṣṇa Paramahansa's life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face. No one can read the story of his life without being convinced that God alone is real and that all else is an illusion.' He demonstrated by his own life that God, the ultimate reality can be realized and then only human life becomes really meaningful.

To conclude, we can say that Ramakrishna's ideas were relevant not only for the age in which he lived, but also to the modern world marked by the co-existence of atheism, materialism as well as baseless superstition and religious formalities. Śrī Rāmākriṣṇa denounced the religious sectarianism, narrowness, fanaticism, exclusiveness and bigotry which characterized much of the Hinduism of the day. He urged people to free themselves from such limitations so that religion could once more realize its true function of promoting peace harmony and understating between the people of the world. Śrī Rāmākriṣṇa's reassertion of the very essence of Hinduism in his own unique way and the supreme importance he gave to all religions as they all lead to the same goal, which is God were his most significant contribution to the renaissance movement of India. Swami Vivekananda was not exaggerating when he said, 'Without studying Śrī Rāmākriṣṇa Paramahansa first, one can never understand the real import of the Vedas, the Vedānta, or the *Bhāgavata* and the other *Purāṇas*. His life is a searchlight of infinite power thrown upon the whole mass of Indian religious thought. He was the living commentary to the Vedas and to their aim. He had lived in one life the whole cycle of national religious existence of India.' The foundation of Śrī Rāmākriṣṇa Mission and its multifarious social, cultural, educational and humanitarian activities since its inception are a testimony to Śrī Rāmākriṣṇa's significant and lasting contribution to the Indian awakening. The Mission has successfully demonstrated the spiritual values of the 'novel method of divine worship through service of suffering humanity. The strength of the Ramakrishna Movement is not in money or men or organization but the ideas it tries to present. Thus the ideas of Śrī Rāmākriṣṇa are reaching out to the far corners of the world through their inherent strength.

4. Summary

India is a land of spirituality, where, from time immemorial, great men and women had followed the path of spirituality and holiness. They gave all their time, energy and life to the pursuit of seeking God fearlessly and consistently. Śrī Rāmakrishna is one such personality and he demonstrated spirituality through his own life. He realized God and told everyone who came to him that God is realizable, and that realization is the final purpose of life. When one reads his life and teachings, he gets an idea of what it means to live a spiritual life. His life was an affirmation of the scriptural truths handed down to mankind from time unheard of. He rediscovered and revitalized India's message of humanism and universalism and revealed the highest spiritual truths through his own life.

