

‘MAHAMANDAL’ – A UNIQUE ORGANIZATION IN THE APPLICATION OF RAMAKRISHNA-VIVEKANANDA IDEAL

Swami Hitakamananda

Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Agartala, Tripura

As a new entrant in Ramakrishna Mission (December 1976) at one of its branch centres in Arunachal Pradesh I came in contact with two Mahamandal brothers who happened to be associated with it since its formative years. They were employees of the centre. One of them was extra-ordinary in his love for the institution and his dedication to duties assigned. He was a tireless and laborious worker for any number of necessary hours (seven days a week) throughout the year without any consideration to pay or increment. His only demand from his employer was just one month's leave in December. He used to spend this leave in working at the Mahamandal headquarters for organizing the Annual Youth Camp and would join the Ashrama duty invariably in the first week of January next. Literally he was more of a dedicated volunteer and less of an employee of the Mission. I liked the man and started inquiring about his organization, its objectives and method of youth training centred on the motto 'BE AND MAKE', and reading its monthly organ 'Vivek-Jivan'. The root of all my interest was the person himself because in my estimation he really understood and absorbed the ideal by transforming himself. Our association was only for two and a half years but the impression was deep in my psyche.

I had my next posting to the Manasadwip branch of Ramakrishna Mission at Sagar Islands in June 1981. An uncommon monk of the Ramakrishna Math, namely Swami Siddhidananda, was the head of this centre and I consider my association with him for just two years as very significant and a turning point of my monastic life. Sri Nabaniharan Mukhopadhyay, the founder Secretary of Mahamandal, used to hold this monk in very high esteem and at his request used to visit the Ashrama as guest lecturer in major celebrations almost every year. In addition, he used to accompany the Swami to many remote islands of Sundarbans where small annual celebrations were organized by small numbers of devotees, teachers, and youth organizations. They were to travel by rowing boats and peddle through knee deep mud to reach river banks. Most of the land trips were by van rickshaws. They were to adjust with very bad sanitary arrangements, ignore lack of electricity and many other obstacles, just to honour the great eagerness of remarkably hospitable village people to hear the nectar-like teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Ma Sarada, and Swami Vivekananda. Sri Nabaniharan had to come to these Islands twice generally and sometimes thrice to cover ten/twelve celebrations every year. To make the things convenient for the Mission, on many occasions he attended these celebrations by cancelling his previous assignments at Mahamandal units even.

Soon after Siddhidanandaji's transfer I was to accompany this lecture tour and to honour Swami Siddhidanandaji's request Nabaniharanbabu attended our programs in Sundarban Islands for another 16 years till his health broke down. This long association with

the founder Secretary of Akhil Bharat Vivekananda Yuva Mahamandal gave me a rare privilege to be acquainted with the basic principles of these youth movement. During our very slow movement together for three/four days at a stretch in each trip, we had enough time for questions and answers on a wide range of topics with Sri Nabaniharan, who is an authority on Swami Vivekananda's life and teachings, very well-read in our Hindu scriptures and the Ramakrishna Vivekananda literature, and, above all, an extra-ordinary writer, thinker, and organizer with startling qualities of head, heart, and hand. These personal interactions with Sri Nabaniharan were later followed by my many visits to Mahamandal Camps and its units as well as its city office, and the discussion I had with the pioneer team of Mahamandal.

I have been working for the last twenty three years with many small Ashramas established by devotees and followers of Ramakrishna Vivekananda, popularly called private Ashramas, many of which are members of Ramakrishna Vivekananda Bhava Prachar Parishad. Thereby I am in a position to compare between these Ashramas and the Mahamandal units, compare between the organizers of these two types of organization working on Ramakrishna Vivekananda ideals and their application in our society to make our life more meaningful.

With the above background and with my own experience in the Ramakrishna Mission for last 36 years I am convinced that Akhil Bharat Vivekananda Yuva Mahamandal is a unique organization among many others working on Ramakrishna Vivekananda ideal of man-making and character building with a view to attaining the ultimate goal of human life – *Realization of God*, as taught by Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna and exemplified in his own life. The uniqueness of Mahamandal lies in its focus to the motto “be and make” and whole range of training schedules planned around it. The concept of jumping straight into philanthropic activities in the name of practising “*shivajnane jivaseva*”, without strengthening the character with a balanced development of head, heart, and hand through the practice of truthfulness, self control, and unselfishness, has landed many organizations into turmoil and many lives into despair within a few years of beginning of these small philanthropic institutions. In fact, it surprises me that ABVYM has been able to maintain its focus to the basic principle of character-building for about five decades by overlooking the temptation of philanthropy and its captivating charm for personal propaganda under an organizational banner.

A person with good characteristic qualities as desired by Swami Vivekananda is an indispensable asset in any field of social activity related to family, business, production, marketing, politics, public institutions or in any organized body. On the other hand, a person without a strong character is unsafe and a source of problems everywhere. Hence, formation of character has been perceived by Swami Vivekananda as the panacea for rebuilding India by freeing it from all social maladies, individual or organizational. Unfortunately, very few leaders or organizations are serious about this concept. Swami Vivekananda was fond of labelling Ramakrishna Math as a *purity drilling machine*. In fact it is being run by the monastic successors of Swami Vivekananda in this vein only around the ideal of renunciation and service. As an individual of this great spiritual organization I have experienced how tempting or alluring the beckoning of name and fame and personal publicity under

organizational banner is. It is extremely difficult to keep the mind free from these blemishes. So I can guess to some extent how much more difficult it can be for people who do not get the training we get in Ramakrishna Math and who has to live and work in open society.

No man-made system is perfect. We have no other option than to adopt the comparatively better, less damaging, and more effective working model. I am convinced that for the practitioners of Ramakrishna Vivekananda ideal outside Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the Mahamandal's model of training the young boys and girls as well as the youth is a very effective one, though this activity is neither very popular nor at all charismatic. Let the trained youth work in any field of activity they prefer, but Mahamandal, as an organization, must not dilute its focus on man-making and character building and steer clear of the confused world of philanthropy and politics.