



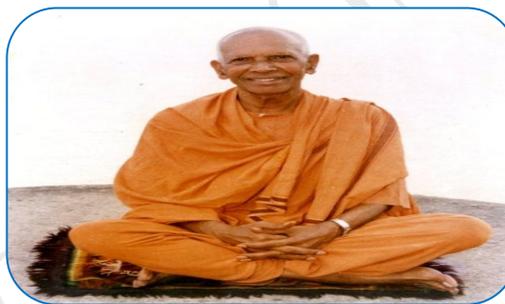
LIFE AND SERVICE OF SWAMI RANGANATHANANDA

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ABSTRACT :

Swami Ranganathananda, a well known personality, nationally and internationally, dedicated his entire life to human welfare and progress. His unwavering faith and love for Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and Vivekananda liberated him from human pleasures and comforts and made him devote his life for others. Vivekananda's message 'Service of God in man' was made practical by him. He was the cultural ambassador of India. He was crowned as the thirteenth President of the Ramakrishna Mission.



Swami Ranganathananda was one of the finest interpreters of Vedanta. He, in a most beautiful and satisfying manner, has interpreted the message of Vedanta to harmonize the conflicting and irreconcilable issues of science and spirituality. Ranganathananda exhorted people not to believe blindly but to understand and believe. Vedanta, the Upanishads, the Bagawad Gita and the like were only for the educated, but Ranganathananda opened the windows of these philosophies even to the illiterate and ignorant. Swami Ranganathananda always advised or rather insisted to work hard and to achieve the goal. He practised this till the end of his life and thus was a role model for others. He gave importance to Yoga, as his great leader Vivekananda had done. He was a man of extraordinary optimism and had a very good memory power too. Importance of education was the other thing which he insisted a lot. Thus a boy, born in a middle class family, by hard work, will power and perseverance, rose to the position of a spiritual ambassador and leader of an extensive organization.

KEYWORDS : Swami Ranganathananda, Vivekananda, Vedanta , Asrama, Sivananda, Lecture Tour.

INTRODUCTION :

Swami Ranganathananda was born in the quiet village of Trikkur near Thrissur in Kerala on 15th December 1908 as Shankaran. He first came to know about Sri Ramakrishna at the young age of Fifteen, after reading, "The gospel of Sri Ramakrishna". Then he read other works of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. At the age of eighteen he decided to join the Ramakrishna Order. His path to become an ascetic started and he went to the Asrama at Ooty. Swami Sivananda, the direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the second president of the Ramakrishna Mission who was at Ooty Asrama blessed him and gave him Mantra Diksha.¹

In 1933 he was formally ordained into sannyas by Swami Sivananda and given the monastic name Swami Ranganathananda. He also had the opportunity to meet other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna such as Swami Abhedananda, Swami Akhandananda, Swami Vijnanananda and Swami Subodhananda. He had also met Sri Mahendranath Gupta, the author of the Gospel.

After Mysore, the Swami served in Bangalore for three years till 1938. At the young age of 31, he was chosen to head the Mission's Rangoon (now Yangon) Society where he worked till 1942. Then he was President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in Karachi (now Pakistan) from 1942 to 1948. He was the head of the New Delhi centre from 1949 to 1962. During this period he attracted many intellectuals to religion through his modern and scientific interpretation of Vedanta philosophy. American ambassador Chester Bowles used to be a regular attendee at the Sunday lectures.²

For the next five years he was Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission of Culture, Calcutta. His Saturday lectures there were later compiled and published as *The Message of the Upanishads*.

From 1973 to 1993 he was President of the Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad. He was elected a Trustee of the Ramakrishna Math and a Member of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1961. He became a Vice—President of the Order on 1st April 1989. He assumed the office of the President of the Order on 7th September 1998.

An academic summed him up thus "He seemed to be an enigma, bordering on the genius. How else could one explain that without any formal higher education, he could become an erudite scholar, a pundit in Indian shastras, going through the original Sanskrit works, and at the same time be proficient in Western philosophy and social sciences."³

The Lecture Tours of Swami Ranganathananda

Swami Ranganathananda's rhetoric style and oration were extraordinary. He never lacked words and talked for hours without any strain or stress. He was a speedy orator. He had a knack of attracting the audience to him. Soon after receiving Sanyasa diksa he started giving public speeches. His first speech was at Banumayya School in Mysore and the central jail there. He was invited by religious communities, institutions, universities etc for talks and discourses. The Sunday evening talks became a custom in all the Ramakrishna Asramas. Swami Ranganathananda was once invited for a forty minute speech but was urged by the audience to speak for two hours.

Swami Ranganathananda lectured on a variety of subjects and his speeches made Vedanta, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita simple for the common man to understand. People from all fields would be his audience and even people of other religions would listen to his lectures.

The essence of the Ranganathananda's speeches spread all over the world and even European leaders invited him. Ranganathananda was nominated as the member of UNESCO and he made use of this opportunity to spread the message of Vedanta as a spokesman of UNEFSCO.⁴

Ranganathananda's words attracted even the communist leaders. He visited countries like the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Cuba to share and spread the philosophy of Vedanta. His speech stirred a famous Japanese Communist ideologist to become a Sannyasi and comrade of Ranganathananda. He was known as Satyalokananda (Yuki Kasu). Ranganathananda remarked that communist and socialist ideologies were the only means for bringing about social and economic equality. He visited more than fifty nations. In the USA, France and Canada he visited about 115 Universities and made about 934 speeches. He also made television interviews and preached in churches.⁵

Ranganathananda's lecture tours can be divided into eight phases:

1. Ranganathananda's first foreign lecture tour was in 1958. He visited Japan, Singapore and Fiji and gave a number of speeches and talks.
2. Ranganathananda's second trip was to South East Asia. He visited countries like Indonesia, Malaya, South Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma.
3. Ranganathananda went to European countries in the year 1961. He visited seventeen European countries viz Greece, Italy, England, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Holland, Belgium, Western Germany, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, Spain, France, Soviet union.
4. The fourth stage of the tour had a long gap because Ranganathananda was made the head of Delhi Asrama then. In the fourth stage he visited the United State of America and several northern and southern American countries.
5. He visited Western Europe and then France, Yugoslavia, Switzerland, Belgium and Greece.

6. Ranganathananda went again to the USA and visited 21 states there. Then he went to Canada, Mexico, Fiji, and Holland. After a short interval he visited Australia also.
7. Ranganathananda made a tour to the Muslim country Afghanistan.
8. In 1974 Ranganathananda made lecture tour to the African countries viz Tanzania, Zambia, Madagascar and Mauritius.⁶

During his second lecture tour of Britain in 1976, he was invited by the Dean of Westminster (Anglican Church) and his wife to visit them. Later at their request he addressed some senior students of Westminster High School and, according to the headmaster, the students listened to the lecture with perfect attention though they were difficult to control in the classroom. After his extensive travel abroad Swami Ranganathananda said; "One important thing which life has taught me is that India's Vedanta and Sri Ramakrishna appeal directly to many thinking minds in the West through books, without the intervention of any Indian teacher."

The lecture which Swami Ranganathananda gave were not mere intellectual exercise. They were outpouring of his soul. Whatever ideas he gave had been absorbed and assimilated by him and had become part of his deepest connection and thinking. Swami Vivekananda once remarked that it was the character of the speaker that created the impact and not his words. This was very true with Swami Ranganathananda.

Swami Ranganathananda was an internationally acclaimed speaker whose stirring eloquence captivated thousands of people all over the world. For the benefit of posterity many of his lectures and writings have been published in book form. Among the publications are "Eternal values for a changing society" "The message of Upanishads" "Vedanta and the Future of Mankind" "Universal Message of the Bhagavad Gita", "The essence of Indian culture", "Spiritual life of the Householder" "The charm and power of the Upanishads" "Vedanta and the future of mankind" etc.

Swami Ranganathananda, the thirteenth President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, entered Mahasamadhi on Monday, 25th April 2005.⁷

Swami Ranganathananda's life is a true legacy of greatness and inspiration to all who knew him. He lived a full life and lived in every corner of our vast subcontinent. He taught the values of love, sacrifice, learning and piety and the importance of knowledge and learning to disciples across the world. He interpreted our ancient and religious texts laced with modernism, humanism and liberalism, the values that Swami Vivekananda held so dear in his teachings of Hinduism.

Swami Ranganathananda was extremely sensitive to the sufferings of the poor and oppressed. He was deeply concerned about the welfare of weaker sections of society and women and actively helped in their uplift. His passing away is an irreparable loss to countless devotees and to the Ramakrishna Order.

Swami Ranganathananda was a man of fascinating personality. The former Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, opines thus: Ranganathananda was one of the greatest teachers, a scholar, a sage, a companion of the needy and above all a deeply religious person and a true humanist in the best traditions of our ancient culture and civilization. He was also a builder, having created and built new centres of learning and meditation for the Ramakrishna Mission at home and abroad. Generations of Indians have sat at his feet and imbibed the teaching of some of our greatest texts and epics. He was, without doubt, the most poetic and philosophical interpreter of the Gita in the living memory."⁸ He also added that, "Ranganathananda was regarded by the disciples of the Ramakrishna Mission as the 'Second Vivekananda' and Ranganathananda proved it. His interpretation of our ancient and religious texts was laced with modernism, humanism and liberalism, the values that Vivekananda held so dear in his teachings of Hinduism."⁹

A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the former President of India called Ranganathananda "A swami of indomitable spirit and a great spiritual leader." And he added, "Swami Ranganathanandji was a noble soul who immersed himself into the mission of spreading the message of Vedanta to humanity spread throughout this planet."¹⁰ A Hindu monk, an eminent soul, a pure Advaitin, a good orator, philosopher, erudite scholar, voracious reader, a spiritual reformer, a well versed musician, a man of intellect and

great humanitarian, all these designations are apt for Ranganathananda. The personality of Ranganathananda was a combination of these different qualities.

Swami Ranganathananda was given the Indra Gandhi award for national Integration in 1986 and Gandhi Peace Prize in 1999, both on behalf of the Ramakrishna Mission.

To conclude with the famous Quote of Swami Ranganathananda which he delivers in all his lectures and also published in his books:

“Are you growing spiritually?

Can you love others?

Can you feel your oneness with others?

Have you peace within yourself and do you radiate it around you?

That is called spiritual growth, which is stimulated by mediation inwardly and by work done in a spirit of service outwardly.

END NOTES

1. Ranganathananda, *My Life is My Work*, Nachiketa Tapovan, 2006, Hyderabad, p.8. On 30th June 1926 and after a week joined the Mysore Ashrama where he worked for nine years, first as a cook, dishwasher and home keeper, and later as warden of the Home for students.
2. *Nirvana*, A Quarterly Publication of Ramakrishna Mission Singapore, July-September 2005, pp. 2-4.
3. *The Hermitage: Biography of Swami Ranganathananda*, Trissur: Spiritual, Cultural and Social Centre, 2007, p.8.
4. Vijayanahan, D., *Swami Ranganathananda*, Kottayam: D. C. Books, 2005, p.18.
5. *Ibid*, pp. 59-60.
6. *The Hermitage, op. cit*, p. 8.
7. *The Monk Without Frontiers: Reminiscences of Swami Ranganathananda*, Kolkatta: A Birth centenary Tribute, Swami Ranganathananda Birth Centenary Celebration Committee, 2008, p. 289.
8. *Swami Ranganathananda*, Sree Ramakrishna Math, Madras, p. 37.
9. Ranganathananda and Elva Linnea Nelson, *Human Being in Depth: A Scientific Approach to Religion*, Albany : State University of New York Press, 1991, p. xiv.
10. Swami Ranganathananda, *Children-Humanities Created Assets*, Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2015, p.20.