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Rāmakṛṣṇa's samādhi revisited

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The nineteenth-century priest of the Kālī temple at the village of Dakṣiṇeśvar near Calcutta, Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa, has been famous for his frequent bhava [emotional state or mood] or ecstasy, and samādhi or syncope [temporary loss of consciousness], believed to be a fallout of his divine madness [divyonmattata]. This madness is not to be understood as mental derangement but as a respectable erratic behaviour culturally associated with the state of a mystic. The Hindu Bhakti [devotional] movement produced numerous saints who appear, from the standpoint of society, as 'crazy', because of their indifference to the phenomenal world. In fact, Rāmakṛṣṇa consciously and forcefully imitated the reported ecstatic (and erratic) behaviour of Śrī Caitanya. This paper offers a critique of the pious and hagiographical accretions of the master's divine madness and explores the motivations and modalities of his frequent withdrawal from the sensate world in large gatherings or in small groups, there being no clear or attestable account of his samādhi when no onlooker was around. Rāmakṛṣṇa's reminiscence of his lone attempted suicide in the temple sanctum, thwarted by an epiphany, has been colourfully crafted and carefully circulated by his disciple biographer Svāmī Sāradānanda, but duly debunked by the saint's famous record-keeper and biographer Mahendranāth Gupta. This paper thus mines the vernacular texts in search of the making of a Hindu mystic.

Ramakrishna is a veritable colossus of mystical experience.

Choudhary 1965: 557.

Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa (1836–1886), a priest of the Kālī temple at Dakṣiṇeśvar, has been famous and popular as pāgal Ṭhākur [mad Master] noted for his wonted samādhi or temporary loss of consciousness believed to be his merger with the divine. Though his 'madness' is not to be equated with the clinical concept of mental derangement or lunacy, but as an acceptable and even respectable erratic and often humorous and wild

behaviour culturally associated with the state of a mystic, it may offer some grounds for pathological presumption. However, as most Hindus (and even some Christian and Sūfī communities) believe, the ‘madness’ of a religious individual is ‘divine madness’ or *divyonmattatā*. Even some of the popular Hindu gods and goddesses such as Śiva, Kṛṣṇa, Cāmuṇḍā, or Kālī are understood to be ‘mad’. The Bhakti movement has produced numerous saints who appear from the standpoint of society as ‘crazy’, but represent an indifference to the phenomenal world. Among such crazy saints, mention may be made of Bilvamaṅgal Ṭhākura (c. 9th century), Śrī Caitanya (1486-1534), Nābhādās (1570-1662), Rāmdās (1606-82), or Tukārām (1608-1649) (see Kinsley 1974 and McDaniel 1989).

Rāmakṛṣṇa, however, consciously and forcefully imitated the reported ecstatic behaviour of Caitanya. He also borrowed his ideas of the five *sthāyī bhāvas* (permanent emotional state or mood) from Caitanyite Vaiṣṇavism: *śānta* (calm), *dāsyā* (service), *sakhya* (companionship), *vātsalya* (childlike naiveté), and *mādhūrya* (sweet love). As Caitanya emphasised Rādhā’s *madhura bhava*, as the lover of Kṛṣṇa, Rāmakṛṣṇa, too, impersonated Rādhā and frequently recommended the technique of *rāgānugā bhakti*, that is, devotion of love, to his disciples (Kinsley 1979: 220).

According to Rāmakṛṣṇa, madness as world-weariness, implies *vairāgya*, which is the outcome of meritorious acts of past lives and superior to *saṃskāra*, which constitutes the inherited traits from previous births. This is so because madness is the characteristic trait of the final birth (KM, III: 180 [GR: 783]; diary of June 13, 1885). Thus ‘crazy’ or ‘ghoulish behaviour is the mark of a perfect knower [*jñānī*] who does not practice discrimination in food and purity. A man of perfect knowledge and a perfect idiot betray similar characteristics’, hence Rāmakṛṣṇa’s spiritual battle cry: ‘Be mad! Be crazy with love of God!’ (KM, II: 169 [GR: 615]. Diary of October 11, 1884).

We need to distance ourselves from the existing hagiographical hermeneutics of Rāmakṛṣṇa’s divine madness and *samādhi* (ecstasy, enstasis or syncope). On the other hand, all reports on his ecstasy make it clear that this condition of the saint was a public performance, there being no clear hint of his merger into *samādhi* or syncope when no onlooker was around. The solitary report based on Rāmakṛṣṇa’s reminiscence on his attempted suicide in ecstasy without the presence of any eyewitness has been colourfully crafted by his disciple biographer Svāmī Sāradānanda (monastic name name of Śaratcandra Cakravartī, 1865-1927) (LP, I [*Sādhakabhāva*: 113-14]). His account of this crowning episode, widely believed to be a major marker of the mystic’s direct contact with the divine, remains to be corroborated by his famous record-keeper and biographer Mahendranāth Gupta (ŚrīM, 1854-1932). When asked by a visitor about the incident, Gupta clearly stated that he had neither heard nor written about it (MJ, 1397 BE: 232).

This study attempts to figure what it is that Rāmakṛṣṇa’s syncope signified and why it attracted the attention of the people at large. This exercise thus questions the hagiographical accretions for Rāmakṛṣṇa’s *divyonmattatā* (divine madness) and *samādhi*. It should be noted in this connection that the author has endeavoured to suspend his

personal grounding in historical criticism of historicist determinism, with a view to understanding the sources both textually and hermeneutically, rather than theologically and/or metaphysically.

Divine Madness

Information on Rāmakṛṣṇa's divine madness may be found in his personal reminiscences or eyewitness accounts as described in the KM or the LP and in the reports of the Brāhmo press. However, these sources need to be used with due caution and circumspection as it is well-nigh impossible to maintain scholarly integrity if we are to follow Sāradānanda's suggestion to accept the master's own explanation as the litmus test for ascertaining the veracity of his visions and bhāvas (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 163, 155-56). Additionally, the Svāmī maintains that Rāmakṛṣṇa was considered insane by "the ordinary people" because of his erratic behaviour (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 154), the untold implication being that only specially endowed individuals were capable of comprehending the merits of the mystic's

From the LP one can distil an approximate chronology of Rāmakṛṣṇa's divine madness which lasted, *mutatis mutandis*, from the time of his employment at the Kālī temple of Dakṣiṇeśvar in 1856 to the conclusion of his Vedāntic training from Totāpurī in 1866. It appears that right from the beginning of his appointment as the temple priest, that Rāmakṛṣṇa began to betray his erratic behaviour. A plausible explanation would be that he found the daily routine of rituals monotonous, as he was neither educated nor experienced in priestcraft, nor even capable of sustaining their responsible or regular undertaking. He knew that he was a favourite of the temple manager Mathurānāth Biśvās (1817-71), son-in-law of the temple owner Rāṇī Rāsmaṇi (1793-1861), and thus his stay at Dakṣiṇeśvar would not be compromised. Moreover, he began to perform peculiar acts such as worshipping himself with flowers, and gorging on foods consecrated to the goddess Kali, and even entreating the idol to come alive. Needless-to-say, his behaviour aroused a great deal of curiosity among many people—temple workers as well as visitors (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 111-13). His ecstatic excesses celebrated in the extant hagiography as his *divyonmattatā* actually expressed themselves as abnormal behaviour. On his own admission,

in my mad state I used to tell people what was right without caring for anybody. Once I found Jay Mukhujje [Mukherjee] unmindful while counting rosary on the Barānagar Ghāṭ. I went to him and delivered two slaps. One day Rāsmaṇi visited Dakṣiṇeśvar and came to the Kālī temple. She used to visit during the ceremony and ask me to sing one or two numbers. I was singing but

noticed that she was inattentive. Instantly—two slaps (KM, II: 3 [GR: 119]. Diary of October 16, 1882).

Mathur became curious about the priest when he came to hear the canards about the young man's various illicit [avaidha] erotic [premapūrṇa] behaviour which was considered quite superfluous and unnecessary by the people' (LP, I [Gurubhāva-Pūrvārdha]: 168). He began to visit the temple secretly (leaving his world of work and amusement in Calcutta) and found the ecstatic young man not only a 'living image of love and simplicity' but in fact a veritable godman. Mathur, reportedly, beheld Kālī when looking at Gadādhara face to face, and Śiva when the latter turned his back (LP, I [Gurubhāva-Pūrvārdha]: 168- 176). This period was marked by a growing intimacy between the enchanted Bīśvās and the ecstatic Bhaṭṭācārya [Bhaṭṭācārya or priest]. The former took the priest to his Jānbājār residence in Calcutta, custom ordered for him sets of gold and silver jewellery befitting a woman, bought gold and silver crockery for his meals, and began to take him for rides around the Maidan and other places of recreation in the city (LP, I [Gurubhāva-Pūrvārdha]: 181; see also 162-88). Meanwhile Rāmakṛṣṇa had succeeded in getting his nephew Hṛdayrām Mukhopādhyāy (1840-99) to take up his daily priestly chores (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 131-32).

Rāmakṛṣṇa told his devotees at the beginning of 1884 that he used to sit in the Pañcavatī and became mad 'in course of time' (KM, IV: 60 [GR: 380], Diary of January 5, 1884). Reportedly, he used to meditate alone at night under an amalakī tree for he believed that 'according to the scriptures anyone meditating under an āmalakī tree has his desires fulfilled.' Once Hṛday saw his uncle meditating stark naked and feared that the latter had gone mad (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 106). The mystic recalled how his condition was witnessed by the roving ascetic Nārāyaṇ Śāstrī, who diagnosed it as insanity (KM, II: 112 [GR: 548]. Diary of September 21, 1884). Rāmakṛṣṇa further reported on his vision 'of particles of light like groups of fireflies' and on his acutely burning sensation during the period of his madhura bhāva (1863-64) for which he was prescribed various ointments and rubbing oils by physicians, though to little effect. But the lucky charm provided to him by Rāmkānāi Ghoṣāl, a Śākta lawyer of Bārāsāt village, seemed to provide some remedy (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 129). However, by 1861, his condition was confirmed as a 'sacred disease' by a physician from eastern Bengal named Durgāprasād Sen, who felt that Rāmakṛṣṇa was 'in a state of divine madness' [divyonmād avasthā] (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 179). Then the bhairavī Yogeśvarī diagnosed his condition as mahābhāva, the exalted condition that had befallen Rādhā and Caitanya (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 189).

Perhaps Mathur was right in thinking that Rāmakṛṣṇa's physical illness, chronic acidity and flatulence, caused his 'mental derangement that manifested itself as excessive devotional mood, and tried to turn his mood by reasoning with him' (LP, I [Gurubhāva-Pūrvārdha]: 171; [Sādhakabhāva]: 35). In fact, Rāmakṛṣṇa himself felt that his visions

aggravated his indigestion caused initially by overeating during his ecstatic mood: ‘Day and night would roll by when I was in ecstatic state. Next morning these ecstasies would be washed out of my bowels’ (KM, IV: 232 [GR: 813]. Diary of July 15, 1885. See also LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 35).

Mathur and Rāsmaṇi also believed that ‘the Master’s mental derangement, caused primarily by his unbroken continence, was manifesting itself as spiritual restlessness’ (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 168). Most probably, Rāmakṛṣṇa’s family members also believed his condition to be an outcome of his repressed rut and persuaded him to get married. He, however, chose Sārādāmaṇi (1853-1920), a six-year old infant girl from the neighbouring village of Jayrāmbāṭī, as his bride in 1859 and, as was the custom then, the married child returned to her parents after the nuptial. Rāmakṛṣṇa earned the nickname of kṣyāpā jāmāi or ‘nutty son-in-law’ by the people of his in-laws’ village. Whenever he would visit his in-laws, the village women would blow conch shell and spread holy water on the path along which they would take their village’s son-in-law to his wife’s home, the reason for his ceremonious reception being the villagers’ attempt to cure him of his malady (Akṣaycaitanya 1393 BE: 130).

Perhaps another explanation for Rāmakṛṣṇa’s suffering was his struggle to rid himself of a deep sense of guilt. He was troubled by what he interpreted was the existence of an evil self (Pāpapurūṣa) within him. This had caused his six-month-long burning sensation of which he was relieved following its immolation by an august ochre-clad figure holding a trident [hinting at the iconic figure of Lord Śiva] emerging from his body (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 127-28). The unspoken but conspicuous message of this vision was that the mystic was a specially-endowed individual [Īśvarakoṭi] who, although a homo peccator like other mortals, was yet protected by an interiorised divinity able to burn up the evil within him—some sort of a built-in auto-sanctifier.

Bhairavī Yogeśvarī

Rāmakṛṣṇa claimed to have undergone a very important spiritual experience with the bhairavī Yogeśvarī the bāmnī [brāhmaṇī], during his state of divine madness. This episode of his spiritual exercise with her is enveloped in mystery and mystification, especially in its lurid details in the JV by Rāmcandra Datta (1851-99). Over the years, various writers, including Jeffrey Kripal (1998: 25, 27, 78), have built an elaborate mystical and tantric explanation of this experience, the authenticity of which is difficult to determine. What one can gather about the master-bhairavī lore is that Yogeśvarī suddenly appeared at Dakṣiṇeśvar sometime in 1861. As has been mentioned earlier, she probably belonged to one of the numerous bhairavī cakras of the neighbourhood. She appears to have had a rather mysterious and muddy past and we have Datta’s admission: ‘We have heard many tales about the brāhmaṇī but we hesitate to divulge them to the public’ (JV: 33). It is likely that she had been procured either by Hṛday who was a regular participant in the local bhairavī cakras, or by Mathurānāth, to provide a sacred diagnosis of Rāmakṛṣṇa’s

strange state. A resourceful woman possessed of charisma and cunning, Yogeśvarī easily influenced the young man with her charm, alleged erudition, and feminine care. Naturally, ‘the affection and attraction at first sight between the master and the Brāhmaṇī increased day by day’ (JV: 191; Sil 2003: 42, 55).

Rāmakṛṣṇa was greatly impressed by the bhairavī, the various books she carried with her: books on tantra, Caitanya Bhāgavata, and Caitanya Caritāmrita, surely played their part. According to his own deposition, he now understood his condition as spiritual in the highest degree, something ‘like a huge elephant entering a small hut’ shaking it to its foundations and shattering it (KM, III: 142 [GR: 747]. Diary of April 12, 1885). The bhairavī even suggested a natural cure for his malady—garlands of fragrant flowers and sandal paste—and sure enough, it is reported to have worked (LP, II [Gurubhāva-Uttarārdha]: 8-9). Another manifestation of this spiritual state was the young priest’s inordinate hunger pangs. The bhairavī simply prescribed a regular regimen of snacks and sweets as the cure, to Rāmakṛṣṇa’s great relief (LP, II [Gurubhāva-Uttarārdha]: 9-10).

Most certainly the bhairavī had designs for herself and the young priest. A shrew out and out, she was invidious of the attention he paid his newly wedded wife, Sāradamaṇī (née Mukhopadhyay, 1853-1920). ‘We have heard,’ writes the author of the LP, ‘that she used to be jealous at the Master’s giving occasional instructions to the Holy Mother’ (LP, I [Gurubhāva-Pūrvārdha]: 242). We learn from Svāmī Gambhīrānanda (monastic name of Jātīndranāth Datta, 1899-1988) how in 1867 young Sāradā rushed to Kāmārpukur from her parental home (where she had been staying since her marriage at five some eight years previously) to live with her husband who had been inveigled by his newfound spiritual mother, Yogeśvarī, and how the latter resorted to intimidation to torment the teenager (HM [G] 1977: 36-37).

Yogeśvarī reportedly taught the eager but confused Rāmakṛṣṇa sixty-four Tantras, especially, sādhanā with ‘the skulls of five creatures, including that of a human being,’ which she procured personally (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva], 179). Subsequently she tried to train him in soḍaṣī pūjā--the Tāntrika ritual with a young female. As Rāmakṛṣṇa recalled:

On one occasion, I saw, that the Brāhmaṇī had brought at night—nobody knows from where—a beautiful woman in the prime of her youth, and said to me, “Bābā, worship her as Devī.” When the worship was finished, she said, “Sit on her lap, Bābā, and perform japa.”

At this point Rāmakṛṣṇa realised the gravity of the situation; next, there might be a command to act on her as a Tāntrika hero. As he recalled:

I was seized with fear, wept piteously, and said to Mā [Kālī], “O Mā, what are your commands to one who has taken refuge in you? Where is the ability of your feeble child to perform this feat?” As soon as I said so, I felt my heart was filled with divine power. And no sooner had I, uttering the mantras, sat on the lap of the woman, like one possessed, unaware of what I was doing, than I fell into a trance (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 225).

There is a hint that the brāhmaṇī herself wished to have a ritual sexual relationship with her young disciple. This was presumably with a view to making him her spiritual partner in the heroic mode of the Tāntrikas, as she was a follower of the vīra mode of Tantra (LP, I [Gurubhāva-Pūrvārdha]: 239). She attempted, albeit cautiously, to instil some erotic feelings into Rāmakṛṣṇa's 'innocent' mind. To quote Sāradānanda,

When the Brāhmaṇī came, the Master's mind was filled with the contemplation of Divine Motherhood....Therefore we clearly understand why he addressed her as "mother" as soon as he saw her and like a child sat, at times, on her lap, taking food from her hand. We have heard from Hṛday that whenever the Brāhmaṇī under the mood of the gopīs of Vraja sang songs of madhura bhāva, he did not like that mood and requested her to stop them and sing instead songs expressive of the motherhood of God (LP, I [Gurubhāva-Pūrvārdha]: 263).

Rāmakṛṣṇa was already aware of the ulterior motive of the middle-aged Yogeśvarī in respect to him, a younger male disciple who she referred to as her son. He used to remark about his female devotees that the mood and attitude of Gopāla or vātsalya bhāva was not good for them, because that mood degenerated eventually. As he remarked with respect to his devotee, the boy Haripada's, coming under the spell of a 'Ghoṣpādā bitch [māgī]' who used to make the boy lie on her lap and feed him with her own hand: 'that very filial affection will lead to undesirable feelings' [ai vātsalya thekei ābār tēcchilya hai] (KM, IV: 164 [GR: 535-36]. Diary of September 19, 1884; KM, II: 154 [GR: 603]. Diary of October 11, 1884).

The clever Yogeśvarī 'rightly understood the Master's mental state and started immediately singing songs as the female attendant of the Mother of the Universe; or introduced songs full of the outburst of affection of Yaśodā for the Vrajagopāl' (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 263). It is well known that Rāmakṛṣṇa enjoyed erotic songs based on the theme of madhura relationship between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. However, he could not afford to encourage the bhairavī to sing those numbers with a young man on her lap, though reportedly, he once sat on the bhairavī's lap in the state of Gopāla and suckled her breasts (RC, I: 69). It was most probably his fear of this kind of behaviour that led him to suggest that Yogeśvarī stay away from Dakṣiṇeśvar as her continued presence in the temple 'would spark public rumour.' Consequently, she fixed her abode on Devamandal's Ghāt at Āḍiādaha a couple of miles north of Dakṣiṇeśvar (LR: 118).

Samādhi

Ramakrishna's divinity was popularized and reaffirmed by his frequent ecstasies or enstasis [samādhis] in public, coupled with his regular pleadings for divine delirium. Samādhi or 'enstasis' is first of all an experience that falls within the ambit of yogic

exercises. As Mircea Eliade has it, the yogī who wishes to achieve true union (yoga) of the human soul with God, endeavours first complete a regimen of haṭhayoga (physiological exercises) with a view to gaining total control of his body, his subconscious and psychochemical flux. Thereafter he seeks to master a triple technique of saṁyama [‘going together’], the three yogāṅgas [‘members of yoga’]: concentration [dhāraṇa], meditation [dhyāna], and stasis [samādhi]. Samādhi is thus the pinnacle of yogic experience in which the adept grasps ‘the form of object without the help of categories or imagination (kalpanā)...a state in which the object reveals itself ‘in itself’ [svarūpa]’ (Eliade 1976: 92).

The samādhi achieved by concentrating thought on an object is saṁprajñāta samādhi [differentiated enstasis] while the one achieved without the intervention of “otherness” is asaṁprajñāta samādhi [undifferentiated enstasis]. The differentiated enstasis consists of four stages: savitarka [argumentative], nirvitarka [non-argumentative], svavicāra [reflexive], and nirvicāra [super-reflexive] (Eliade 1976: 93-96. See also Feuerstein 1990: 238-302, 447-48). According to Dr. Sudhir Kakar, the highest stage of samādhi is mokṣa, which is, a la Vṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, ‘entry into brahman, a merging with brahman, eating of brahman, breathing of brahman’s spirit.’ In other words, ‘it is the unity of self and the world’ (Kakar 1978: 16). Samādhi, according to the Rājayoga school, is a prelude to mokṣa. However, as Kakar argues, ‘the perfect samadhi or yoga is the closest approximation...experientially and psychologically, to what moksha may conceivably mean’ (Kakar 1978: 17-18). In Freudian parlance, this may be equated to the stage of ‘oceanic feeling’ (Ewigkeitsgefühl).

Rāmakṛṣṇa defined samādhi as ‘the dissolution of the mind’ (KM, III: 78 [GR: 478]. Diary of June 30, 1884) and tried to explain samādhi through Tāntric terminology. As he said:

The Kulakuṇḍalinī is the Mūlādhāra. When it is aroused, it passes along the Suṣumnā nerve, goes through the centres of Svādhiṣṭhāṇa, Maṇipura, and so on, and at last reaches the head. This is called the movement of the Mahāvāyu. It leads to samādhi (KM, IV: 237-38 [GR: 830]. Diary of August 9, 1885).

He talked of various categories of samādhi: jaḍa samādhi in which there is no consciousness of ‘I’, and cetanā samādhi, which is attained through the path of bhakti (KM, III:78 [GR: 478]. Diary of June 30, 1884). Once Rāmakṛṣṇa provided what may be considered as (for lack of a better word) a zoological description of various samādhis to Girīśh. According to it,

There are five kinds of samādhi. First, the ant movement—the Mahāvāyu rising up like an ant. Second, the fish movement. Third the serpent movement. Fourth, the bird movement—just as the birds fly from one branch to another. Fifth, the monkey movement in which the

Mahāvāyu reaches the head with one jump, as it were, followed by samādhi (KM, V: 142 [GR: 702]. Diary of February 25, 1885).

He admitted having learnt this taxonomy of samādhi from an anonymous holy man in Hṛṣikeś, whose experiences matched Rāmakṛṣṇa's. On another occasion, Rāmakṛṣṇa described other types of samādhi: the sthita samādhi (when the aspirant stays for a long time in a state of unconsciousness) and unmanā samādhi (a condition which permits sudden withdrawal from the phenomenal world and union with God). The sthita equals to jaḍa and it culminates in nirvikapla samādhi. The cetanā equals to bhāva which constitutes a somewhat lower category of samādhi in which a trace of 'I' remains for the sake of enjoyment and taste of the phenomenal world. However, either kind of samādhi cannot be comprehended until one has given up kāmīnī-kāñcana (KM, IV: 230 [GR: 812]. Diary of July 15, 1885).

Rāmakṛṣṇa claimed to have experienced samādhi at the early age of six or seven, at the sight of white cranes flying in the sky overcast with dark cloud. It is hard to say whether or not this would constitute a spiritual experience, but his next reputed samādhi occurred two years later when he was singing a prayer song dedicated to the village deity Viśālākṣmī. A third episode of this state occurred, probably later, when he was acting the part of Śiva in a yātrā at the Kāmārpukur home of the suvarṇabaṇik [caste of gold merchants] worthy Sītānāth Pyne (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 44, 48, 53).

Rāmakṛṣṇa further claimed that he was adept in the skill of attaining the nirvikalpa samādhi, in the mystery of which he was inducted by his naked mentor Totāpurī the Nyāṅgṭā (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 295-96). Reportedly, he was in the nirvikalpa state for six months and this spiritual feat was indeed remarkable because, according to him, ordinary mortals can live only for twenty-one days in that state. He clearly recalled that in his nirvikalpa condition:

he had no clue as to the passing of days and nights. Just as flies enter into the nostrils and the mouth of a corpse, so they entered into mine though I had no consciousness. The hair became matted on account of accumulation of dust. I perhaps urinated and defecated unconsciously.

He was saved, he said, fortunately for the good of the world, by a holy man with 'a stick like ruler in hand,' who recognized Rāmakṛṣṇa's condition and 'knew that a lot of Mother's work was yet to be done through this body; if it could be preserved, many people would benefit' (LP, I [Gurubhāva-Pūrvārdha]: 55-56). It is puzzling how the master could recall his experience in a spiritual condition in which there was no consciousness of the ego or of the phenomenal world. Rāmakṛṣṇa, of course, maintained judiciously that samādhis could not be described adequately, they must be experienced. However, he considered the experience of samādhi—whatever it was like: ant, monkey, fish, or nirvikalpa—unwholesome, for he admitted having prayed to Kālī to 'cure' him of this

(KM, II: 57 and also III: 258-59 [GR: 237 and also 949-50 respectively]. Diaries of June 5, 1883 and April 9, 1886 respectively).

Rāmakṛṣṇa's frequent samādhi and his quick recovery from that state or his claim to maintain simultaneously an ecstatic state of unconsciousness and the normal conscious state appear to contradict traditional descriptions and definitions. Joshi (1965) suggests that samādhi, properly speaking, 'is a state which makes for an experience of equipoise (samatva),' and that such a state 'does not come and go; it is once for all.' It is a permanent 'state of liberation in bodily existence' and therefore 'a samadhi that comes and goes...is really not a samadhi at all' (pp. 57, 59). Kakar (1978) agrees that mokṣa or perfect samādhi 'is not a temporary surge of oceanic feeling, but a constant and fully aware living-in-the ocean' (pg. 17).

Bhāva and Īśvarakoṭi

With a view to explaining the puzzling anomaly of vividly remembering the experiences of an unconscious state of mind, Rāmakṛṣṇa used two Bengali words: bhāva and Īśvarakoṭi. He told Prāṅkṛṣṇa Mukhopādhyāy that he had been commanded by Kālī "to remain in bhāva" (KM, IV: 3 [GR: 175]. Diary of January 1, 1883. See also Kakar 1991: 20-23 for an interesting discussion of bhāva). Most Rāmakṛṣṇa scholars insist that the mystic used the word bhāvamukha [literally meaning, 'toward bhava,' that is, 'on the verge of ecstasy,' and not quite 'in ecstasy'], though it is mentioned only once in the KM, where he speaks of Caitanya in bhāvamukha (KM, III: 85 [GR: 485]. Diary of June 30, 1884). In his Introduction to the GR, Svāmī Nikhilānanda (monastic name of Dineścandra Dāsgupta, 1895-1973) writes that 'the Divine Mother asked Sri Ramakrishna...to remain in bhavamukha, on the threshold of relative consciousness, the borderline between the Absolute and the Relative'(GR: 30).

Monarañjan Basu obfuscates the meaning of the word by borrowing a Latin phrase from Christopher Isherwood (1904-86)—sub specie aeternitatis—and then equating it with bhāvamukha instead of samādhi (as Isherwood did) (Basu 1981, 16 and 137-40 for a discussion of bhāvamukha. See also Isherwood 1948, 17). Svāmī Tapasyānanda (1904-c.1991) claims that the word is 'for the first time given out by the Master himself, as he heard it from the commandment of the Divine Mother' and that 'the concept...forms a contribution of his Vedantic thought' (Tapasyānanda 1986: 60-74). More recently, Kripal adds his own interpretation by translating bhāva as 'existence' first and then claiming, idiosyncratically, that it points 'to the ultimate truth of the Tantric dialectic' (1998: 155, 159).

Rāmakṛṣṇa is said to have declared that the skill of dwelling on the threshold is the monopoly of the specially gifted individuals: the Īśvarakoṭis, who are divine incarnations and are superior to ordinary mortals, the jīvakoṭis (GR: 52: Nikhilānanda's Introduction; KM, III: 171 [GR: 777]. Diary of May 9, 1885). The latter are unable to return to the plane of relative consciousness after samādhi, 'but incarnations and Īśvarakoṭis can go

up as well as come down' (KM, II: 130 [GR: 562]. Diary of September 26, 1884). They are also qualified to experience mahābhāva or prema (KM, IV: 119 [GR: 503]. Diary of August 3, 1884). There is a divine telos behind this scheme of things and that is, 'when God Himself appears as a man, as an incarnation, he holds the key to the liberation of beings; then, for the welfare of humanity, he returns from samadhi' (KM, II: 57 [GR: 237]. Diary of June 5, 1883). Hence, claimed Rāmakṛṣṇa, the natural inclination of his mind was to move upward—toward nirvikalpa, but he made an effort to bring his mind down to the realm of the mundane just for the sake of his devotees. He accomplished this feat by kindling artificially the desires for drinking water, eating soup, smoking tobacco, seeing or conversing with people. As he said, he constantly had to wrestle with his mind which, given the slightest opportunity, would sprint for the nirvikalpa (LP, I. [Gurubhāva-Pūrvārdha]: 57). The latent message of this talk is obvious: the bodhisattva-like mystic is an Īśvarakoṭi, mandated by the heavens to liberate mankind and postpone his permanent merging with the godhead. Thus his cravings for food, tobacco, and other creature comforts are actually his 'sacrifice' for others who would be deprived of his spiritual help if he practiced his wonted austerity for merging with the divine.

Yoga: Was Rāmakṛṣṇa a Yogī?

If samādhi, as Eliade maintains, is the pinnacle of yogic experience, then we must presume that Rāmakṛṣṇa was a practitioner of yoga. However, we know that he never really mastered haṭhayoga, although he did try it once. He reports that once he bled from his throat as the outcome of his practicing yoga, as diagnosed by a sādhu [ascetic] (LR: 91-92), though it is unclear as to what exactly he did to cause his guttural hemorrhage. The authenticity of this incident is shrouded in mystery though it should be noted that Rāmakṛṣṇa had brought in a testimony from a holy man that he practiced yogic exercises. He also believed that his condition was caused by Haladhārī's (Rāmlāl Caṭṭopādhyāy, 1858-1933) curse on him.

It is quite likely that Rāmakṛṣṇa in fact was unable to undertake any physical exercise. The description of his physique as sabal o suṭhām ("strong and well-built") by his admirers is a well-intentioned hyperbole at best (RA, I: 129). Śivanāth Śāstrī (1847-1919) wrote that Rāmakṛṣṇa's 'constitution...seems to have been naturally frail' (Mookerjee 1976: 15. See also Śāstrī 1979, I: 98). Protap Mozoomdar (1840-1905) observed that even under forty years of age, the master, though 'well-formed naturally,' looked pitifully pale and shrunken, probably because of his austerities during the days of his sādhanā (cited in Diwakar 1970: 266). Mozoomdar wrote that Rāmakṛṣṇa had 'a very frail constitution and his health had to be maintained with utmost care' (Ibid).

Keśab remarked that Rāmakṛṣṇa 'was such a delicate and extraordinary personality, that he should be protected carefully just as a beautiful and expensive article has to be preserved in a glass case' (KM, V: 9-10). Diary April 2, 1882. Translation of this diary

appears in GR under a different date: June 25, 1884). We have Rāmakṛṣṇa's wife Sāradā's personal testimony that her husband

used to go to the country for recouping his health; for he suffered very much from digestive troubles at Dakshineswar and said, "Pooh! The stomach is a store of filth which keeps on flowing out!" All this made the body repugnant to him, and he took no further care of it (HM (G) 1977: 35).

Rāmakṛṣṇa especially found basti (cleansing of the large intestine and the rectum by using anal pump), neti (cleansing of the nasal cavities by means of wires or threads introduced into the nostrils), and nauli (contraction of a muscular area of the abdomen in order to exert direct action on the functioning of the digestive apparatus) extremely difficult, almost impossible, to practice. Hence he said that

a man practicing haṭhayoga is concerned with his body. He washes his intestines with a bamboo tube through his anus. He draws clarified butter and milk through his sexual organ. He learns how to manipulate his tongue through some exercises [possibly referring to the so-called "lion pose" in which the haṭhayogī sticks his tongue out in order to make his facial muscles firmer] (KM, II: 80 [GR: 330]. Diary of December 9, 1883).

Haṭhayogīs, Rāmakṛṣṇa maintained, aspire not for divine realisation, but for a long life only. Moreover, as he announced, haṭhayoga was not efficacious for the Kaliyuga in which human beings have a short lifespan, they depend on food for living and need for the sake of undertaking haṭhayoga a lot of hazardous and horrendous exercises with utmost care and correctness for a long time. Any slightest deviation from the rules of exercise and regimen would result in sure death. Rāmakṛṣṇa, thus states:

Therefore, it is not necessary to practice these things. Besides, is it not for the purpose of regulating the mind that one needs to control the vital air by practicing prāṇāyama and the like? You will see that both the mind and the vital air will gradually be controlled through meditation and by devotion to God (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 146).

Rāmakṛṣṇa never openly confessed to his personal problems with yogic exercises. On the other hand, he claimed that he never took 'more than three days to succeed in any of the disciplines' (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 209). Being unread in the scriptures, he forbade Vedic scholarship and worship because it was unsuitable for the Kali Age. He, however, did have some smattering of the tantra, as taught by Yogeśvarī, and thus declared that it was suitable for Kaliyuga (KM, II: 66 [GR: 297]. Diary of September 26, 1883). As he declared, 'the path of bhakti is good for Kaliyuga' because 'it's easy' in an age of commotion and competition (KM, I: 79 [GR: 172]. Diary of December 4, 1882).

Rāmakṛṣṇa's Ecstatic Behaviour in Public

One of his early public trances that earned him celebrity occurred at the 'Steamer Parties' of Keśab Sen in 1881 and 1882. Nagendranāth Gupta (1861-1940), a relation of M, described Rāmakṛṣṇa's samādhi at the party of July 15, 1881:

We intently watched Ramakrishna Paramhansa in samadhi. The whole body relaxed and then became slightly rigid. There was no twitching of the muscles or nerves, no movement of any limb. Both his hands lay in his lap with the fingers lightly interlocked. The sitting posture of the body (asana) was easy, but absolutely motionless. The face was slightly tilted up, and in repose. The eyes were nearly but not wholly closed. The eyeballs were not turned up or otherwise deflected, but they were fixed and conveyed no message of outer objects to the brain...We gazed in silence for several minutes at the motionless form of the Paramhansa and then Troilokya Nath Sanyal [1848-1915]...sang a hymn to the accompaniment of a drum and cymbals (khol and kartal). As the music swelled in volume the Paramhansa opened his eyes and looked around him as if he was in a strange place. The music stopped. The Paramhansa looking at us said, "Era sab kara?" (Who are these people?) And then he vigorously slapped the top of his head several times, and cried out "Nebe ja--nebe ja" (Go down, go down). No one made any mention of the trance (cited in SD: 74-75).

On October 27, 1882 Mahendranāth Gupta reported:

The Master] lost outer consciousness and was in samādhi as soon as he boarded the boat. The boat came [alongside the steamer]...Everybody crowded to have a view of the Master. Keśab carefully brought the Master out of the boat. With great difficulty he was brought back to consciousness and taken inside...He was made to sit on a chair...the onlookers peeking from outside. The Master again went into samādhi and lost all consciousness of the outer world...The Brāhmo devotees kept staring at [the Master]. The Master's trance came to an end...He mumbled to himself: "Mā, why have you brought me here? Would I be able to save them from their fetters?" (KM, I: 37-38 [GR: 132-33]. Diary of October 2, 1882.

Mahendranāth Gupta reported Rāmakṛṣṇa's ecstatic dance at Surendranāth's home on the occasion of the Annapūrṇā Pūjā (1883):

Now kīrtana is about to begin. The khol [an earthen percussion instrument] is playing. The singing has not started yet. The sweet sound of the khol brings to mind the kīrtana of the party of Gaurāṅga. The Master is getting into an ecstatic mood. Now and again he is looking at the drummer and saying, "Ah! Ah! I am getting goosebumps." When the singer began his ecstatic melody, improvising several erotic imageries, Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa went into samādhi. After a short while he regained consciousness and then suddenly stood up and began to sing like a milkmaid [gopī] of Vṛndāvan gone berserk for Lord Kṛṣṇa. M wrote: "The Master danced and sang and the devotees watched spellbound" KM, II: 40 [GR: 211-12]. Diary of April 5, 1883).

A month later, on May 27, a Vaiṣṇava kīrtanīyā named Manohar Gosvāmī visited Dakṣiṇeśvar and sang a few numbers on Caitanya’s ecstatic love and on Lord Kṛṣṇa’s amorous exploits in Vṛndāvan. As ŚrīM informs:

The Master was absorbed in Rādhā’s mood. He tore off his shirt and...began shivering in mahābhāva. Looking at Kedār, he is singing to the melody of the kīrtana: “Please fetch Kṛṣṇa, the lord of my life and heart.... Either bring him or take me to him. I shall be your maid forever.”

The performance of the avatāra astounded the professional. Charmed by Rāmakṛṣṇa’s mahābhāva, Gosvāmī entreated him with folded hands: “Please deliver me from my worldliness” (KM, V: 41-42 [GR: 224]. Diary of May 27, 1883). Again, the following month, at Maṇi Sen’s Pānihāṭi residence, on the occasion of the Ciṅrā Mahotsava (Great Festival of Crispy Rice),

the Master suddenly began to race with the speed of an arrow. They...found him dancing with the chorus group of Navadīp Gosvāmī. He was getting into samādhi from time to time. Śrī Navadvīp Gosvāmī held him carefully lest he should tumble....[And then] the singing crowd surged toward the Rāghava temple...In a mood of intense intoxication the Master again began to dance in the courtyard of the...shrine. He is getting into samādhi from time to time (KM, IV: 23 [GR: 253-54]. Diary of June 18, 1883).

ŚrīM provides two particularly graphic descriptions of Rāmakṛṣṇa’s ecstatic performance. At the Brāhmo Samāj office of Siṅthi in north Calcutta, Rāmakṛṣṇa danced to the tune of Trailokyanāth Sānyāl ‘intoxicated with divine love.’ As the description goes:

While dancing, he went into samādhi several times. He stood motionless in samādhi, his eyes still, his face smiling, with one hand on the shoulder of a beloved disciple. At the end of the trance, he danced again like a mad elephant...A marvellous sight!...The Brāhmo devotees were dancing around him like iron stuck to a magnet. Everybody was chanting the name of Brahman ecstatically...Many of them were weeping like children, crying “Mā, Mā!” (KM, I: 159 [GR: 632]. Diary of October 19, 1884).

A most carnivalesque atmosphere of divine fervour, a veritable madness, occurred at Shyampukur in north Calcutta, where Rāmakṛṣṇa was transferred toward the final stage of his illness. On this day Narendranāth Datta (Śvāmī Vivekānanda, 1863-1902) sang:

O Mā Brahmamayī, make me mad! I have no need of knowledge or discrimination.
Mā, make me drunk with the wine of your love and plunge me...into the sea of love.
Here in this madhouse of yours, some laugh, some weep, and some dance joyfully:
Jesus, Buddha, Śrīcaitanya are unconscious in love.

Hereafter we follow ŚrīM:

A wonderful sight after the song! Everybody is mad in ecstasy...At first Vijay got up and stood intoxicated. Then Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa followed. The Master had forgotten all about his painful and fatal illness. The doctor [Dr. Mahendralāl Sarkār], in front of him, also stood up. Both patient and physician forgot themselves. Naren, Jr. and Lātu went into samādhi. Dr. Sarkār had studied science, but he was watching this strange scene in utter amazement. He noticed that those who were in ecstasy were utterly unconscious of the outer world. All were motionless and transfixed. At the end of the spell some laughed and some wept. As if a number of drunkards had assembled there! (KM, I: 230-31 [GR: 884]. Diary of October 25, 1885).

The KM contains two interesting accounts of Rāmakṛṣṇa's ecstasy that reveals sheer fun and nothing else. According to one such account, on the second day of the Durgā Pūjā festival in 1884, Rāmakṛṣṇa noticed his beloved Narendra while conversing with his devotees. Immediately he stood up and experienced samādhi. Having recovered from his trance, he uttered 'Saccidānanda' thrice and said to himself:

Shall I say again? No, today it's Mā, the bestower of the bliss of intoxication! Mā, full of the bliss of drunkenness! Sā, re, gā, mā, pā, dhā, ni [do, re, mi etc.]. It isn't good to remain on ni. It isn't possible to remain there long. I'll stay on the next lower note (KM, II: 130 [GR: 562]. Diary of September 28, 1884.).

The second account describes an incident of the next day. In due course Narendra arrived, and there was no limit to the Rāmakṛṣṇa's happiness. After having saluted him, Narendra began talking to his friend Bhavanāth Chaṭṭopādhyāy (1863-96). A long mat was spread on the floor. Narendra lay on his stomach while conversing. Rāmakṛṣṇa looked at him and suddenly experienced samādhi. He then mounted his back and went into samādhi again.

Thereafter Rāmakṛṣṇa sang a number dedicated to the Goddess Durgā and then went out to the porch to practice japa, taking the rosary from Pratāp Hāzrā (apparently to calm himself or control some undesirable thought). Here he was in trance again. "He sat in the state of samādhi for a long time...[while] the devotees watched in wonder" (KM, II: 138-40 [GR: 569-70]. Diary of September 29, 1884).

On the same day, after lunch, everybody took a little nap and thereafter some devotees began a game of playacting in which Bhavanāth appeared in the guise of a brahmacārī and Narendra as a Tāntrika. Suddenly, Rāmakṛṣṇa began to sing and dance ecstatically. Then he became normal again. After a while he sang and danced with his devotees in a circle. At the end of this performance, Rāmakṛṣṇa told ŚrīM: 'There would have been more fun had there been a drummer. The note of the drum should have been: "Tāk tāk tā dhinā! Dāk dāk dā dhinā!"' (KM, II: 145-46 [GR: 575]. Diary of September 29, 1884).

Rāmakṛṣṇa would often experience samādhi whenever he felt happy or highly pleased with something or someone. One day, after having instructed his wife Sāradā to dust and make his bed and prepare a few rolls of betel leaf (as his mouth refresher), he entered the temple at Dakṣiṇeśvar but came out a few minutes later ‘as if in a drunken state.’ A rather easy-going man who was also an accomplished actor, he obviously was aware of his behaviour. Yet he gave Sāradā a nudge and asked her: ‘Am I really drunk?’ Though quite surprised to see him that way at that moment, she still replied in the negative. ‘Why do I stagger then? Why can’t I speak? Am I really drunk?’ Rāmakṛṣṇa insisted (he was talking!). Finally, ŚrīM said what must have sounded very palatable to the ecstatic master: ‘No, no! Why should you consume alcohol? You have drunk the nectar of Mā Kālī’s bhāva’ (LP, II [Gurubhāva-Uttarārḍha]: 67. See also Prabhānanda 1981: 98-133).

From a moving carriage on the streets of Calcutta, Rāmakṛṣṇa was entranced by the sight of a bunch of drunken men revelling loudly on the roadside. His words became slurry and ‘he brought suddenly a part of his body and the right leg out of the carriage and stood on the footboard on one foot. Like an inebriated man he expressed his joy by gesticulating shouting his approval at them: “Great! Fine! Cheers!”’ His companion, a complete stranger, dragged him inside and, reportedly, ‘his heart went on throbbing for some time.’ He thought, ‘how awful it was...to drive in the same carriage with this mad Master!’ ŚrīM observed astutely and eloquently: ‘The Master is like a boy, beyond the three guṇas...He is devoid of any juice of material desire and is like a dry timber, highly combustible’ (KM, II: 230 [GR: 963]. Diary of April 22, 1886).¹

It really is not quite true that Rāmakṛṣṇa danced and romped in his mātōārā bhāva [intoxicated mood] oblivious of the world around him. On the other hand, he was fully aware of his audience and also of any possible criticism of his widely and wildly publicised ecstasies. In particular, he was especially careful in making his debut in a new place. At the Star Theater, where he went to see a religious play, he was becoming emotional while watching some of the scenes and admonished Baburām Ghoṣ (Svāmī Premānanda, 1861-1918) and Gupta seated next to him: ‘Don’t make a fuss if I fall into ecstatic mood or undergo a samādhi. The worldly people will think it’s playacting’ (KM, II: 118 [GR: 553]. Diary of September 21, 1884). He loved to playact the Viṣṇu of folklore by placing his foot on the chest of his devotees, but he was aware of its perception by unbelievers, and so made it a point not to allow those whom he somehow disliked to participate in that spiritual game. For example, he told Pratāp Hāzrā (c.1846-1900), whom he dreaded as well as disliked, to stop clutching to his feet by chiding him: ‘Leave me, what’s this drama you’re enacting...people will see us and spread rumours’ (RA, II: 64). But he unhesitatingly placed his feet on Vijaykrṣṇa Gosvāmī’s (1841-99) chest and the latter literally washed them with his tears (RA, II: 255).

Rāmakṛṣṇa would remain quite self-conscious even in a trance. ŚrīM once reported how after ‘his samādhi was over, the master found the gaze of a room-full of people fixed

on him. He went on talking to himself' (KM, II: 35 [GR: 208]. Diary of April 8, 1883). At another time, following a session of kīrtana, heavy dancing, and frequent samādhis, the ecstatic master noticed Vijay drifting into a trance and asked: 'My dear, Sir, have you lost consciousness, too?' (KM, IV: 95 [GR: 441]. Diary of May 25, 1884). Sāradānanda informs accurately: 'His excessive bhāva notwithstanding, the Master used to be mindful of even the most insignificant matter' (LP, I [Gurubhāva-Pūrvārdha]: 88).

Rāmakṛṣṇa would often try to convince his acquaintances of the genuineness of his condition. He told Priya Mukhopādhyāy: 'Believe me as I speak in this state of mind. There is neither any parade nor pretense here' (KM, IV: 191 [GR: 587]. Diary of October 2, 1884). Vaikunṭha Sānyāl (1857-1937) writes about Rāmakṛṣṇa's similar protestations in respect of his bhāva: 'Upon my mother, this is no put on by a crook' [māiri balci, kon śālā bhāndāy] (LM: 56). Girīś Ghoṣ reports on the master's protestations about his ecstatic state in Balarām Basu's (1842-90) home: 'No, no, this is no put on, no put on.' (Ghoṣ 1388 BE: 6). Rāmakṛṣṇa was equally concerned about the degree of his impact on people. One day he asked M: 'Does whatever I say in my ecstatic state attract people?' Having received a positive response, he asked again: 'What do people think? Do they think anything in particular when they see me in ecstasy?' Once more he asked ŚrīM 'What happens to me in the ecstatic state?' The Master then spoke: 'It is He who's doing everything. I know nothing whatsoever' (KM, IV: 122 [GR: 505]. Diary of August 3, 1884).

Rāmakṛṣṇa's ecstasies were also publicised by the Brāhmo press. Keśab Sen met the master for the first time in 1875 at the retreat of Jaygopāl Sen and became his ardent devotee. Rāmakṛṣṇa initially impressed Keśab with his 'thrilling song' and samādhi (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 400). The Brahma leader himself had claimed an avatara status in the Jewish, Christian, and Vaiṣṇava traditions through his New Dispensation (Parrinder 1982: 99). He undertook the responsibility for advertising the Rāmakṛṣṇa phenomenon: 'All right, I shall gather people.' Thanks to Keśab's initiative, Rāmakṛṣṇa had become a celebrity since 1879. An editorial of 15 June 1879 in the Brahma paper *The Indian Mirror* wrote: 'I can assure the reader...that if the Yogi is not gallant is pure.' *The Sunday Mirror* of 2 November reported that 'the Paramahansa of Dakshineswar...completely lost his senses when he and the procession chanted the name of God before him. This is what we call being intoxicated or maddened by communion with God....The sight we saw there is worth seeing by all means.' *The Dharmatattva* of 1 October reported on Rāmakṛṣṇa's visit to Belghariā retreat where all the Brāhmo invitees were struck by the divine intoxication of the master (Diwakar 1970: 254).

Describing the 'steamer party' of 23 February 1882 organized by Keshab in honour of Rāmakṛṣṇa, *The New Dispensation* of 26 February wrote how in the presence of Rev. Joseph Cook (1838-1901) and Miss Mary Pigot (1837-1917) as well as of the Brāhmos, and to their wonder, the paramahansa 'successively went through all the phases of

spiritual; excitement which characterize him.’ The paper added that ‘Rev. Cook who represented Christian theology and thought, seemed much impressed and interested’ (Diwakar 1970, 256). *The Dharmatattva* of 5 August 1884 wrote that Rāmakṛṣṇa was a paramahansa ‘in action and not in apparel’ and added that ‘at the very mention of God he goes into samadhi’ (Diwakar 1970: 255). A distinguished intellectual and patriot from Bariśāl, eastern Bengal, Aśvinīkumār Datta (1856-1923), who watched the devotees dance in a circle with Rāmakṛṣṇa standing motionless and transfixed in samādhi for a long time, said to himself: ‘Yes a paramahansa indeed’ (KM, I: 262 [GR: 1023]. Datta’s undated letter to ŚrīM).

Rāmakṛṣṇa’s Śamādhi: An Examination

Śaśadhar Tarkachūdāmaṇi (1851?-1928) wrote that Rāmakṛṣṇa was unaware that nirvikalpa samādhi ‘was possible only after having mastered the numerous stages of samādhi.’ According to the tarkachūdāmaṇi, the master’s trance state

was not the product of any spiritual exercise. More likely it was the effect of some condition of the brain. Those with feeble brain become senseless even by the impact of the most trivial incidents. This may happen even on hearing a song. (cited in RV: 8-9: Śaśadhar’s letter to Padmanāth Bhaṭṭācārya).

Among modern scholars, only Professor Dhar boldly and judiciously asserts that the Rāmakṛṣṇa suffered from bouts of catalepsy - ‘a condition of stupor with or without loss of consciousness’ (Dhar 1977: 116 and also 117-18). Actually speaking, samādhi appearing as syncope [‘a fainting or swooning and other kinds of loss or absence of consciousness’ (Clément 1994: xix; GR: 52: Svāmī Nikhilānanda’s Introduction) was an escape mechanism for Rāmakṛṣṇa—escape from the distresses, dilemmas, and anxieties of the real world into the safe haven of a psychic moratorium or, to borrow Fliess’s phrase, a ‘hypnotic evasion’ (Fliess 1973: 285). This condition appears to be corroborated by the master’s own admission. During the advanced stage of his terminal cancer, when told by the physician to control his emotions, Rāmakṛṣṇa said: ‘During ecstasy the illness of the throat remains in one corner’ (KM, V: 119 [GR: 847]. Diary of September 24, 1885). Sāradānanda writes how the mere mention of the word ‘hemp,’ ‘wine’ etc.—something that Rāmakṛṣṇa did not desire—he would go into samādhi. We learn further that ‘the strange Master enter[ed] into samādhi uttering the name of that part of the female body at the name of which our civilised but conceited mind...is filled with the idea of vile enjoyment’ (LP, II [Gurubhāva-Uttarārdha]: 64). Rāmakṛṣṇa’s samādhi served also as an escape from anger. Once Rāmlāl touched his uncle’s pate while giving him oil massage (a daily chore), the master became furious, and ‘then he suddenly went into samadhi’ (RH: 45).

Dr. Kakar writes:

Some psychologists have interpreted the striving for mokṣa [perfect samādhi] as a response to environmental stress—that is, a regression to the undifferentiated phase of infancy in which child and mother are united in the symbolic intimacy, and withdrawal to a (potentially controllable) inner world of personal experience. As a partial explanation of the psychological basis of such a cultural ideal and in the case of some individual Hindus, this explanation may be true enough (Kakar 1978: 27).

In Rāmakṛṣṇa's case, however, as Śāśadhara Tarkacūdāmaṇi had observed, any powerful emotion—any stimulus such as feelings of lust, and fear or fantasy or sheer desire to achieve dramatic effects for a certain activity—all these were contexts or pretexts for his sinking into a state of divine delirium or samādhi (RV: 8-9; Dhar 1977: 117-18).

It is quite likely that the memory of some unexplored childhood trauma rendered Rāmakṛṣṇa an easy and frequent prey to hypnotic trances in later life. Lloyd DeMause has suggested a 'linkage between childhood abuse and adult psychoses' (cited in Atlas 1990: 309). Admittedly there is no direct and clear evidence but there are some very suggestive indications that can only be possible by trying to understand the written report on Rāmakṛṣṇa's reminiscences in his own words. A few illustrations in this regard are in order. We are told that as a young boy Rāmakṛṣṇa was taken to a solitary spot by his older neighbour (of a lower caste) and worshipped as a divine being and that he used to frequent this man's store regularly at night for free treats (Tapasyānanda 1986: 89; Sen 1378 BE: 24; PP 1395 BE, I: 21). Likewise, the boy used to visit the haunt of the roving sādhus in his village en route to their pilgrimage to Puri, the land of the god Jagannāth to the utter panic of his widowed mother. Once he returned home clad in loin cloth and his body smeared in ashes just like those seminude ascetics (LP, I [Pūrvakathā o Vālyajīvan]: 109). Then, the memory of his frequent childhood encounters with the adult women of the traders' quarters at Kāmārpukur. Here, he was regularly invited into their inner apartments at the home of the village worthy Sītānāth Pyne. We know that the younger women believed that he was 'a part of Bhagavān Śrīkṛṣṇa' and 'regarded him as their spiritual lover and friend' (LP, I [Pūrvakathā o Vālyajīvan]: 132). These experiences may have induced a mix of feelings, both pleasant and repulsive. In particular, his later aversion to kāmīnī and contempt for widows were linked to memories of the past that caused him anxiety, and may have functioned as triggers for his temporary loss of consciousness.

At the same time, we ought to bear in mind that Rāmakṛṣṇa also considered samādhi pathological rather than spiritual. He believed that his compulsive overeating during his trance states caused his chronic diarrhoea. It may also be possible that by constant practice, Rāmakṛṣṇa developed a habit or mania for being on a high whenever possible, and he could do nothing about this so-called 'sacred disease' (for the term in quotes see Dhar 1977: 116). An 'ecstasy edict,' he went into samādhi in 1868 while listening to a vīṇā recital by Maheścandra Sarkār as easily and completely as he did while listening to the prayer songs or a recital from Vaiṣṇava or Śākta stories and lyrics (LR: 231. For the

term in quotes see Clément 1994, 205). Reportedly, he prayed to goddess Kālī : ‘Mā, keep me awake so that I am able to listen to the vīṇā real well’ (RC, I: 137). As he confided to M: ‘something happens to me in the ecstatic state...I feel as if I were possessed by a ghost. I cease to be my own self’ (KM, I: 228 [GR: 882]. Diary of October 1885). Similarly, he confessed to Dr. Mahendralāl Sarkār (1833-1904): ‘What can I do? I lose consciousness in that mood. I am not aware of what I do’ (KM, I: 240 [GR: 891]. Diary of October 26, 1885). This confession of course sadly contradicts his earlier understanding of divine consciousness: ‘How can one lose consciousness by contemplating of Him whose consciousness has made the world conscious?’ (KM, IV: 26 [GR: 256]. Diary of June 18, 1883).

That his trances were pathological rather than spiritual may be attested to by the report that Rāmakṛṣṇa used to recover his consciousness when awakened by the loud cry of God’s name. Obviously, then, his samādhi was something not connected to the divine—merger with the divine (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 362-63). Śivanāth Śāstrī (1847-1919) spoke of Rāmakṛṣṇa’s ‘strange nervous disorder, under which, whenever there was any strong emotion or excitement, he would faint away...[a] malady...peculiar to religious persons’ (cited in Mookerjee 1976: 16; see also Dhar 1977: 114-27). Śāśadhar in fact compared Rāmakṛṣṇa’s condition to that of his [tarkacūdāṇi’s] disciple Durgācaraṇ Bandyopādhyāy as well as that of a little child of five or six, who loses his or her senses on hearing a kīrtana and regains consciousness after a while. The child was considered an incarnation of Caitanya by the ‘inventors of neo-avatars’ (cited in RV: 9: Śāśadhar’s letter to Padmanāth Bhaṭṭācārya). It should also be recalled how Caitanya, whose ecstatic dance was imitated by Rāmakṛṣṇa, regarded his own ecstasy (Rādhābhāva) as the outcome of epilepsy or mṛgīvyādhi [indisposition of the female antelope or mṛgī in rut] that mirrored Rādhā’s viraha (‘mṛgī-vyādhite āmi hai acetan’) (Dimock 1999: 607 and n. 174).

We must recall that Rāmakṛṣṇa was quite an accomplished actor. In fact, there is an interesting and suggestive statement by him which insinuates the dramatic element of his samādhi. He inquired of an actor who visited him at Dakṣiṇeśvar:

Haven’t you seen a theatrical performance? The people are conversing with each other, when suddenly the curtain goes up. Then everybody’s attention is directed to the play. There is no other vision. Such is the state of samādhi (KM, V: 120 [GR: 430]. Diary of May 24, 1884).

This bit of conversation does make Rāmakṛṣṇa’s point quite clear, but it also points to his intimate knowledge—acquired through various dramatic performances—of audience psychology. A natural actor from his childhood, Ramakrishna described his colourful encounters with the divine in vivid concrete terms. He dressed up to become the female Rādhā to his beloved Kṛṣṇa; a mother to the doll Rāmlālā; a little child to the goddess Kālī (in fact he once assumed the iconic posture of the Goddess Herself); a

singing and dancing bhakta of Viṣṇu like Śrīcaitanya; and he beheld the visions of the divinities of other faiths such as a bearded Mohammad or Allah, and the Christian Jesus with a snub nose. He was at once a self-proclaimed and self-described devotee of God and a living God-man. Also, as has been noted earlier, he was equally adept at donning the garb of a monk, as of a monkey, with equal felicity. Such dramatic feats along with his performative talents for singing, dancing, and above all, his smooth anecdotes and didactic tales [kathāmṛta], constitute his spiritual repertoire that is celebrated by posterity down to this day. It is his artistic acumen, of an itinerant polymorphic showman of rural Bengal, who entertains his audience by assuming various forms [vahurūpī], that had been the unacknowledged but real secrets of his success in the world of the Calcutta babus, especially the neo Brāhmos of Keśab Sen's sect.

According to a report of Rāmlāl, his uncle's stare during samādhi was fixed and eyelids half-closed—ardaśivanetra. He would weep profusely in bhava, and after the spell was over would make faces and utter 'ka, ka, ki, ki, ku etc.' 'Nobody understood these,' the nephew said (AP: 15). Reportedly, his public trances initially brought him little more than people's ridicule and the Paramahaṃsa earned the pejorative sobriquet of 'Great Goose' (Datta 1396 BE: 21). However, the master soon turned out to be a popular performer. Indeed, the real reason behind his vast popularity was, as he himself discovered, the rumour that he was a man 'who died seven times and came back to life seven times' (KM, IV: 165 [GR: 536]. Diary of September 9, 1884).

A Clinical Perspective of Samādhi

Nevertheless, his ecstatic visions and trances as reported by him and witnessed by devotees and admirers can be said to have had a clinical or neurological, though not necessarily or entirely pathological, basis. Professor Arthur Deikman who has done pioneering scientific study of meditation and mystical experiences, maintains that mystical experience is produced by two basic techniques—contemplation [non-analytic apprehension of objects] and renunciation of mundane pleasures (vairāgya or, in Rāmakṛṣṇa's lingo, giving up kāmīnī-kāñcan)—that induce "deautomatisation" of the psychological structures leading to the obliteration of the distinction between self and object and between objects (phenomenon of Unity). Deikman provides five characteristics of mystic vision: (i) intense realness (thoughts and images becoming real), (ii) sensory translation (illumination from an actual sensory experience following a resolution of unconscious conflict and the resultant experience of peace), (iii) sense of unity (we are at one with the world and with God—a flatus complex associated with a narcissistic religious personality), (iv) incommunicability or ineffability, and (v) a state of fana or "dying to self," that is, undermining of logical consciousness (Deikman 1969: 42). A la Deikman, we can appreciate Ramakrishna's personal testimony of his bhāvasamādhi:

Houses, doors, temples—everything seemed to disappear altogether—as if there was nothing anywhere! And I beheld a boundless infinite illuminated sea of consciousness! However far in whatever direction I looked, I saw a continuous succession of effulgent waves surging forward, raging and storming from all sides with great speed. Very soon they fell on me and drowned me to the unknown bottom. I panted, struggled, and fell unconscious (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 114).

On another occasion Rāmakṛṣṇa reminisced on his days of sādhanā:

When I sat to meditate I had, in the beginning, the vision of particles of light like group of fire-flies; sometimes I saw masses of mist-like of mist-like light covering all sides; and at other times I perceived that everything was pervaded by bright waves of light like molten silver. I could see these with my eyes sometimes shut and sometimes open. I did not understand what I saw, nor did I know whether it was good or bad to have such visions (LP, I [Sādhakabhāva]: 117).

Studies of some neurologists, notably of Professor Vilanayur Ramachandran of the University of California, San Diego, demonstrate a direct connection between neural disorder in the temporal lobe resulting in epileptic seizures and “oceanic” feeling (cosmic consciousness or vision of the divine) and not necessarily what is traditionally considered as mental illness. Ramachandran posits that religiosity has a definitive link to the temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE). The TLE subjects seem to have a wired brain, especially the limbic system, those clusters of nerve cells or nuclei covered by large C-shaped fibre tracts deep in the brain that directly affects the septum located near the front of the thalamus in the middle of the brain. Persons ‘zapped’ in this region report an experience of divine presence and of intense pleasures, ‘like in thousand orgasms rolled into one’ (Ramachandran 1999: 123). Here we may recall how Ramakrishna, while disparaging human carnality vehemently and thus revealing some sort of hyposexuality [reduced libido], yet eloquently described his Seligkeit [divine euphoria] experienced during his mahābhāva, transforming ‘all the pores of the body, even the roots of the hair’ into ‘a great vagina, mahāyoni,’ leading to a feeling of ‘pleasure of intercourse with ātman’ (KM, IV: 36 [GR: 346]. Diary of December 17, 1883).

As suggested above, Rāmakṛṣṇa’s prolonged episode of cosmic or divine vision and encounter during an upsurge of his TLC are indicative of neurological origins in his ecstatic vision and his spiritual gnosis or enlightenment. However, as Ramachandran cautions, ‘religion, the quintessential human trait, is an unsolved mystery of human nature’ and ‘in seeking brain centers concerned with religious experience and God,’ scientists have entered a ‘twilight zone of neurology.’ His judicious conclusion is that although ‘there are circuits in the human brain that are involved in religious experience,’ yet ‘it is not fully known if these circuits evolved specifically for religion.’ In other words, though we are still not sure about the existence of a ‘God module’ in the human brain, it is clear that scientists have ‘begun to address questions about God and spirituality

scientifically' rather than remaining satisfied with what Omar Khaiyyam's (1048-1131) Heaven counselled 'a blind Understanding' (FitzGerald 1889, rubaiyat [quatrain] 33; see also Ramachandran 1999, 132).

Ramakrishna's neurosis—especially the neurosis caused by his physical disabilities and diseases, together with his vision of the abstract Saccidānanda as an embodied male god (KM, V: 182 [GR: 720]. Diary of March 7, 1885), as well as that of the anthropomorphic folk deities Rāma, Kṛṣṇa or Kālī [who, reportedly came so close to Her dear child as to let him feel Her breath (LR: 75) during his fugue state popularly believed to be his samādhi or mahābhāva or divyonmattatā—explains his God-mania, his theosis (Finlan & Kharlamov 2006: 1). Ramakrishna's divine madness and his claim that he was God, we might suggest, were part of his resolution to inner crisis. The real world—the socially constructed world of the male in his male role, the world of disease and death, the actual state of his own body coupled with his fragile health and physical pain and suffering he had endured most of his adult life, especially during his last years as a victim of painful cancer of the throat—needed to be erased or forgotten through some sort of hypnotic evasion. He sought a psychic asylum and found it in romantic escape to a divine arcadia (much like the fictional frozen planet Gethen [Le Guin 2000]), that mythical meadow where the Lord Kṛṣṇa plays on his flute, where the rustic dairymaids [gopīs] rush out of their homes to make love to him, and where, in fact, the breasted and bearded Rāmakṛṣṇa imagined himself to be one of those gopīs in love with her lover-God. His ecstasies and visions had this-world love as their core content. Rāmakṛṣṇa thus loved to soar blissfully in the high heavens away from and above his sordid painful reality. Like Andrew Parent, a character of Paul Theroux's novel, 'he had no fear of flying; he was afraid of landing' (Sheppard 1989: 114).

In the end it must be admitted that the Paramahaṁsa's syncope together with his description of the vision of the divine as materialised human figures, do not seem to convey any lofty and consciously conceived spiritual or aesthetic core, so to speak, as they lack the calm grandeur of a sublime experience (see Sil 2014: ch. 2). The popular Rāmakṛṣṇa is a respectable teacher [guru], great renunciant [tyāgī], fully realised ascetic and mystic, and lover of humanity [premer ṭhākur]—credited with the usual qualities of a hagiographical hero. But is the popular Rāmakṛṣṇa the authentic God-mad Gadādhara? The real man was certainly a bundle of contradictions, who could be compassionate and cantankerous, a paragon of humility in public but capricious and relentless at home at times, and who displayed a marked penchant for creature comforts. His pronounced gynophobia stands in sharp contrast to his lifelong dependence on women's nurture and care. He was greatly influenced by his mother whom he once described as 'hābā' [dumb or idiot], and yet adored and petted by the village women in his childhood as their 'spiritual lover.' He was employed by a rich and famous woman thus gaining an opportunity to live in Dakṣiṇeśvar, and he reportedly received instructions in the esoteric science of Tantra from a roving nun. On his own admission, he consummated his

sāadhanā by worshipping his teenage wife as the Divine Mother. The enigmatic and ecstatic Rāmakṛṣṇa might appear a bit weird and wacky, but never dull. In fact, he was at once a most colourful and playful child and lover of the divine. 🙏

ABBREVIATIONS

- AN *Svāmī* Prabhānanda (1981), *Ānandarūp Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*, Kalikātā: Śilālipi
- AP K. Mitra (comp. and ed.) (1339 BE), *Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa o antaraṅga prasaṅga*. Dakṣiṇeśvar, Author
- B.E. Bengali Era, that is, Bengali Calendar, which follows Gregorian Calendar by 593 years 3 months and 14 days.
- GR *Svāmī* Nikhilānanda (trans.) (1984), *The gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, New York: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center. See KM below.
- HM(G) *Svāmī* Gambhīrānanda. (1977), *Holy mother, Sri Sarada Devi*, Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math.
- JU S. Mitra (1308 BE), *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa (Jīvanī o upadeś)*, Calcutta: Great India Press.
- JV R. Datta. (1995), *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇa Paramahamsadever jīvanvṛttānta*. Kalikātā: Udbodhan Kāryālay.
- KM *ŚrīM* (M. Gupta) (comp.) (1394 BE), *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta*, (5 vols.), Kalikata: Kathāmṛta Bhavan. All references to *KM* are accompanied by corresponding references to *GR* for the English translation. However, the cited passages in Bengali from *KM* appear in my translation. See *GR* above.
- LM V. Sānyāl. (1390 E), *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇa lilāmṛta*, Kalikātā: Navapatra Prakāśan.
- LP *Svāmī* Sāradānanda. (1398 BE), *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga*, (5 pts. in 2 vols.), Kalikātā: Udbodhan Kāryālay. Each part with separate pagination. Vol. I in 3 pts. (Pūrvakathā o vālyajīvan, sādhakabhāva, and gurubhāva: Pūrvārdha; Vol. II in 2 pts. (Gurubhāva: Uttarārdha and divyabhāva o Narendranāth).
- LR Advaita Ashrama. (1964), *Life of Sri Ramakrishna compiled from various authentic sources*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1964.
- MJ A. Bhattacharya. (1397 BE), *ŚrīMar jīvandarśan*, Kalikātā: Grantha Bhāratī.
- PR A. Sengupta. (1395 BE), *Parampuruṣ Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇa*, (4 vols. in 1), Calcutta: Mitra o Ghosh Publishers Private Limited.
- RA *Svāmī* Prabhānanda. (1396-1401 BE), *Śrīrāmakṛṣṇer antyalilā*, (2 vols.), Kalikātā: Udbodhan Kāryālay.
- RC G. Barman (*alias* P. Simha). (1316 BE), *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇacarit*, (2 vols.), Kalikātā: Kālīnāth Simha.
- RH Swami Chetanananda. (ed. & trans.) (1993), *Ramakrishna As We Saw Him*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama.
- RV P. Bhaṭṭācārya. (1924), *Rāmakṛṣṇa Vivekānanda prasaṅga*, Benaras: Kāśīdhām Brāhmaṇ Sabhā.
- SD B. Bandyopādhyāy and S. Dās (eds.) (1375 BE), *Samasāmayik dṛṣṭite Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa*, Calcutta: General Printers & Publishers.
- ŚrīM M. Gupta Anon. 'Theatricals'. *The Hindoo Patriot*. 28th April 1859: p. 9.

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