

# THE IDEA AND THE METHOD OF THE MAHAMANDAL

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What type of institution is Akhil Bharat Vivekananda Yuva Mahamandal? Is it a religious institution, a cultural institution, a social-service organization, or an educational institution?

Swami Vivekananda was monk; he preached religion. So it may appear that the Mahamandal has something religious about it, as it is in the name of Swami Vivekananda. If, taking one's cue from this 'something religious', one asks whether the Mahamandal is a religious institution, the answer will be, 'No.' But, if mention is made of, or attention is pointed to, what is the core of religion, what religion really means, then the Mahamandal is, of course, a religious institution. This religion is, however, no religion of any narrow boundary. This is not at all the religion of the Hindus (among the Hindus of the *Vaishnavites*, the *Shaktas*, or of the *Shaivites*) alone, nor of the Muslims, nor the Buddhists, nor the Christians. This is so, because Ramakrishna or Vivekananda does not belong to any particular religion. They are the founders of the harmony of all religions. Tolerance was altogether absent from the domain of religion – and whether it is still there is open to doubt. In this respect, they are the eye-openers of the people of the world. Tolerance is very important. For, taking into account clime and time, different religions have risen among different groups of men. But man has a 'dharma', duties, aspirations, and yearnings in life. And the way to the fulfillment of these aspirations, yearnings is the way of religion. To people to whom this occurs, there is no difference between Hindus, Muslims, or Christians.

Swami Vivekananda has dwelt on this matter deeply and elaborately. According to him, one gets to religion only when one conquers one's inner nature and outer nature. This gives strength – real strength – and that is why this is true religion. So, religion is that which lifts a creature from the level of the brute to that of man, and then from the level of man to that of the divine. There is no room for different religions here. It is the same in all cases, and anything contrary to it is no religion. Every religion prescribes that man should curb and shed his animality and develop his human qualities. Any man who has thus become religious would appear as a God – be he an imaginary God ! In imagination, we retain only that which is prized – such as cannot be had in the day –to day world. Our imagination is not gratified with the beauty, the physical features, and the nature of man we usually come across in society. That is why we attribute to our idea of God the infinitely developed forms of human qualities. And so we want to make a God out of man. This is a common strain in every religion of the world. Judged from this angle, the Mahamandal is also practicing religion. But as temple, rituals, and worship have no place in the Mahamandal, it is not a religious institution on that account.

Nowadays, to many, culture usually means dance, music, drama, stories, novels, or some unintelligible paintings, or poems. The Mahamandal does not bother about such an interpretation of culture. In that sense, the Mahamandal is certainly not a cultural institution. If a man is really cultured, he does not look at the world the way animals do. With the unfoldment of his manhood, there blooms in him a tender faculty for appreciation of beauty. The practical usefulness of a thing does not in itself satisfy him. He looks for inner beauty in things. By such constant striving the mirror of his mind becomes clear. And he acquires the capacity to find beauty in the world, in nature, in things, in thought, and in all living creatures. This is indeed a spiritual quality. If understood in this way, the Mahamandal is surely for culture, but in no way is it so according to the common connotation of culture as above.

An analysis in the same way will reveal that the Mahamandal is not even a social service organization with the common connotation. Why? A social service organization generally undertakes some welfare activity in the society – it renders assistance to people in various ways. Nowadays, rural development has become an item of social service. Normally assistance is rendered to the destitute – food to the hungry, medicines to the ailing, clothes to the unclad, and so on and so forth. These are good works. But the Mahamandal is not just for such types of work. For this kind of work, there is a multitude of organizations at local, national, and international levels all over the world. They are patronized by the national governments, various international agencies, and also the general public. What special justification can there be to have one more organization of this type?

But there is still a place for social service in the Mahamandal. This social service is, however, of a special type. This is so, because Vivekananda himself had developed the idea. Service through providing food to the unfed, clothes to the unclad, medicines to the ailing was no doubt suggested by Swamiji. But the work on which he laid special emphasis is providing good ideas to the people: ideas that help man grow to become better individuals. In our families and societies, there are really poor. Poor are not only those who have no money and cannot make both ends meet. One who suffers from want or inadequacy of good ideas is also poor. According to Swamiji, to serve such poor people is the highest of all kinds of social service. The Mahamandal particularly addresses itself to this higher type of social service as pointed out by Swamiji. The Mahamandal does not have for its object fulfilment of any individual or collective desire, where, not unoften, gratification of the ego becomes the main urge for practising generosity. Nowadays very often social service springs from such a mentality. I have something and I give self-satisfaction and ego-gratification. That is why there is so much of publicity newspapers, radio, television, etc. for all types of social service activities, including even distribution of rugs ! This is not, of course, what Swamiji taught. Had it been so, people would not have kept him so fresh their in their memory with the veneration, respect, and love that he commands even today. Many have been born on this earth, who have drawn up schemes for social service of the above description, and success has also been theirs. But they do not live long in human memory. Pioneers among men, leaders of races, venerated personalities like Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Mohammad, Chaitanya, Ramakrishna are remembered by mankind for the fact that each of them has given to the world such

invaluable ideas as have proved to be most effective for the real benefit of man through ages, though all of them did not found new sects themselves. For progress towards perfection, towards complete elimination of all wants through positive ideas, men who lack them have drawn inspiration from the lives and precepts of these great souls.

The Mahamandal does not claim that it will meet all the needs of society. But the youths of today do not have ideas that are necessary for building up their lives. More often than not, the youths of the country do not get from the existing system of education those invaluable ideas necessary for life-building. Of course, there are some teachers who, beyond the pale of text-books, hold before their pupils some lessons from their own lives and experiences. This they do, so that the students may feel inspired and impelled to build their lives properly. It is due to the existence of a few such teachers with the spirit of renunciation and service that even today some youths are growing as the real wealth of the country. When these limited few will also not be there, and all will be drawn into the vortex of trade-unionism, then will it really be a day of great misfortune for the nation. The number of mindful guardians is also dwindling fast. It is by realizing this that the Mahamandal has taken up the mission of meeting this want. So, if at all an epithet is to be used to indicate what type of organization this Mahamandal is, instead of calling it a religious, cultural, or social service organization, the Mahamandal should be called an educational institution.

If now the question is asked, whether the Mahamandal intends to establish schools and colleges for spreading ideal education on some particular model, the answer is again, 'No.' Many are trying to implement plans for imparting education by establishing schools and colleges, but they also meet with failure. Even if proper care is taken about content and method of education – if that could at all be possible – any plan for such ideal education is doomed to failure, on account of the fact that teachers will come either from employment exchanges or with political backing, and the plan will remain on paper only. So, as things stand today, there is no use multiplying schools and colleges with possible government grants, as, understandably, labour and money spent for the purpose would go waste without yielding the desired benefit. That is why the Mahamandal wants to do the same job of imparting the right kind of education, not by multiplying such institutions with public money, but by working on the principle: 'If the boy does not come to education, education must go to the boy.' So, the task of the Mahamandal is to spread its centres everywhere – in villages and towns. If there is any boy who will not come to any of those centres, the Mahamandal will go to his home with a supply of those ideas which he needs badly, without which he cannot grow properly and becomes rickety and weak, bodily and morally. Such man-making ideas, when made available, will help him grow in all respects and make him strong and healthy.

Dwelling on this idea, Swamiji says that man has three elements, which are his sources of power – body, mind, and heart ; when there is harmonious development of all these three elements, one becomes a real man. It is this task that the Mahamandal has chosen to perform.

Physical exercise for fitness and development of the body, practice of mental concentration to gain control over the mind, to increase its effective power, and at the same time acquiring the capacity to make it one-pointed are included in the daily routine

for Mahamandal youths. But, if strength of body and mind is our sole possession, it would not be possible for us to make much headway in the matter of welfare of human society. For that, heart needs to be added to the other powers. The heart that is sympathetic should be expanded. But how? What is the method of expanding the heart? As one of its methods comes social service. Of course, as a method of expanding heart, social service is not to be performed in the spirit of common place charity. We should serve with respect, with feeling that every creature, every man is a temple in the true sense. People are in distress, in difficulty, and their real divinity is not manifested. Therefore, just as we cleanse a temple, make sandal wood paste, pluck flowers, and decorate the temple and he deity to make everything there beautiful, in order to feel the divine presence, so also our social service should be leavened with holiness and sincere feeling to make the manifestation of the divinity already in the man in distress possible by offering the same attention, purity, love, reverence, and awe that we usually have for the deity in the temple. So, it would not be fair to evaluate the worth of the social service schemes now in operation at various units of the Mahamandal merely on the basis of the volume of work, money involved, or outward show. Proper evaluation of such work can be made only through assessment of the motive and the depth of feeling of the worker and then from the number of such workers engaged in the sort of work, which would give them a spiritual boost.

All-round development and unfoldment of the being through constant striving for the highest excellence of body, mind, and heart are the essence of true education, which in a way is the same thing as true religion or spirituality. This spirituality does not concern a different world from ours or freely a world beyond death. Through strivings to manifest in their lives real religion, serious and sincere men have discovered some clear-cut ways in every age, and these have, in course of time, become traditional. These 'paths of religion' are also called '*Yogas*'. There are four principal *yogas* in our tradition, viz. '*Jnana yoga*', '*Raja yoga*', '*Bhakti yoga*', and '*Karma yoga*'. Swami Vivekananda observed that religion means conquering our inner nature as also the nature outside by resorting to one or more or all of the above *yogas*. Swamiji has also said that when our inner power is brought under our control, it becomes easy to exercise control over outer nature. According to him, the most effective and perfect path can be had by harmonizing and integrating all these four *yogas*. One who takes to this integral path of self-development is endowed in full with the fruits of all these four individual paths, and his development in all directions comes about simultaneously.

In short, *Jnana yoga* is the path of discrimination. The way enjoins discriminating, telling apart by the application of the power of discernment, the good from the evil, the eternal from the transient, the abiding from the ephemeral. And by exercising judgement in this way, one can attain to what is eternal and real, the ultimate truth.

A *Raja yogi* lays the greatest stress on the power of the mind. With him, the mind is everything : and if it could be rid of all its agitations by calming it and bringing it under absolute control, truth reveals itself, he claims. This is his path to realize the truth.

To a *Bhakta* it seems that there is no need for queer exercises of the body, the mind, or the intellect, none for breath-control or any kind of mortification. Should any feat be called for, be it a feat of the heart. That I would love to perform. I shall open my heart

and hold it up to God, my Beloved. By whatever name or in whatever name or in whatever way we may like to invoke Him, there is something which is the ultimate truth and whose essence is love itself. Had there been nothing of the kind, how could sprout this little bud of love in me? Had there been none who is full of love and whose nature is love, how could in me surge that love which refuse to be dammed up, which disdains to remain confined within oneself, which longs to open the floodgate to embrace all? It is He whom some call Allah, some God, some Siva, or some Kali. Some, in imagination thinking him God in Haven see Him seated on the throne there. The person practicing *Bhakti yoga* says, 'Rather than realizing truth by exercising discrimination, controlling the mind, or practicing austerity, I will seek truth through love, exhausting my limited love on Him who is all some and seeing myself at one with the world at large. By offering love, I will myself become all.'

The *Karma-yogi* does not like any of these modes. According to him, there is no need to exercise discrimination or to become emotionally surcharged and keep the heart open, waiting for God. In his opinion, to remain idle is not at all proper. The fact that we have the power to work, the power to move has a significance of its own. By the application of this power to work, we can have perfection and fulfilment of our lives. The *Karma-yogi*, working with his method in pursuit of perfection comes to realize that real happiness can be had only when the work is done not for self-pleasure or self-enjoyment. Sri Krishna reminds us of the fruits of *Karma-yoga* in the *Gita*. Selfless work done for the good of others bestows on the careful worker the fruits of knowledge. The *Karma-yogi*, by renouncing self-interest and sacrificing himself, attains to truth that is realized through *Jnana yoga*. For, he feels that he and others are not different. His awareness of this identity is in perfect accord with the truth, which the lover discovers through his love for God, the man of knowledge or one who discriminates discovers through his discrimination, and the *yogi* discovers through the control of his mind.

These being the four principal methods of seeking truth and attaining it, a person who can apply all these methods in his life equally and properly and can taste the ultimate truth in every possible way is according to Swami Vivekananda, the ideal man. Sri Ramakrishna, too, has said, 'Why should I just have one taste of an edible? There may be so many preparations of the same fish.'

With our limited capacity in the sphere of the Mahamandal, we would strive, according to the ideas and guidance of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, to synthesize *Jnana*-discrimination, control of the mind, indiscriminate love, and selfless work. Then only will our development become all-round and complete. It may be that love for men will grow in our heart, sympathy may also be awakened; but, if we are not able workers, we cannot strive to remove their sufferings. Again, engaging oneself in removing others' distress through service would not ultimately be fruitful, if the mind, while at the work, is in a disturbed state and cannot think clearly, or if power of concentration is not achieved through practice of control of the mind. Again, before thinking, speaking, or doing anything, discrimination is to be exercised to see whether it is good or bad. To stimulate that power of judgement, cultivation of the knowledge-path is necessary.

But we need employ discrimination to the extent a true Vedantist does, equating Ganga water and ditch-water. We may strive for developing our capacity for discrimination by a

simple process. We may study and contemplate on the great lives and teachings of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda. Through constant cultivation of those thoughts, power of discrimination and judgement is awakened, and this gives one the capacity to discern between right and wrong, real and unreal, good and evil. Poise and tranquility of the mind, without which we are often led to wrong judgement and love that wells up in our heart cannot be translated into action, can be ensured through regular practice of mental concentration and prayer for the well-being of all. And for expansion of our heart, to stir up our sympathy to feel for others' woes, to stimulate our devotion, which is nothing but love extended universally, striving is necessary. The study and cultivation suggested for acquiring the capacity for discrimination will also help in expansion of our heart. They have to be followed by our exposure to the environment of suffering and actual service rendered to achieve the object.

When a man, equipping himself with such faculties of the heart and intellect, with power of the mind and practical efficiency, steps into the society, fired with the inspiration to devote his life for the real well-being of man, his work becomes a little different centres for making such worthy, healthy, strong, thoughtful, and sympathetic men. In different villages and towns, each of such youth individually and all in unison give practical shape to the life-giving ideas of Swami Vivekananda.

In the view of the Mahamandal, this is the way of synthesizing the four *yogas* to transcend animality in man and to stride for full manhood. This is the way in which the Mahamandal, without being a common religious, cultural, social-service, or educational institution, is continuing its work for the last twenty years for true religion, culture, social welfare, and education with the resolve to build a better society of better men. This indeed is the work of the Mahamandal.