

## [Monks With a Mission](#)

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### MOVEMENTS

## Monks With a Mission

The challenges of success impact Ramakrishna Mission as it enters its second century of service

A hundred years ago, sixteen impoverished boys gathered under the guidance of Swami Vivekananda to form the Belur monastery. "We were so poor," wrote Vivekananda, "that some days we only had rice to eat, with no salt. Other days we had nothing at all." From that impecunious beginning grew the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, comprised today of 1,001 sannyasin monks (including the annual initiates' class of '99, at right), 400 novice monks, 102 branch centers in India and another 34 worldwide. The President of India recently presented the RK Mission (as it is commonly known) with the "Gandhi Peace Prize" for 1998, worth <sup>US</sup>\$250,000, for its service to India in running temples, schools, orphanages, hospitals, disaster relief, vocational training and tribal welfare projects. The Mission is also collectively one of the major publishers of India, with 3,000 religious titles in 22 languages, and has now ventured onto the Internet at [www.sriramakrishna.org/](http://www.sriramakrishna.org/). The presidential citation that accompanies the prize commended members on their service "to all, irrespective of caste, creed or language."

The RK Mission is no longer impoverished, with an income in India of Rs. 400 million (US\$10 million) for 1991, the last year for which we could obtain figures. Overseas missions prosper too; some own valuable donated properties. It is a monk-run institution and is enjoying a steady influx of swami candidates. The Catholics, by contrast, are experiencing a worldwide drop in seminary enrollment. In the US, for example, by the year 2005, it is estimated half of Catholic priests will be age 55 or older and only one in eight under 35. Currently, 10% of US parishes and 43% of parishes worldwide are without a priest, and even India has seen a 13% drop in priests from 1965 to 1986. Hinduism is not suffering from such a trend, with nearly all monastic orders experiencing steady growth.

The RK Mission can take credit for this in part: thousands of young men have been inspired by the life of Swami Vivekananda to take sannyas, including Hinduism Today's publisher, who read "Song of the Sannyasin" [see page 30] as a

spiritually-minded teenager in 1944, and his guru, Yogaswami of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, who, as a young man of seventeen, saw Swami Vivekananda in Colombo upon his return from America in 1889.

Strictly speaking, the RK Mission is two institutions: the Ramakrishna Math, which is the monastic order and lays emphasis on religion and preaching; and the Ramakrishna Mission, which is a registered society dedicated to welfare services with a spiritual outlook. The trustees of the Math ("monastery") are senior monks. They also are the governing body of the Mission, and the administrative work of both is mostly in the hands of the monks. In the Mission work, devotees and well-wishers drawn from various walks of life are involved, especially those who have taken mantra

diksha, initiation, from the president or vice-presidents of the Order. In other countries, the term "Vedanta Society" is also used, but as the defining factor of all of these institutions is the monastic leadership of each individual center, it is common practice to call everything the "Ramakrishna Mission."

Swami Vivekananda was quite clear that he wanted the Mission centers staffed by monks (or in the case of centers for women, by nuns). One sign of the Mission's popularity is that devotees in many places in India and abroad have requested monks to be sent to run centers with insured support from the local community. But there are not enough monks to cover every such request, and during the huge 1980 Mission convention, Swami

Atmasthananda, then an assistant secretary of the Mission and now a vice-president, complained, "The number of monastics is extremely meagre. We are already committed to great responsibilities. Further, we are living in a fast-moving age. We need more qualified, more equipped and more learned monks. But the youth are rather shy to the life of renunciation in hundreds as wanted by Swami Vivekananda, and thus we have the acute problem of shortage of efficient man-power even to conduct the existing programs satisfactorily."

According to Swami Jyotirmayananda, an independent monk with ties to the RK Mission, "The shortage [felt in 1980] is not as severe after the centenary celebration of the Mission in 1997-98. There has been an increased awareness

of the Mission work, and more young men are coming. Previously, life in most of the monasteries was rather austere and not inviting. But today the situation is different. The monasteries are more affluent, and life not so austere. Also, young men are realizing the utter absurdity of what goes on in society and politics, and they want to find a more idealistic life."

The Mission is actively involved in social service through dozens of institutions, as instructed by Swami Vivekananda, who taught, "He who sees Siva in the poor, in the weak and in the diseased, really worships Siva, and if he sees Siva only in the image, his worship is but preliminary." In the 19th century, Christian missionaries heavily criticized Hindu institutions, especially the

monastic orders, for not being involved in social service. In past centuries, the welfare of Hindu society was the king's responsibility; that of monks was to follow their religious path. But with the defeat of the kings, new forms of government left great gaps in society, and "social service" by nongovernmental bodies became a necessity. So in the late 19th century, there was considerable pressure on Hindu religious institutions to respond. Several, including the RK Mission, then set patterns of social service in addition to the traditional contemplative and teaching life of the monks. The trend has continued, and the RSS and Vivekananda Kendra have evolved in a way that eliminated monasticism altogether to create social service institutions with a religious orientation.

Vivekananda knew the Christian missionary strategy: "Patients in one end of the hospital, converts out the other." And while he was acutely aware of the need to counter conversion [see page 23], he wanted the Mission's service to reflect the true spirit of Hinduism and proceed with equal respect for all faiths, without conversion as the goal, expressed or implied. This policy has gained the Mission widespread acceptance. Even the dozen centers in Bangladesh, built before India's partition, survive under the restrictive Muslim regime.

Education is a major part of the Mission's social service, and their schools in India receive considerable government money. According to the 1991 figures, 43 percent of the total RK Mission annual operating income in India came as government

grants, and nearly all for education. Ironically, these schools, though run by the RK Mission, cannot teach religion. Only schools run by minority religions (also supported by government funds) can so teach.

The consequences of accepting this government money came to a head in 1980 when, in order to circumvent government restrictions, RK Mission made the shocking claim in a court affidavit that they were a minority religion: "Ramakrishnaism,... clearly distinguished from all other cults or religions, including traditional Hinduism."

At issue was control of their schools in West Bengal, a communist-ruled state. In brief, the Mission could either give up

control of its schools, or they could seek protection from government interference under the constitution as a minority religion. Initially the Mission won, but, in a celebrated judgment by the Supreme Court of India, were formally declared "Hindus" in 1995. The issue was deeply disturbing to the Hindu public, for it appeared the heirs to the very symbol of resurgent Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda, had abandoned the faith. Even within the Order there was considerable debate. Today the Mission is relieved to have the matter closed. In response to the question, "What has been the greatest success of the RK Mission?" Swami Bhajanananda, Assistant Secretary of the Mission, replied, "The 1997 centenary of RK mission, the Youth and Devotees Convention of that year and the Supreme Court's judgment declaring Ramakrishna Mission monks to be Hindus." [See [www.hinduismtoday.kauai.hi](http://www.hinduismtoday.kauai.hi).

[us/Newspaper/NewsReleases/RKMission.html](#) for the final judgment text.]

With that behind them, there remains little criticism of the RK Mission, aside from complaints they can't respond to all the requests to set up new centers. According to Swami Jyotirmayananda, some "criticize that the Math doesn't follow the old type of dress, hair style, that they initiate swamis from all castes or that they are not vegetarians." Others, he said, "don't feel they are political enough." Occasionally they are criticized for worshiping the icon of Sri Ramakrishna himself in their

temples, instead of the image of God.

There is certainly one area of orthodoxy where the RK Mission has set an exemplary pattern: separation of monks and nuns. While many modern and even traditional ashrams have unmarried men and women living in the same ashram (with predictable results), the RK Mission has never done this. As a result no hint of scandal has fallen upon them in this regard, and their Orders, both of monks and nuns, have remained strong.

India is seeing more of her holy men and women delving in politics. Vivekananda not only forbade the Order from entering politics, he warned them to "have nothing to do with the rich." "To pay respects to the rich and hang on them for support," he once scolded, "is conduct becoming of a public woman, not one who professes to have renounced the world."

The RK Mission regards Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as saints of the highest order. They recognize a line of succession, of gurus, who are the presidents of the Order and could,

in extraordinary circumstances, act with complete authority to adjust the spiritual life of members. However, there is a great conscious effort, explained Swami Tyagananda of the Boston center, to avoid the promotion of personalities, to "have a voice without a face," as Vivekananda put it. Today few outside the RK Mission could name the president, but every Hindu and many non-Hindus know "Swami Vivekananda."

The Mission's future is bright: so many new monks coming in--38 this year, mostly college graduates--that they've

standardized a two-year training course at Belur headquarters for novices; so many requests to open centers that they can't fulfill them; and worldwide respect for their selfless social work. In a recent policy change, they are setting an example for India by forbidding corporal punishment in their schools. Expansion, such as seen in the new Ramakrishna temple in Chennai (above), is proceeding at a carefully regulated pace, their printing presses release new titles monthly, and they venture daily into cyberspace.

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## INTERNET

### Ramakrishna Swamis Get On-Line!

Computer-wise novice monks catapult the conservative India order onto the global Internet and connect members via e-mail

The fact that no young person in school today can be without a computer began to impact the RK Mission about ten years ago. Entering monks extolled to their saffron-clad elders the benefits of

e-mail, explained Swami Tyagananda, now at the Boston Ramakrishna-Vedanta Society. The cost advantages were obvious compared to the telephone, and now over 50 percent of all the RK centers in India and 100 percent in the rest of the world have e-mail. More recently, the centers are making use of the World Wide Web, with the Chennai Mission putting up its web site last February. Log onto [www.vedanta.org/cent/otherc.html](http://www.vedanta.org/cent/otherc.html) to get the best list of web and e-mail addresses for RK centers worldwide. Twenty have web sites, including "Nippon Vedanta Kyokai," [www.bekko.ame.ne.jp/~vedanta](http://www.bekko.ame.ne.jp/~vedanta) in Japanese and the Brazil center at

[www.geocities.com/Athens/Styx/4632/](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Styx/4632/) in Portuguese.

Most of the web sites allow for ordering of books, both in English and local languages, plus give the history of the RK Mission, local programs and history. The USA centers are the most wired, with only the Midwest centers of Chicago, St. Louis and Kansas City off the Net. Belur Mutt in Calcutta and the Chennai center, the two main publishing facilities in

India for RK Mission books, have small web sites at the moment. According to Swami Jnanadananda of Chennai, they have plans to add publications on-line over time.

One interesting site is called "Monastic Life" at the Vedanta Society of Southern California ([www.vedanta.org/monl/index.html](http://www.vedanta.org/monl/index.html)). There you'll find descriptions of the RK Mission monastic programs for monks and nuns, and a six-week

summer retreat program to "experience the lifestyle of monastic living" and "reflect on the meaning of life," among other aims. It also offers "Talk to a monastic," a wonderful service allowing those inclined toward monasticism to start learning about it. That'll be a boon for those like Swami Atmarupananda, one of the 25 or so American-born swamis. He said that in the 1970s it was quite difficult for him to find out how to join the Ramakrishna Mission Order of monks.