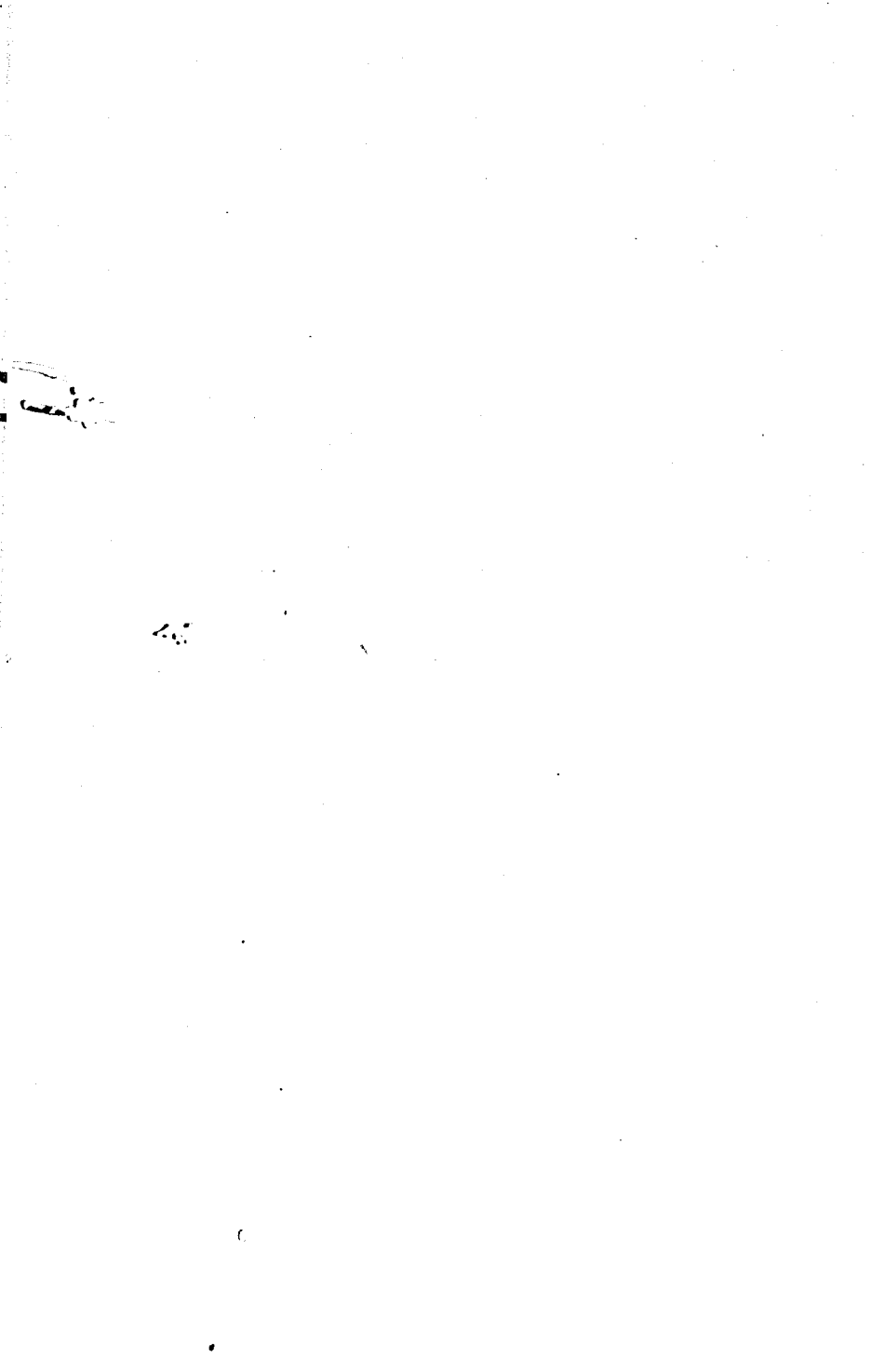




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# Ramakrishna and his Disciples

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# RAMAKRISHNA and his Disciples

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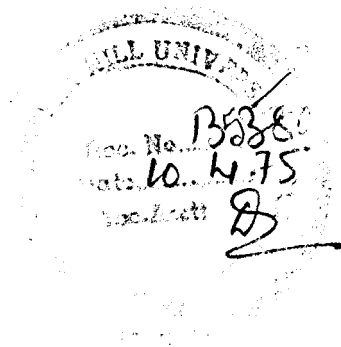


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*to*  
*Swami Prabhavananda*

This book is dedicated – indeed, one may say it dedicates itself – to Swami Prabhavananda, head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, my *guru*, dear friend and literary collaborator for the past twenty-five years. It was he who asked me to write it, and who has helped me with his advice and encouragement throughout the writing.

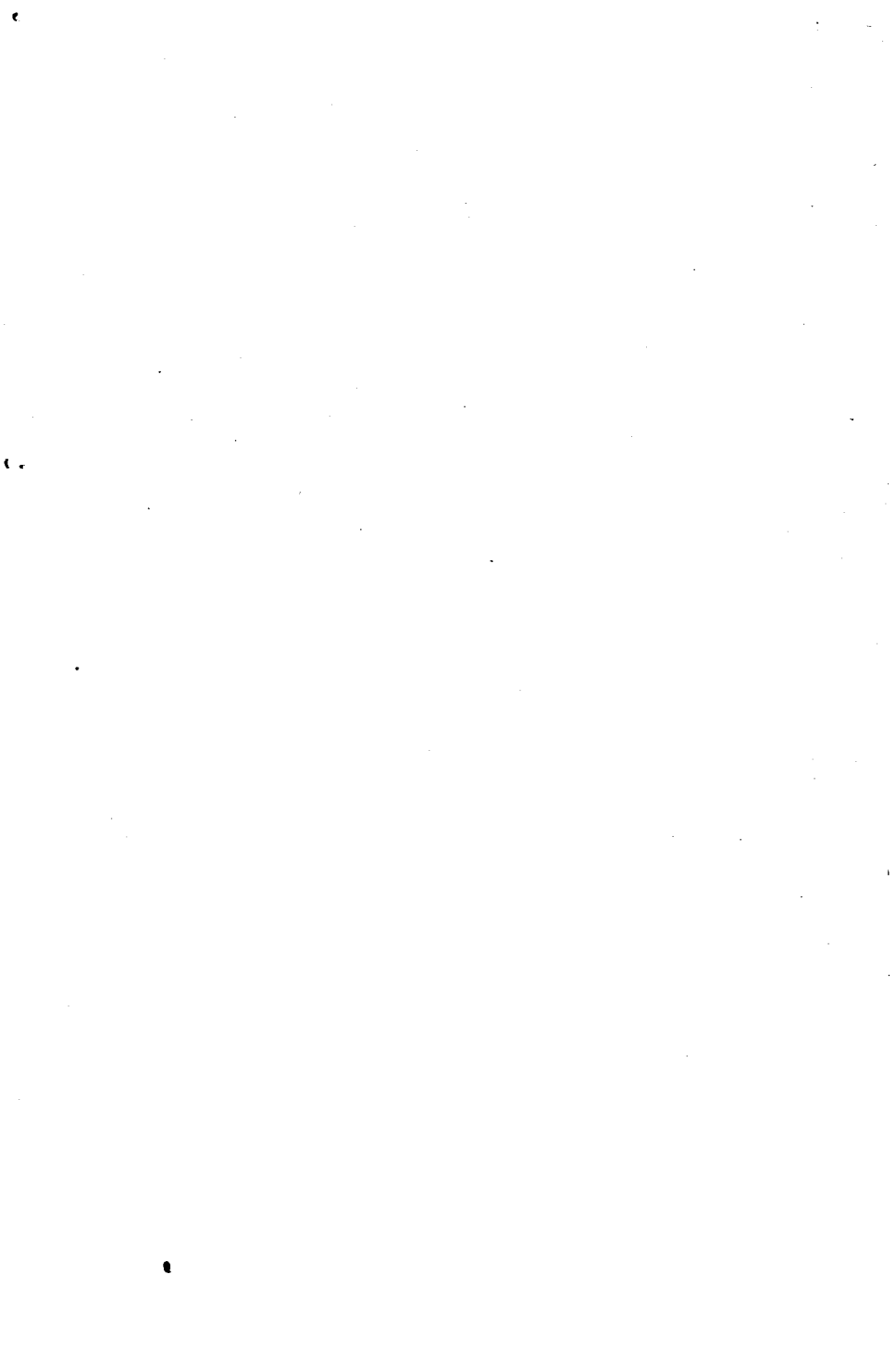
I owe great gratitude to Swami Madhavananda, head of the Ramakrishna Order, who read the manuscript chapter by chapter as it was sent to him at the Belur Math in Bengal, and supplied me with most valuable corrections, added information and comments.

From first to last, I have had constant help from John Yale (now Swami Vidyatmananda). While in India recently, he verified many details, collected illustrations for this book and compiled the explanatory notes on them which are printed in an appendix.

Here, at our centre in Los Angeles, I must also thank Swami Vandanananda, Ursula Bond (Pravrajika Anandaprana) and the many other members of the group who have shared in the work of this project.

C. I.

September, 1964



## Preface

---

This new Life of Sri Ramakrishna by Mr. Christopher Isherwood, a writer of world-wide repute, enjoys certain advantages over the other two biographies of Sri Ramakrishna, written by the great Western savants Max Müller in 1898 and Romain Rolland in 1929. In the first place, both of them wrote as distant admirers, whereas Mr. Isherwood has an intimate knowledge of Vedanta and Hindu ways of life and has to his credit a number of books and articles on these subjects. He approaches Sri Ramakrishna with love and devotion just like any Hindu, and at the same time deals with his subject in the scientific spirit of a Western investigator. He has taken the active help and guidance of two senior monks of the Ramakrishna Order for collecting his materials and verifying their authenticity. And his two visits to India placed him mentally in the actual atmosphere and surroundings in which Sri Ramakrishna lived.

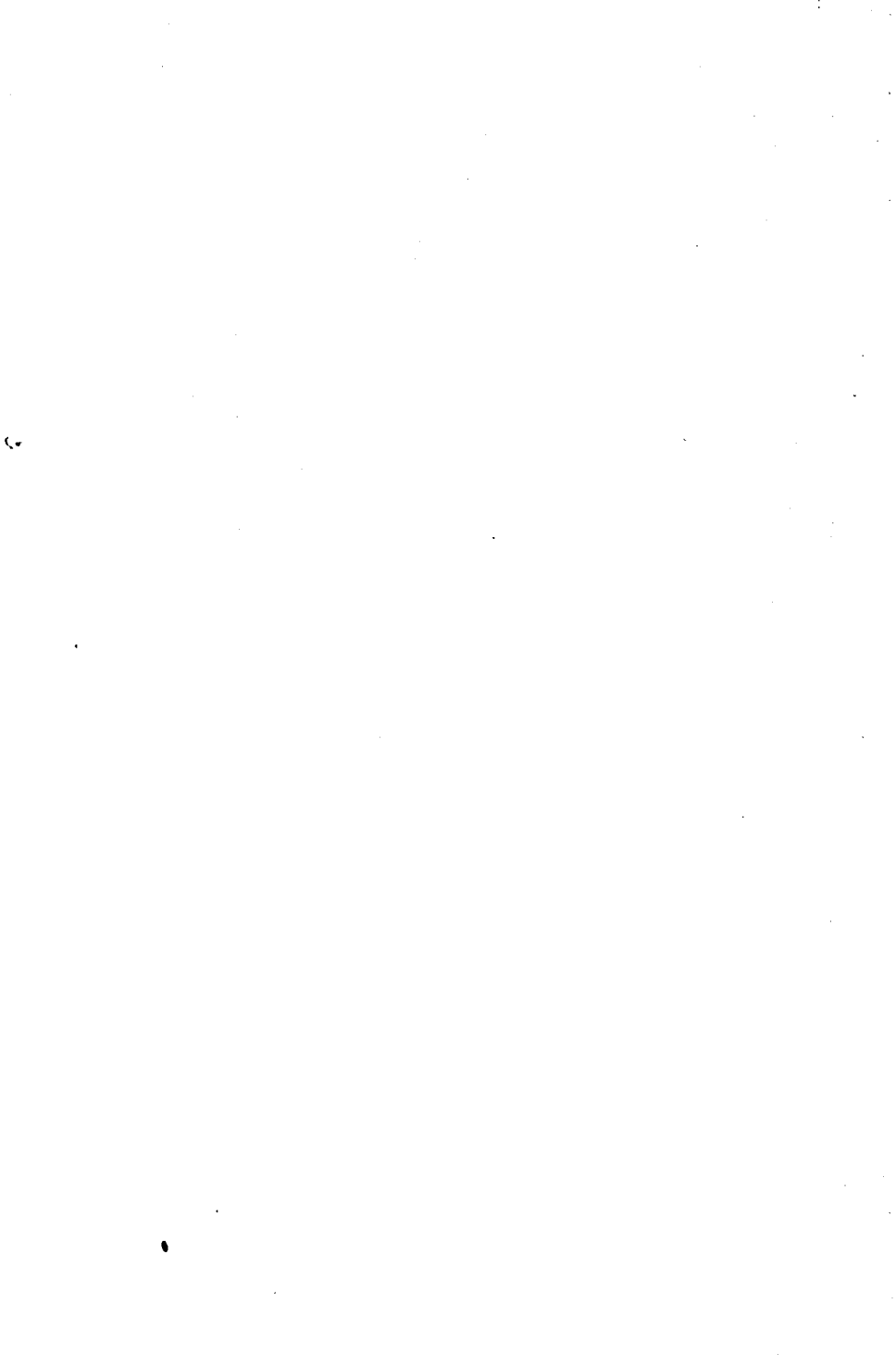
Secondly, he had the complete advantage of possessing the two source books in translation – Swami Saradananda's *Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga* and M's *Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, which were not available at the time of Max Müller and only partially available to Rolland.

Thirdly, the impact of the spiritual genius of Sri Ramakrishna on the modern world is better understood today than when the earlier two wrote on him. Added to these is Mr. Isherwood's inimitably arresting yet simple style and a great number of illustrations, some of them hitherto unpublished, which make the biography really vivid.

We do hope that this new publication will receive from the public the enthusiastic welcome it deserves.

Sri Ramakrishna's Birthday  
March 1965

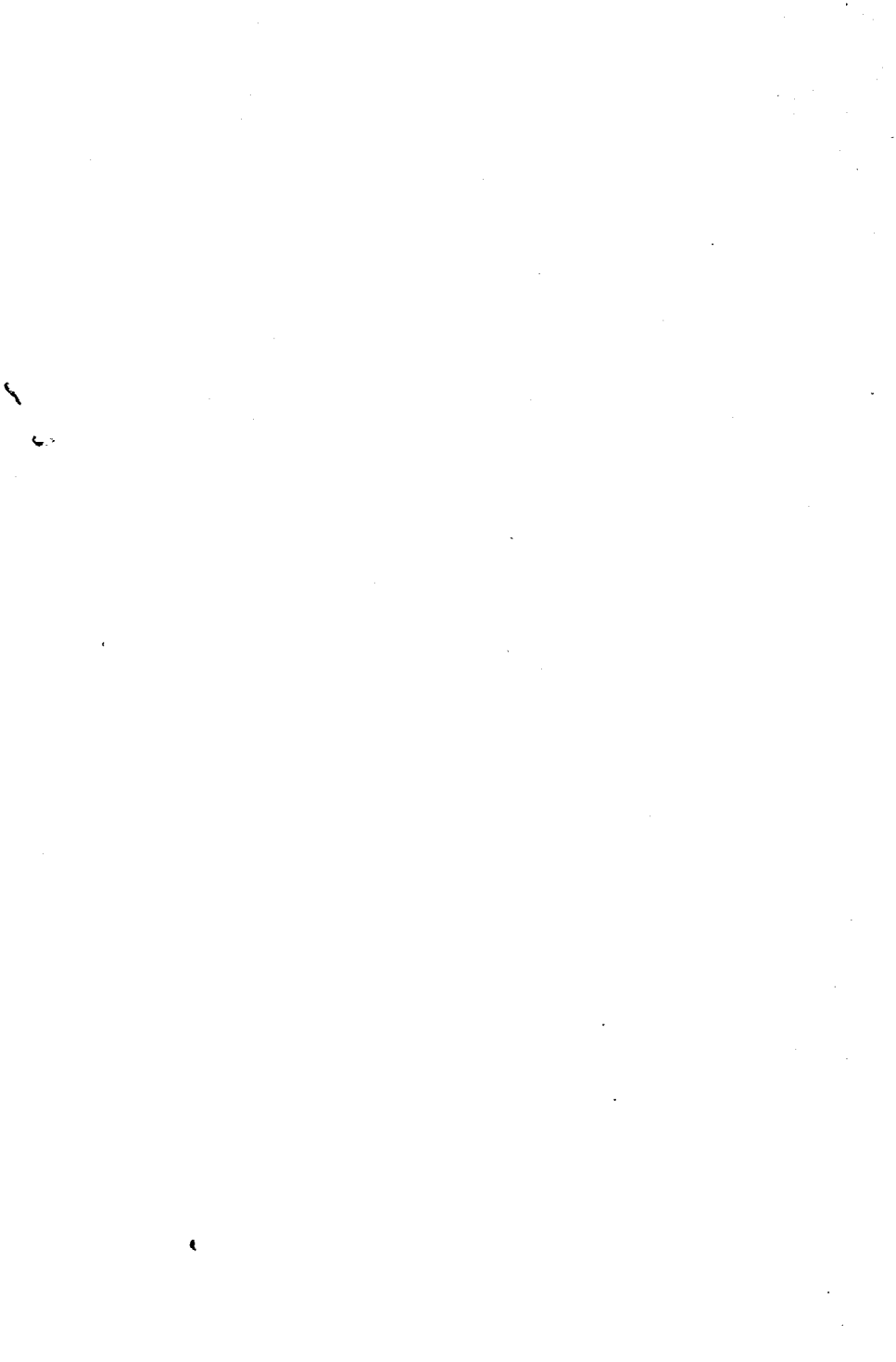
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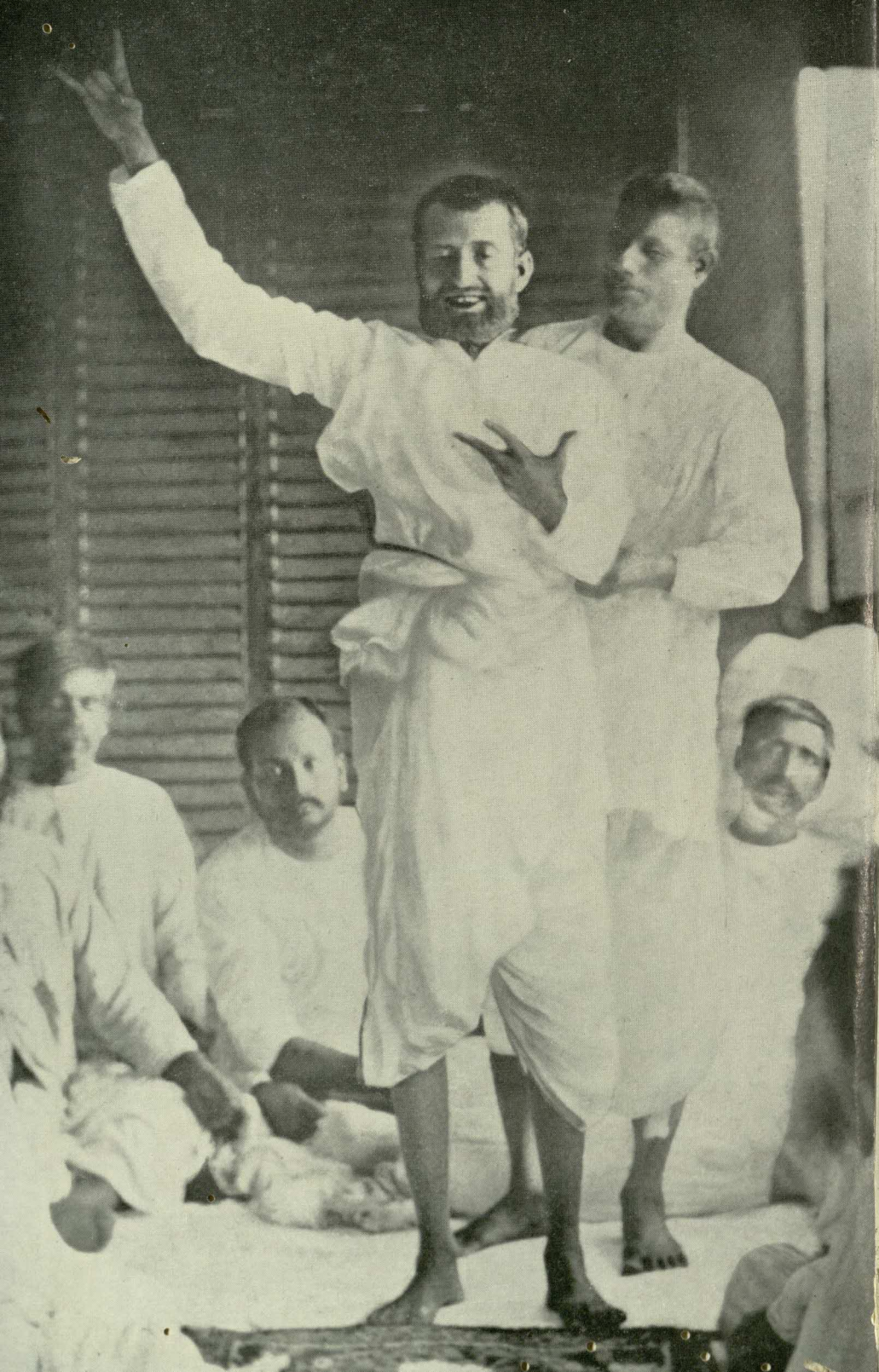
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# I

## The Story Begins

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This is the story of a phenomenon.

I will begin by calling him simply that, rather than 'holy man', 'mystic', 'saint', or 'avatar'; all emotive words with mixed associations which may attract some readers, repel others.

A phenomenon is often something extraordinary and mysterious. Ramakrishna was extraordinary and mysterious; most of all to those who were best fitted to understand him. A phenomenon is always a fact, an object of experience. That is how I shall try to approach Ramakrishna.

Modern advertising has inflated our value-judgements until they are nearly worthless. Every product and person is said by its publicist to be the best. I want to avoid the competitive note here so I will say only this: Ramakrishna's life, being comparatively recent history, is well documented. In this respect, it has the advantage over the lives of other, earlier phenomena of a like nature. We do not have to rely, here, on fragmentary or glossed manuscripts, dubious witnesses, pious legends. What Ramakrishna was or was not the reader must decide for himself; but at least his decision can be based on words and deeds Ramakrishna indubitably spoke and did.

You will find a full bibliography at the end of the book. But I must also mention here the two great works which provide almost all of my source material. This book is really no more than an introduction to them, and I shall quote from them and paraphrase them throughout it. One is *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by M.; the other is *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* by Swami Saradananda. M. is the pseudonym of Mahendra Nath Gupta, the headmaster of a Calcutta high school, who first met Ramakrishna in 1882 and thereafter visited him regularly during the remaining four years of Ramakrishna's life.

## The Birth of Ramakrishna

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Soon after the move to Kamarpukur, Khudiram had the first of a series of spiritual experiences which were to be granted to him and to his wife Chandra during the years that followed. Since such experiences, in all their variety, are to be a recurring theme in this story, I will make some general remarks about them now.

When we use the word 'experience' in its primary sense, we mean – to quote the dictionary – 'the process or fact of personally observing, encountering or undergoing something'. That is to say, experience is valued because it is personal; being contrasted favourably with hearsay or the information got from newspapers and books. Experiences are held to be more or less important according to the intensity of their effect on the experienter.

These two factors – the personal nature of experience and its measurement by intensity – are most significant when we come to consider the kind of experience called spiritual.

If someone tells me about an experience he has had in the world of ordinary sense-perception, I shall usually be able to decide whether he is speaking the truth or lying. I can do this because I can almost always relate the experience he describes to similar experiences of my own. And so his experience is of value to me. But if someone tells me about an experience in the spiritual world I shall probably be in doubt, because I have no similar experiences to which I can relate his. Unless, for other reasons, I have become convinced that this person will never lie to me, his experience will therefore be of no value to me. Many of my readers will know that sense of sad frustration with which one listens to some spiritual testimony one longs to believe in but can't, because the witness is so obviously dishonest. It is human nature to pretend to know a little more than you really do. But, alas,

### 3

## The Boyhood of Ramakrishna

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The art of astrology has been practised in India since ancient times; and today it is still customary to cast the horoscope of a newborn child. Khudiram was a skilled astrologer, so he was able to do this for Gadadhar. In later years, several well-known astrologers entirely confirmed his findings.

The horoscope was extraordinarily auspicious. It showed that Gadadhar would live in a temple, surrounded by disciples; that he would found a new institution for teaching religion, and that he would be revered for generations to come. All this was, of course, no more than a confirmation of the message received by Khudiram and Chandra in their visions. It might be supposed, then, that their belief in the divine mission of their son would now have been established beyond all doubt. Khudiram and Chandra were great devotees, and their faith was strong; but they were also parents, and they worried over their latest child just as much as any other couple in the village might have done.

Most of their anxiety proved to be groundless, however. This strange new guest in the form of a baby did not have to go hungry. Khudiram had a nephew named Ramchand, who lived in the town of Midnapur, not far distant to the southwest; and Ramchand was both well-to-do and generous. When he heard of Gadadhar's birth, he at once sent his uncle the present of a cow, so that a supply of fresh milk was assured.

And so it was whenever help was needed; helpers were not lacking. This was demonstrated when the time came to perform the ceremony of *anna-prasana*. *Anna-prasana* is a very important event in the life of a young Hindu child; it is the occasion on which he or she is given rice to eat for the first time – generally at the age of six or eight months

## How Ramakrishna Came to Dakshineswar

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In those days, the city of Calcutta was the seat of British rule in India and the main port of entry for the ideas and culture of the West. The changes that were taking place in India, for the worse and for the better, all had their beginnings there. In making the journey from Kamarpukur to Calcutta, Gadadhar had passed from the timelessness of village life into the very midst of contemporary history.

The year of his arrival, 1852, was only five years away from the end of an epoch in Anglo-Indian relations. In 1857 came the Mutiny. (Now officially called by Indian historians The First War of Indian Independence. I use the old offensive name with apologies; because it will be familiar to most of my readers.) The following year, the powers of the East India Company were formally abolished and the government of India was transferred to the British Crown. Thus the responsibility for what was done in India was placed directly upon the British Parliament and people. And thus, very slowly, events began to open up the long, bloody path which was to lead to independence.

Already, during the pre-Mutiny period, there had been much bloodshed in many parts of the land, as the process of annexation went relentlessly forward. In 1852, the British went to war with Burma for the second time and seized one of her maritime provinces. But all this violence seemed relatively remote from Calcutta itself, where the British had been peacefully established for more than seventy years. They had built an imposing European Quarter – ‘a city of palaces’, one contemporary traveller called it; while another was reminded of St John’s Wood in London. Its architecture was predominantly neo-classical; the larger mansions had stately columns and massive porticoes, and their rooms were vast, airy and scantily furnished in order to lessen the heat. Here, the social life was elegant and excessively formal. The

## Early Days at Dakshineswar

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In the main features of its appearance, the Dakshineswar temple-compound has not changed since the time of its completion, rather more than a hundred years ago. Today it is still one of the most impressive landmarks on that part of the Ganges. (Another is the Belur Math Monastery which is the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Order.) The view of Dakshineswar, looking upriver from the south, has now been blocked by a large metal bridge which connects the banks just below the temple grounds. But the devotee of Ramakrishna can take at least some satisfaction from the fact that this bridge, which used to be named after Lord Willingdon, one of the last viceroys, has been renamed the Vivekananda Bridge, in honour of Ramakrishna's great disciple.

Nowadays, the temple-compound is not as well kept as one could wish. The surface of the tiled courtyard is rough and broken. The gardens are no longer well cared for. Some of the buildings have been attacked by the rot which so easily takes hold in this humid tropical climate. Crowds of children and adults beg, try to sell you souvenirs or to take charge of the shoes which you are obliged to remove and leave at the entrance of the sacred precincts. However, these are minor disadvantages. The visitor must be thankful that so much remains intact of the setting of Ramakrishna's adult life.

Part of the land which the Rani bought for the temple grounds was once a Moslem cemetery, which was associated with the memory of a Moslem holy man. It is convex in shape; and such a formation – described as resembling the back of a tortoise – is said by the Scriptures to be particularly suitable for the worship of *Shakti*, the female principle within the Godhead. Adjoining the temple property to the north, there was a lot which the British owned and used, during Ramakrishna's time, for storing ammunition.

## The Vision of Kali

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Thus it was that, at the age of twenty, Ramakrishna suffered a second great bereavement. Ramkumar had been even more than an elder brother to him; he had stood, especially during the past four years, in the place of Ramakrishna's father.

The young man's mind now turned altogether away from the world and its impermanence, towards the one resource which he believed to be unfailling. He became passionately resolved to obtain a vision of Kali the Divine Mother – to know the Reality within the image he worshipped daily in the shrine. Obsessed by the love he felt for Kali and by his desire to see her, he spent every moment that he could in the temple. And when its doors had to be closed, according to custom, at midday and at night, he avoided the company of others and wandered off alone into the jungle thickets which covered the northern end of the temple property.

Hriday now became concerned, for he saw that Ramakrishna was neither sleeping nor eating sufficiently. And he knew that his uncle was in the habit of going off into the jungle – a thing which nobody else at Dakshineswar would willingly do, especially at night. Since the place had formerly been a graveyard, you might expect to meet ghosts there.

One night, the devoted youth put aside his own fears and followed Ramakrishna at a distance. In order to scare him into turning back, Hriday threw some pebbles and gravel after him. They fell around Ramakrishna, who ignored them and went on into the thicket. The next day, Hriday asked his uncle outright what he had been doing in such a sinister spot, in the middle of the night. Ramakrishna then explained to him that an *amalaki* tree (which bears an astringent plum-like fruit) grew there, and that, according to the Scriptures, anyone who

## The Marriage of Ramakrishna

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Shortly after this, Ramakrishna gave up performing the worship in the Kali Temple. It is written in the Bhagavad-Gita that, as a man progresses along the path of spiritual development, his acts will 'fall from him'; in other words, the performance of rituals and the observance of other religious duties will become less and less necessary for his spiritual welfare. Ramakrishna used to express this truth as follows: 'The mother-in-law allows her daughter-in-law to eat all kinds of food and do all kinds of work, until she conceives. But, as soon as she's with child, one must be a little careful about the kind of work and food she is given; and later, when her pregnancy is far advanced, her work is strictly limited. Just before childbirth, she doesn't have to work at all. And, when the baby is born at last, she has nothing to do but play with it.'

Ramakrishna's devotion to the Divine Mother was now so great that external acts of worship had become unnecessary. He was worshipping the Mother in spirit, wherever he happened to be and whatever else he was doing. Sometimes, it seemed to him that he had no separate existence from her at all; he would take flowers and sandalwood and decorate his own body, instead of her image. And if this sense of communion with her ceased for even a few moments, his agony would be so intense that he would throw himself down, wailing, and rub his face against the earth until it bled.

Mathur observed Ramakrishna's behaviour with mixed feelings. One half of his mind had decided that Ramakrishna was not only sane but super-sane, a being who could see the real nature of things in clearer perspective than ordinary mortals. But the other half of Mathur's mind persisted in regarding Ramakrishna as a sadly eccentric and

## The Coming of the Bhairavi

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As soon as he was back at Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna resumed the performance of worship in the Kali Temple; but he did not continue it for long. After a few days, his awareness of the Mother's presence overwhelmed him once more, and he was unable to attend to any external duties. His earlier symptoms returned; the blood flushed his chest, his body burned, he could not sleep. But now, as he said himself, he could regard these symptoms more objectively, and they did not seriously alarm him.

They alarmed Mathur, just as much as before. Again a doctor was consulted; new but equally ineffective medicines were prescribed. One day, however, when Mathur took Ramakrishna to the doctor's house in Calcutta, a colleague happened to be present. He too examined Ramakrishna and declared: 'It seems to me that the patient's condition is due to some kind of spiritual excitement – medicine won't cure him.' Ramakrishna used to say in after-years that this doctor was the first member of the medical profession to understand his condition. But the doctor's opinion was disregarded by his colleague and by Mathur.

When the news reached Kamarpukur that Ramakrishna had seemingly suffered a mental relapse, Chandra was in despair. Since all her planning and her financial sacrifices appeared to have been in vain, she decided that she must now risk the sacrifice of her own life. She must practise the fast called *prayopavesana*, in which the devotee throws himself down before the deity in the shrine and remains there until his prayer is granted or he dies of starvation. Chandra attempted to practise *prayopavesana* first at a Shiva shrine at Kamarpukur. But a vision directed her to approach Shiva in another temple, in the neighbouring village of Mukundapur; so there she recommenced her fast. After two

## Some Visitors to Dakshineswar

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Until the Bhairavi came to Ramakrishna, he had been living alone, as it were, in the midst of a crowd. Many people at the Dakshineswar Temple had learned to love him, but not one of them was sufficiently advanced in his own spiritual life to be able to understand the nature of Ramakrishna's struggle. The very object of sadhana – to obtain direct, unitive knowledge of God – can be, for most of us, only a hopeful phrase. It is not merely that we could never dare to attempt – we can scarcely even imagine – the supreme act of ego-surrender, surrender of all individual identity, through which God is known. And if we *can* dimly imagine it for a few moments at a time, it must appear to us as appalling as death itself; a leap into the utter void.

In the first phase of Ramakrishna's sadhana, he is finding out everything for himself, empirically. He has no books to instruct him. He has no one to tell him if his insights are unique or if they have been shared by others. He experiences everything as though for the first time in human history. This loneliness and the fear that went with it – that these insights were, perhaps, nothing but self-deception – was the hardest trial that Ramakrishna had to undergo.

But now he had a teacher. The Bhairavi, herself a firm believer in the Scriptures and their authority, had undertaken to show him that what he was rediscovering for himself had already been known, throughout history, to the world's great seers. The object of her training was to reassure Ramakrishna by demonstrating to him how he could obtain the vision of God by following out exactly the instructions of the Scriptures.

We may accept Ramakrishna as an avatar and nevertheless understand that he had to assume a certain measure of ignorance in order to set us the example of a great spiritual aspirant, wrestling with genuine

## Tota Puri

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I have already referred to the various attitudes which a devotee may assume in his worship of the Personal God (Ishwara). Now I must describe them in more detail, with special reference to Ramakrishna's own experience.

The simplest devotional attitude is known as *shanta*. This is the basic dualistic approach of worshipper to Worshipped, of the creature to his Creator. It does not resemble any human relationship.

Next comes *dasya*, which resembles the relationship of a child to his parent or a servant to his master. This was the attitude of Hanuman towards Rama (see Chapter 7). Hanuman regarded himself as Rama's servant; and Ramakrishna, as we have seen, identified himself for a while with Hanuman in his worship of Rama. Also, throughout most of his life, Ramakrishna regarded himself as the child of Mother Kali.

Next comes *sakhya*, in which the devotee thinks of himself as God's friend. He may identify himself, for example, with one of the shepherd-boys of Vrindavan, who were the friends of Krishna's boyhood. Ramakrishna used to say of his disciple Rakhai (who later became Swami Brahmananda) that he had been one of these shepherd-boys in a previous existence.

Next comes *vatsalya*, in which the devotee thinks of himself as God's parent. We have seen how Ramakrishna and Jatadhari assumed the attitude of parents towards Ramlala, the child Rama.

Last, there is the *madhura bhava* (the sweet mood) in which the devotee approaches God as a lover. For Hindus, the chief exemplar of this mood is Radha, the beloved of Krishna. It is said that the *madhura bhava* also contains within itself the other devotional attitudes. For a loving woman may be, on occasion, the servant of her lover, or his adviser and friend, or his motherly comforter and protector.

## I I

# Mathur

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In the last chapter, I mentioned the Durga festival of 1864 at which Mathur failed to recognize Ramakrishna while he was dressed as a woman. I must now return to this Durga festival, to give an instance of Mathur's power of devotion. This had been growing enormously ever since his vision of Ramakrishna in the aspects of Kali and Shiva, which is described in Chapter 8.

The Durga festival lasts five days, ending on the evening of the fifth with the immersion of the image which has been used in the worship. Two kinds of image are used in Hindu ritual; permanent and temporary. The permanent image, made of marble or some other durable stone, is placed in a temple, dedicated, and worshipped every day thenceforward. The temporary image, made of clay, is used only for one particular religious festival; then it is consigned to the nearest river, lake or sea.

The temporary image is just as sacred as the permanent image; but only during the period of the festival. Before it can be worshipped, the worshipper must evoke the Divine Presence from his own heart and transfer that Presence to the image. Before the image can be removed from the shrine and immersed, the Divine Presence must be withdrawn from it again, and reinstalled within the worshipper's heart. The reason for this procedure is obvious enough. But devotion is not reasonable. And it may happen that the worshipper suffers great pain in consequence. If he can truly believe that the Presence *has* entered the image, then there is a danger that his devotion may fasten upon the image itself. Image and Presence may become completely identified in his mind. The thought that they must be separated again will then naturally fill him with dismay.

This is what happened to Mathur at the Durga festival. And when

## Sarada and Chandra

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Sarada Devi had not seen her husband since his visit to Kamarpukur in 1867. After that visit, Sarada had gone back to her native village of Jayrambati and had been living there with her family ever since. Now she was growing up into a quiet, thoughtful young woman who did her household duties conscientiously and was quick to sympathize with and help people in their troubles. Those who knew her well, loved her, but perhaps rather took her for granted; a life lived without egotism is apt to appear relatively effortless and therefore somewhat uninteresting to outsiders. There can have been few, if any, of Sarada's kinsfolk and friends who realized that they were in the presence of an evolving saint.

Although Sarada had been only thirteen when she last saw Ramakrishna, the impression he had made upon her had been lasting. During these years of their separation, she had come to regard her marriage with him as a fully established relationship. She loved Ramakrishna with a spiritual love which gave her a sense of extraordinary security, because it was free from jealousy and possessiveness. Her thoughts were constantly with him in Dakshineswar and she longed to see him again; but she assured herself that he would not forget her and that he would send for her to come to him in his own good time.

Nevertheless, the years were passing; and Sarada, for all her faith in her husband, could not help being troubled by the gossip about his seemingly insane behaviour – gossip which was continually being fed with fresh rumours from Dakshineswar. The men of Jayrambati made fun of Ramakrishna; the women treated Sarada with condescending pity, as the wife of a madman. Sarada knew that Ramakrishna had certainly not been mad when he was with her in Kamarpukur; but that,

## Keshab Sen

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The last chapter ended in March 1876, with the death of Chandra Devi. I intentionally left out of it one most important event which took place almost exactly a year earlier; the meeting between Ramakrishna and Keshab Chandra Sen. From an historical point of view, this meeting is so full of significance that it demands a whole chapter to itself. Keshab Sen has been briefly referred to as a prominent Hindu reformer of the nineteenth century. Now I must explain in detail what it was that he wanted to reform, and how his ideas were influenced by the teaching and example of Ramakrishna.

Something has already been said, in Chapter 4, about the influence of the British upon India. One of the many evils of foreign conquest is the tendency of the conquered to imitate their conquerors. This kind of imitation is evil because it is uncritical; it does not choose certain aspects of the alien culture and reject others, but accepts everything slavishly, with a superstitious belief that if you ape your conquerors you will acquire their superior power.

The British certainly had much to offer India that was valuable: medical science and engineering, the arts of the West, a clearly-defined legal code. Unfortunately, they brought with them also two creeds – scientific atheism and missionary evangelism – diametrically opposed to each other yet equally narrow and dogmatic. These two creeds had done quite enough harm already in the West, where they were indigenous; exported to India, they had the added power of novelty and threatened to produce spiritual and cultural chaos. The young Indians who came into contact with them nearly all reacted violently. Either they lost belief in everything Hindu and got nothing from England in return but despair; or they were thrilled by the fanaticism and self-assurance of the missionaries and embraced a wretched version of

## The Coming of the Disciples

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We have seen that Ramakrishna did not expect too much of the Brahmos; their previous conditioning had left them incapable of any radical change of life and mind. Contact with them made Ramakrishna long all the more earnestly for some really dedicated disciples – young ones preferably – who would be ready to renounce every worldly desire and follow his teaching without any reservations. The others, he was accustomed to say, could no more be taught true spirituality than a parrot can be taught to speak after the ring of coloured feathers has appeared around its neck.

‘In those days there was no limit to my yearning,’ he would recall. ‘During the daytime, I could just manage to keep it under control, though the talk of worldly-minded people tormented me. I would yearn for the time when my beloved companions would come to me; I kept thinking what a relief it would be to talk freely and openly to them about my experiences. Everything that happened made me think of them; I couldn’t keep my mind on anything else. I kept planning what I should say to this one and what I should give to that one, and so forth. When evening came, I couldn’t master my feelings any longer. I was tortured by the thought that another day had passed and that they hadn’t arrived! When the evening worship started and the temples resounded with the ringing of bells and the blowing of conch-shell horns, I would climb up on to the roof of the Kuthi and cry out at the top of my voice in the anguish of my heart, “Come to me, my boys! Where are you? I can’t bear to live without you!” A mother never longed so for the sight of her child, or a friend for his friend or a lover for his sweetheart, as I did for them! Oh, it was beyond all describing! And, soon after this, they did at last begin to come.’

The Brahma Samaj was actually the means of bringing several of

## Naren

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Narendra Nath Datta – Naren, as he was called for short – was born in Calcutta on January 12, 1863. His family belonged to the second highest caste, the kshatriyas. The kshatriyas were, it will be remembered, traditionally the caste of the warriors, administrators, leaders of men; a most fitting ancestry for Naren himself. But the Dattas were distinguished rather as scholars and philanthropists; they were very wealthy.

Naren's grandfather, Durgacharan, had longed since childhood for the monastic life; and when he had done his duty to society, as the Scriptures enjoin, by marrying and begetting a son, he left his family and his fortune behind him and disappeared. A few years later, his wife came to Benares, no doubt because she hoped to find him there. One day, on her way to visit a temple, she fell down in the road, which was slippery after a rainstorm. A monk helped her to her feet; then made her sit down on the temple steps and examined her carefully to be sure that she was not injured. Their eyes met. It was her husband. The moment they recognized each other, he turned and hurried away without even a backward glance.

It is customary for a monk to revisit his birthplace twelve years after he has taken the monastic vow. So, in due course, Durgacharan came back to Calcutta. He asked leave to stay at the house of an old friend, begging him not to tell the family. But the friend well-meaningly betrayed Durgacharan and the family came and took him back home with them, practically by force. For three days and nights the captive monk sat in a corner of the room, in miserable silence, not moving, his eyes shut. The family at last became afraid that he was going to fast till death, so they left the door open, and next day he was gone forever.

## The Training of Naren

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In the last chapter we saw how Ramakrishna became convinced that this young college student, Narendra Nath Datta, was actually an incarnation of one of his 'eternal companions'. It may well be asked how Ramakrishna, once he had arrived at this conviction, could have continued to feel even the smallest anxiety about Naren's future. For how could such a being ever come to any spiritual harm? In answer to this question, Saradananda points out that even an avatar, when he assumes a body and enters the sphere of Maya, must suffer some blurring of his spiritual insight. Ramakrishna was prone to occasional doubts about the truth of his own visions; perhaps he had been mistaken, he would say to himself. And so he continued to be anxious and to subject Naren to various tests.

Ramakrishna used to say that there are eighteen qualities or manifestations of power which can possibly be found in a human being. Even two or three of these qualities are sufficient to enable an individual to gain great fame and influence in the world – and Ramakrishna saw that Naren had all eighteen of them. In moods of anxiety, Ramakrishna feared that Naren might misuse these powers as he grew older; that he might be satisfied with a partial realization of God, and that, on the basis of this partial realization, he might merely found a new religious sect and make himself famous and powerful in the usual worldly way. Ramakrishna's own life was, as we have already seen, both a protest against sectarian exclusiveness and a demonstration that every sect can show the way to knowledge of God. He need not have worried about Naren, who was to prove, in the writings and lectures of his later life as Vivekananda, how well he had learnt this lesson: 'I accept all the religions of the past and I worship God with every one of them. Can

## The Young Monks

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In telling this part of the story, it seems better not to keep strictly to the chronological order of events. I have already followed the course of Naren's spiritual training through to the year 1885, without stopping to record many contemporary happenings. And now, having written about Naren, Rakhai, Latu, and Gopal Ghosh, it seems more logical to complete the list of those who eventually became monks of the Ramakrishna Order than to introduce them by twos and threes, according to the dates of their arrival at Dakshineswar, amidst a lot of unrelated people and events. I shall briefly sketch the life of each individual to its end, although that will take us far into the future. By so doing, I hope to make the various personalities stand out in sharper contrast and impress themselves more deeply on the reader's memory. If I were to show them only as a group of young men and youths during the very short period of their association with Ramakrishna, they might appear confusingly alike.

For the sake of completeness, I shall begin by naming all sixteen of Ramakrishna's disciples, including the ones who have already been described. I shall first give the pre-monastic name of the disciple and then the name he assumed as a monk, followed by a translation of it. (The invariable suffix *ananda* means bliss; in this connection, 'he who has the bliss of . . .' For example, *viveka* means spiritual discrimination. So Vivekananda means 'he who has the bliss of spiritual discrimination'. But there is no need to keep repeating 'he who has the bliss of' on the list that follows.) Nearly all of these monastic names were chosen by Naren, often on the basis of something Ramakrishna had said about that person. Naren gave them to his brother disciples at the time when they took their monastic vows, soon after Ramakrishna's death, in 1886.

## Some Great Devotees

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Balaram Bose came of a rich family which had estates in Orissa and was noted for its piety and good works. From his youth, Balaram had lived chiefly in holy places, spending most of his time in meditation and privacy. He left the management of the family estates to a cousin and drew from them only a small income just sufficient for his needs. He belonged to the sect of the Vaishnavas. Balaram had married, as we saw in the last chapter, the sister of Baburam Ghosh, the future Swami Premananda. They had three children.

Balaram first heard about Ramakrishna through Keshab Sen's newspaper. In 1882, when Balaram was in his late thirties, he had to go to Calcutta to be present at the wedding of his eldest daughter; so he took this opportunity of visiting Dakshineswar. He arrived there on foot – this was typical of his unassuming way of life – to find Ramakrishna's room crowded with people; Keshab and a number of his Brahmo followers were there. Balaram did not introduce himself but sat down quietly in a corner of Ramakrishna's room, remaining there until it was time for the others to go out and eat. Then Ramakrishna turned to Balaram and said, 'Is there anything you want to ask me?' 'Yes, sir. Does God really exist?' 'Certainly he does,' said Ramakrishna; but he added that God only reveals himself to the devotee who regards him as his nearest and dearest. Balaram asked, 'Then why can't I see him, when I pray to him so much?' Ramakrishna smiled. 'Is he really as dear to you as your own children?' Balaram had to admit that he had never felt as strongly about God as all that. The next morning, Balaram returned to Dakshineswar. As before, he came on foot. Ramakrishna noticed this and was pleased.

During the rest of their association, Ramakrishna worked on Balaram to make him less strict and sectarian in his attitude towards conduct

## The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna

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I have already often referred to M. (Mahendra Nath Gupta) and quoted from his *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, called in Bengali *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*. Now I must write in detail about M's life, his book, and the account it gives us of Ramakrishna's personality and teachings.

Mahendra Nath was born in Calcutta in 1854. When he was still a small child, he was taken by his mother to see the Dakshineswar Temple, which at that time had only recently been built. In the crowded temple courtyard, Mahendra Nath became separated from his mother and started to cry for her. Then a young man came out of one of the buildings, saw the little boy in tears and remained with him, comforting him, until his mother reappeared. In later life, Mahendra Nath liked to believe that this young man had been Ramakrishna himself.

Mahendra Nath grew up to be a brilliant student. He graduated third in his class from the University of Calcutta, in 1875. While still in college, he married a girl who was related to Keshab Sen; and thus became one of Keshab's most devoted followers. Having graduated, he started his career as a teacher. He was teaching at the Metropolitan Institution at the time when he first went to Dakshineswar and met Ramakrishna, in 1882. (Throughout the *Gospel*, M. is nearly always precise about dates, and it seems odd that he does not tell us in so many words exactly when this first meeting took place. He does give us two clues, however, which fix the date; it was a few days after February 23rd and it was on a Sunday in February. In the year 1882, the only Sunday between February 23rd and the end of the month fell on the 26th.)

The *Gospel* opens with an artless abruptness and incoherence which

## The Last Year

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The early part of 1885 was unusually hot. Since Ramakrishna suffered from the heat, the devotees suggested that he should suck pieces of ice and put ice in his sugared drinks. He became very fond of ice. However, when, towards the end of April, he began to complain of a pain in his throat, the devotees blamed the ice, and themselves.

The pain was caused by a sore, which did not yield to treatment but grew gradually worse. The doctor advised Ramakrishna not to talk more than was absolutely necessary and to avoid, if he possibly could, going into samadhi. In samadhi, the blood rushes to the throat, and the doctor feared that this would aggravate Ramakrishna's condition.

In May, the Vaishnavas held an annual festival at the village of Panihati, on the bank of the Ganges, a few miles upriver from Dakshineswar. The festival commemorated an occasion on which Sri Nityananda, the chief disciple of Sri Chaitanya, was entertained at a feast in this same village by Raghunath, a householder devotee. Nityananda encouraged Raghunath to persevere in begging Chaitanya's permission to renounce the world and become a monk.

Ramakrishna had attended the Panihati festival many times already; but this year he wanted to take his young disciples, who had never seen it. When objections were made to this expedition because of his illness, he brushed them aside, saying that he would only stay an hour or two and that he would be careful not to go into samadhi. It was agreed that he must not take part in the kirtan, the singing of holy songs, as this invariably threw him into ecstasy.

After visiting the home of a wealthy landowner and resting there for a little while, Ramakrishna and his party went to watch the dancing and singing in the courtyard of the Radhakanta Temple. As they stood there, a man dressed as a Vaishnava began to dance and shout in an

## The Story Continues

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That same evening, in accordance with Hindu custom, Sarada Devi sat down and began to remove her ornaments in token of her widowhood. Just as she was about to take off her gold bracelets, Ramakrishna appeared to her, looking as he had looked before his sickness came upon him. Taking her by the wrists, he asked, 'Why are you putting away the ornaments of a married woman? Do you really believe I'm dead?' Because of this vision, Sarada continued to wear her bracelets. Some days later Balarām Bose bought a piece of white cloth without a coloured border, such as a widow should traditionally wear, and asked Golap Ma, one of Sarada's woman friends and a great devotee, to give it to her. Golap Ma found this commission painful and embarrassing; it was, in effect, a blunt reminder to Sarada of her loss. But when Golap Ma went to visit her, she saw that Sarada had already torn away a strip from the broad, red border of her own wearing-cloth, making it very thin. Throughout the rest of her life, Sarada wore cloths with thin red borders, never plain white ones.

About a week after Ramakrishna's death, Naren and a young householder devotee named Harish were standing near the pond in the garden of the Cossipore house. It was eight o'clock in the evening. Suddenly, Naren saw a draped and shining form approaching them along the path from the gate. He asked himself if this could be the Master, but said nothing to Harish, fearing that he was the victim of an hallucination. But, a moment later, Harish himself exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, 'What's that?' So Naren shouted, 'Who's there?' Hearing the shout, some other disciples ran out of the house. But the luminous form vanished near a jasmine bush, within ten yards of where they stood.

Such were the spiritual reassurances. But the material outlook was far from reassuring. The lease on the Cossipore house was due to

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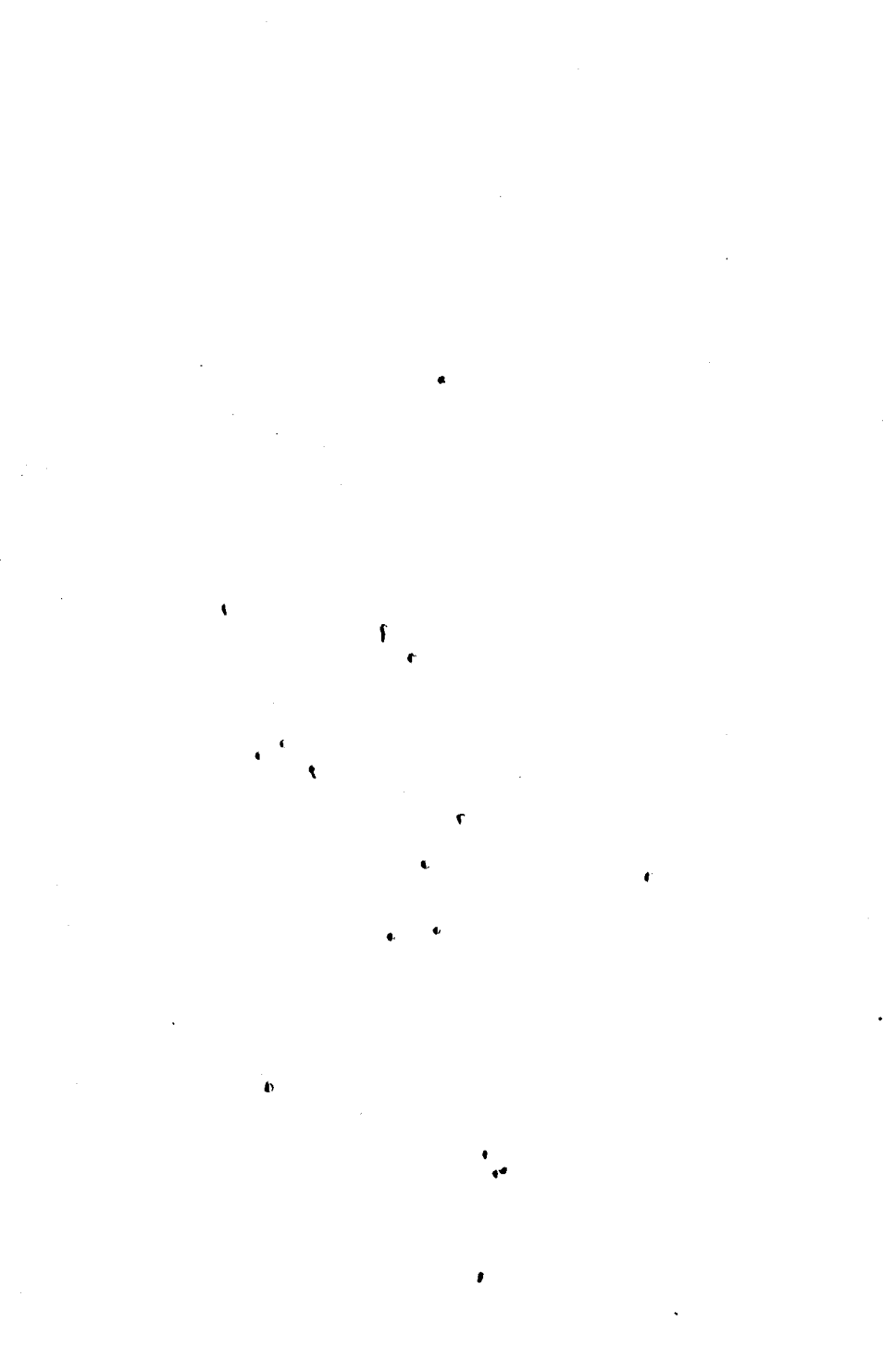
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## Notes on Illustrations

Frontispiece: this, the first of four photographs taken of Ramakrishna, was made on Sunday, September 21, 1879. The place was Keshab's house, the Lily Cottage, on Upper Circular Road, Calcutta. Ramakrishna was in samadhi, supported by Hriday. Brahma devotees were sitting on the floor. Keshab seems to have had the photograph made for his own use, as it is known that afterwards he kept a copy in his room.

1. This, the second photograph of Ramakrishna, was taken on Saturday, December 10, 1881. Surendra arranged for the portrait to be made in the studio of the Bengal Photographers in the Radhabazar section of Calcutta. Ramakrishna had previously shown an interest in the mechanics of photography. Before the picture was taken he inquired into the photographic process and studied the equipment. Later he drew upon the knowledge he had acquired for examples to illustrate his teachings.

2. The third photograph was probably taken in 1883 or 1884. Bhavanath Chatterjee engaged a photographer to come to Dakshineswar to take the picture. Ramakrishna was seated in samadhi on the raised veranda outside the Radhakanta temple. Narendra was present. Later when Ramakrishna saw a print he remarked: 'A high yogic state is pictured here. As time goes on this photo will be worshipped in every home.' Some prints from the original negative are in the possession of the Ramakrishna Order, from which the great numbers of copies in circulation today were made.

3. This photo and No. 4 were taken on the same day in November 1898 at Nivedita's house in Calcutta.

4. Holy Mother was photographed for the first time twelve years after Ramakrishna's death, when she was forty-five years old.

5. The octagonal room on the ground floor is 7 ft. 9 in. in diameter. Originally the entrance door was only four feet high. This was Sarada Devi's residence at Dakshineswar for several years. Chandra occupied the second floor. This illustration was made from the roof of Ramakrishna's room, looking north. Beyond is the Panchavati.

6. Narendra Nath Datta (1863-1902) in 1892 at Belgaum in western India.
7. Rakhal Chandra Ghosh (1863-1922) became Swami Brahmananda, but to this day he is affectionately referred to as Raja Maharaj or simply Maharaj. This picture was taken on May 10, 1921, as Maharaj was on his way to open the permanent building of the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home in Madras.
8. Taken in 1902 at Balaram's home in Calcutta, not long before Swami Vivekananda's death. Sadananda was Vivekananda's disciple.
9. Hari Nath Chatterjee (1863-1922) became Swami Turiyananda. Baburam Ghosh (1861-1918) became Swami Premananda. This photo was probably taken in 1910 or 1911.
10. Formerly Sarat Chandra Chakravarty (1865-1927). He is shown in characteristic pose sitting in the small room at the entrance of the Calcutta residence of the Holy Mother and *Udbodhan* office, where he wrote in Bengali *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*.
11. Most probably Tarak Nath Ghoshal was born in 1854. He died in 1934. He is still referred to as Mahapurush Maharaj, 'great soul'. This picture was taken in Madras, probably in 1924.
12. Formerly Sarada Prasanna Mitra (1865-1915). This photograph was taken in San Francisco.
13. Formerly Shashi Bhushan Chakravarty (1863-1911).
14. Latu (his full name and date of his birth are unknown to us) became Swami Adbhutananda. He died in 1920. Jogindra Nath Choudhury (1861-99) became Swami Yogananda. This picture was taken from a group photo made at the Alambazar Math in 1896.
15. Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912) as he looked at about the time he met Sri Ramakrishna.
16. Mahendra Nath Gupta was born in 1854 and died in 1932. In 1928 he was photographed kneeling beside the bel tree at the north of the Dakshineswar temple grounds where more than forty years before some of his most memorable encounters with Ramakrishna had taken place.
17. Also known as Mathur Mohan Biswas and Mathur Babu. From a painting. The date of Mathur's birth is uncertain. But it is known that he was a classmate of Devendra Nath Tagore who was born in 1817. Hence Mathur would probably have been between thirty-five and forty

years old when he met Ramakrishna in 1855, and between fifty and fifty-five when he died in 1871.

18. Chanting and singing songs of their own composition formed an important part of the religious observances of the Brahmos. They frequently accompanied themselves on one-stringed musical instruments like the one Keshab is holding. The banner reads: New Dispensation.

19. This photograph after the death of Ramakrishna, was made at about 5 P.M. on Monday, August 16, 1886, outside the front door of the Cossipore Garden House. Twenty-four of the more than fifty devotees who were present are identified in the key.

20. This old photograph conveys the atmosphere of Kamarpukur as it was years ago. In the courtyard of Khudiram's house (*left*) formerly stood a shed, where Gadadhar was born. Across the lane from the house is the Shiva temple in front of which Chandra had a vision indicating the birth of a divine child.

21. Village scene near Khudiram's house. The colonnaded temple is one of a group of buildings which comprised the Laha estate. At the left can be seen a corner of the nat-mandap. On the right an old palanquin is stored.

22. Several terms used in the diagram are not mentioned in the text of this book, but are used in Swami Saradananda's biography of Ramakrishna and in M's Gospel. The chandni is the portico at the head of the main landing ghat. 'Natmandir' - its synonym 'nat-mandap' is used in this book - is an Indian term for the open-air meeting halls or audience chambers frequently to be found facing Hindu shrines. Chandra was placed in the Ganges at the Bakultala ghat at the time of her death.

23. Visitors are seen entering the southeast veranda, outside Ramakrishna's room.

24. Looking west. Through the open door the semi-circular porch is visible, with the Ganges behind. Narendra came in through this door on his first visit to Ramakrishna. Many of the events related in the Gospel occurred in this room. It is about twenty-four feet square.

25. Looking down the steps of the ghat, Sri Ramakrishna first saw the Bhairavi getting out of a boat, probably like the 'country boat' shown in the foreground. In the portico occurred the first meeting between Ramakrishna and Tota Puri.

26. Image of the Divine Mother of the Universe from the front. The image is  $33\frac{1}{2}$  in. high and made of black basalt.

27. Profile from the west. The bedstead of the deity, with its mosquito curtain, is visible beyond the altar. The shrineroom is 15 ft. by 15 ft. The Kali figure is generally partly covered by flower garlands brought as offerings by worshippers.

28. The kind of carriage used by Ramakrishna on his many trips from Dakshineswar into Calcutta. Such carriages are still in use today.

29. During Ramakrishna's time this sword hung on the wall of the Kali shrineroom. It was used to kill goats intended as offerings. The sword is now kept locked in a case in the quarters of the temple manager.

30. The courtyard is 220 ft. by 440 ft. The dimensions of the nat-mandap are 75 ft. by 50 ft. The Kali Temple is 50 ft. square, not including the platform which surrounds it, and more than a hundred feet high. The Kali image faces south, towards the nat-mandap. The vantage space inside the central arch, where devotees crowd to view the deity, is about seven feet square. A corner of the most southerly Shiva Temple appears in the left foreground.

31. Preserved at the Belur Math is a manuscript of some hundred pages, written by Sri Ramakrishna. The contents include copies of three plays based on stories from the Mahabharata and Ramayana. The manuscript was probably written before 1852. It is inscribed with Ramakrishna's youthful name and address, which are shown in the illustration: Sri Gadadhar Chattopadhyaya (Chatterjee), Village Kamarpukur. Students who understand the Bengali of the period say that the writing in the manuscript is fairly correct.

32. An early photograph suggesting the dense, solitary character of the Panchavati as it existed at the time of Ramakrishna.

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