Cover Story

Corona Crisis: Time to unleash our Collective Power?
RAMAKRISHNA ORDER’S COVID-19 RELIEF SERVICE

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THE VEDANTA KESARI
A Cultural and Spiritual Monthly of The Ramakrishna Order

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He was a much-celebrated and much-feted Swami. His famous address at The World’s Parliament of Religions, Chicago in 1893 had catapulted him to the status of a super star. But Swami Vivekananda was not one to bask in chaffy glory. A letter to one of his trusted followers, from the USA, dated 12 Jan 1895, read, ‘I want to preach my ideas for the good of the world. ...What work have you done in the way of advancing the ideas and organising in India? ...My life is more precious than spending it in getting the admiration of the world. I have no time for such foolery.’

Swamiji, as Swami Vivekananda was fondly addressed, loved and revered his motherland as his own mother. Every breath of his aspired for her well being and every cell in his body yearned that she regain her lost glory. She had been a beacon light for the world until repeated invasions pillaged her ruthlessly and left her not just poverty-stricken but also psychologically drained. The latter struck at the very core, underlying the urgency for immediate redressal. Swamiji’s panacea for this lay in India’s very own practical and ennobling Vedantic wisdom. Vedanta recognises no weakness. It proclaims that in every individual lies a mine of strength. All that is needed is an effort to draw from it.

Swamiji started looking for the right channel to propagate the powerful message of Vedanta. He opted for the print medium and decided to bring out a journal, giving it the name Brahmathavan. In February 1895, he sent from USA $100 and a letter to his trusted disciple Alasinga Perumal. The letter read: ’Now I am bent upon starting the journal. Herewith I send a hundred dollars... Hope this will go just a little in starting your paper.’

If selflessness and devotion would have a form, it would have borne the name of Alasinga Perumal. Brahmathavan became Alasinga’s calling and the first issue rolled out from a press in Broadway, Chennai on 14 September 1895. The magazine included a poem of Swamiji specially composed for the occasion. It was titled, ‘The Song of the Sannyasin’. One verse ran thus:
"Strike off thy fetters! Bonds that bind thee down,
of shining gold or darker hue one —

Love, hate — good, bad — and all the dual throng,
Know, slave is slave, careless or shifted, not free

For fetters, though of gold, are not less strong to bind;

then off with them. Sannyasin hold say one tat sat on

(Handwritten words in Swamiji’s own hand)

With this message that marked its mission, Brahmavadin made a determined entry into the strife-ridden climate of pre-independence India. The birth of the magazine was certainly an occasion for celebration but the struggles were far from over.

One of Swamiji’s letters to Alasinga read: ‘I learnt from your letter the bad financial state that Brahmavadin is in.’ This was followed by another letter that carried the line, ‘I pledge myself to maintain the paper anyhow.’

Bolstered by this pledge, Alasinga Perumal braved on, surmounting many an impediment. Sadly, Swami Vivekananda passed away in 1902, at the age of thirty-nine. Alasinga’s intense anguish morphed into heightened devotion towards the magazine. But the next hurdle in Brahmavadin’s journey came in 1909, in the form of Alasinga’s own demise. In May 1914, the magazine, tottering as it was, floundered and ground to a halt.

It was at this crucial juncture, that the Ramakrishna Mission stepped in to revive it. The Mission was itself in its nascent stages with many a teething problem but nothing could come in its way of reviving the Brahmavadin. For, had not their beloved Swamiji repeatedly said, ‘The Brahmavadin is a jewel – it must not perish!’ And so, the very same month when Brahmavadin closed, it was resuscitated with the new name The Vedanta Kesari.

The history of The Vedanta Kesari is much more than just a tale of sweat, toil and a dream realized. It is a narrative of Swamiji’s passion for India and Alasinga’s devotion to his master. It is a celebration of love, transcending forms.
To establish the magazine on firm financial footing please contribute ₹ 1,000/- & above to the Permanent Fund.

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For the last 106 years, without missing a single issue, the magazine has been carrying the invigorating message of Vedanta and alongside, continuously revamping itself to meet the changing needs of the times.

The relevance of Vedantic wisdom to everyday life is all the more pertinent today than ever before. ‘Arise, Awake and stop not till the goal is reached,’ is the thundering motto of Swami Vivekananda. The Ramakrishna Mission, as you all know, is a unique organization where sannyasis and lay people come together and endeavour for the common good. Let’s join hands in taking forward our revered Swamiji’s vision and mission for The Vedanta Kesari.
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Sloka - 14

At the time life leaves my body, and all my limbs have become weak, and my relatives cry uncontrollably out of affection for me, even if I am conscious, O Lord, how can I concentrate my mind on You when distracted by so many obstructions!

Sloka - 15

O Indwelling Self! I surrender myself along with my descendents at Your lotus feet now itself, O Lord of the Daughter of the Mountain! I cannot know Your nature (which is Existence-Consciousness-Bliss); nor am I capable of performing the Vedic rituals or yoga practices. Being without any other means, I take refuge in You alone.

Sloka - 16

I, tormented by this transmigratory existence, now take refuge in You, the Lord who first created the Creator of all the worlds (Brahma) and imparted to him the Vedas along with the puranas, who are the Lord of Goddess Parvati, the primordial Guru who confers self knowledge.
Sri Ramakrishna suffered several bereavements. The first was the death of a nephew named, Akshay. After the young man’s death Sri Ramakrishna said: “Akshay died before my very eyes. But it did not affect me in the least. I stood by and watched a man die. It was like a sword being drawn from its scabbard. I enjoyed the scene, and laughed and sang and danced over it. They removed the body and cremated it. But the next day as I stood there (pointing to the southeast verandah of his room), I felt a racking pain for the loss of Akshay, as if somebody were squeezing my heart like a wet towel. I wondered at it and thought that the Mother was teaching me a lesson. I was not much concerned even with my own body — much less with a relative. But if such was my pain at the loss of a nephew, how much more must be the grief of the householders at the loss of their near and dear ones!”

God is engaged in three kinds of activity: creation, preservation, and destruction. Death is inevitable. All will be destroyed at the time of dissolution. Nothing will remain. At that time the Divine Mother will gather up the seeds for the future creation, even as the elderly mistress of the house keeps in her hotchpotch-pot little bags of cucumber seeds, ‘sea-foam’, blue pills, and other miscellaneous things. The Divine Mother will take Her seeds out again at the time of the new creation.

One should constantly remember death. Nothing will survive death. We are born into this world to perform certain duties, like the people who come from the countryside to Calcutta on business.

The way to remember God in the hour of death is to practise, now, the repetition of His name and the chanting of His glories. If one keeps up this practice, then in the hour of death one will repeat the name of God.

One is aware of pleasure and pain, birth and death, disease and grief, as long as one is identified with the body. All these belong to the body alone, and not to the Soul. After the death of the body, perhaps God carries one to a better place. It is like the birth of the child after the pain of delivery. Attaining Self-Knowledge, one looks on pleasure and pain, birth and death, as a dream.

—Sri Ramakrishna
How to describe the strange situation that we are now experiencing? We could say it is an agathocacological situation. Never heard that word? Well, I just dug out this archaic word, which means ‘composed of both good and evil’. However, decades from now while speaking about this Covid pandemic, people will probably quote Charles Dickens and say, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

People are dying; people are mourning; people are out-of-work; people are hungry; people are mentally disturbed; people are in fear; people are angry; people are bored; ..... How terrible! But nature is reviving; nature is rejoicing; nature is busy at work cleansing herself; all her non-human species are in peace; birds, and animals are happily roaming around, water and air are cleaner;.... Really wonderful!

These conflicting experiences are again best encapsulated in the words of Shakespeare’s three witches in Macbeth, who declare, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” Everything the witches delight in is evil to others, and everything that others delight in is evil to the witches. Such is our relationship now with Nature. What we see as good for us is foul to Nature, and what Nature considers as good (purging a burgeoning, reckless, selfish species) is foul to us. We have become the modern GDP driven witches zooming around bent on harming Nature.

This disconnect with Nature is the result of our unquenchable unnatural desires. As Swami Vivekananda puts it, “We have become so unhinged and unnatural that nothing natural will satisfy us. We are always grasping after morbid things, must have unnatural excitement — unnatural food, drink, surroundings, and life.” One major consequence of this unnatural life is fear, at whose root is fear of death.

The Covid virus disturbs our belly, raises our body temperature, squeezes our lungs, and kills our life. Isn’t this similar to what the human society is doing to Nature? We recklessly mine earth’s belly, throttle her with toxic fumes, heat her atmosphere to dangerous levels, and mindlessly kill countless fellow species for our pleasure. This raises the question, who is the real epidemic threat? – the fast spreading Covid virus killing mankind, or the human kind multiplying faster than the virus and destroying Nature?!

What is the way out? As a quote attributed to Einstein states, “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” Our hope lies in awakening into a higher consciousness. Sri Ramakrishna reminds us that “God is the container of the universe and also what is contained in it.” And into his creation, God sends, as Swami Vivekananda writes, “death and life, plague and epidemics, and everything. ... He is the good; He is the evil; He is the beautiful; He is the terrible; He is life; and He is death.” Truly, God, Nature, and we are one. Whether we are sitting safe at home, or fighting the Covid virus, or lying ill in an isolation ward, let us with every breath remind ourselves of our true nature as the Atman. And let us focus on connecting with fellow living beings and nature, and restore the balance in creation.

May divine mother Maariamma also known as Shitala Devi, soon deliver us from this painful collective karmaphala of our generation. In the meanwhile, let our lips pray and hands rise in service.
Prayer

Sri Ramakrishna Sangha Stotram
श्रीरामकृष्ण-संहा-स्तोत्रम्

SWAMI NITYASTHANANDA

1 May is a special day for the Ramakrishna Order, as it was on this day in 1897 that, under the initiative of Swami Vivekananda, the monastic and lay devotees of Sri Ramakrishna came together to formally establish the Ramakrishna Mission as a religious organisation. This Sangha Stotra prayerfully remembers these great souls.

I bow down to Sri Ramakrishna having a pleasant form. Like a bee he is residing in the lotus of the devotees’ heart, sipping the nectar called bhakti.

I bow down to Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi who takes us across the terrible ocean of samsara, who is the mother of all — both good and bad, who bestows auspiciousness, and who gives us the essence of bhakti.

I bow down to Swami Vivekananda, the heroic sannyasi, who won the whole world by the power of his words and uplifted it.

I bow down to Swami Brahmananda who is desireless, who is the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna and who has taken refuge at the feet of Sri Krishna.

I bow down to Swami Premananda who is shining with lustre, who was born as a part of Radha (the spiritual consort of Sri Krishna), and who excelled as the embodiment of Sri Ramakrishna’s love.

I bow down to Swami Adbhutananda who had no knowledge of letters but was established in the Supreme Knowledge of Brahman. Did he not attain spiritual perfection just by serving Sri Ramakrishna?

The author, a senior sannyasi of the Ramakrishna Order, is Adhyaksha of Ramakrishna Mission, Davanagere, Karnataka. davanagere@rkmm.org

The Vedanta Kesari
May 2020

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प्िन्नवदनं शान्ं जशवानन्महामुपनम् ।
महापुरुषनामपि ख्यातं तं प्रणमाम्यहम् ॥7॥
I bow down to Swami Shivananda, the great ascetic, who was calm, who had a cheerful and kind face, and was well-known as ‘Mahapurush Maharaj’.

योगानन्नं महापूज्ञं मृदुशीलं हद्वरतम् ।
शारदार्पतचचतं तं प्रणमागम मुहुमु्वहुः ॥8॥
I again and again bow down to Swami Yogananda who offered his entire mind to Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. He was of a mild nature, practised sadhana with stern determination, and was most worshipful.

निरिखनं महाकोंभं तं वन्दे साहसप्रयम् ।
शारदार्पतचचतं तं प्रणमागम मुहुमु्वहुः ॥9॥
I bow down to Swami Niranjanananda who loved adventure, who shined like the sun, had not an iota of impurity, and had applied the collyrium of knowledge that can destroy ignorance.

बन्दे तं शारदानन्ं पनश्चल ं शारदाप्प्यम् ।
गुरोललीलाप्िङ्देन प्ाप्तवान् यः क ृ ताथ्वताम्   ॥10॥
I bow down to Swami Saradananda who was firmly established in Truth, was most dear to Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, and who attained fulfillment in writing about Sri Ramakrishna in the book ‘Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga’.

तुरीयस्थितं तत् तुरीयानन्योगगनम् ।
वेदान्ततत्त्वभाषणं सेवकायस्तस्यतात्मरं ॥11॥
I bow down to Swami Turiyananda who was an adept in the principles of Vedanta, was always engaged in austerities, and was established in the Turiya state of consciousness.

रामकृष्णाध्यायम् रामकृष्णाध्वरकाः ।
तत्पूजापनरतं रामकृष्णनन्ं नमाम्यहम्   ॥12॥
I bow down to Swami Ramakrishnananda who offered all his energies to Sri Ramakrishna, always took shelter at his feet, and was always engaged in his worship.

अखण्डस्वेतानिरं जीवानं शिवभावतः ।
अखण्डानन्मज्ञानमेव नरदेवस्य पदानुगम् ॥13॥
I bow down to Swami Akhandananda who always traversed in the path shown by Swami Vivekananda, and was always engaged in serving fellow beings in the spirit of Shiva Jnane Jiva Seva (serving people looking upon them as the Lord himself).
I bow down to Swami Subodhananda who was soft spoken, child-like, had divine knowledge, was simple natured, peaceful, and compassionate.

I bow down to Swami Advaitananda who was wise, elderly, and who sacrificed his all to serve Sri Ramakrishna.

I bow down to Swami Vijnanananda who like an Avadhuta totally rejected worldly customs, was an adept in architecture, and was a brahmajnani.

I bow down to Swami Abhedananda, a knower of Truth, a Yogi, a great scholar, who became renowned as a spiritual teacher.

I bow down to Swami Trigunatitananda, who was full of noble qualities, and who enhanced noble qualities (in seekers), who was endowed with awakened knowledge, and who became renowned for running the magazine ‘Udbodhan’ (in Bengali).

I bow down to Mahendra Nath Gupta, the outstanding devotee, adorned with scholarship and humility, and who is drinking his guru’s nectarine teachings.

I bow down to Girish Chandra Ghosh, the great dramatist and actor, who washed away all his sins through devotion, attained perfection through faith, and was an incarnation of Bhairava.
नागं महाशयं वन्दे भक्तश्देषं मुहुमु्वहुः ||
परमादुतचारिनं निर्मांनं मानदं वरम् ||21||

I bow down to Naga Mahashay again and again, whose character was most wonderful, who was free from pride and respected all, and who was an outstanding devotee.

बलरामं रामचन्द्रं िुरदेशं शम्भुमक्लिकम् ||
अन्यां भक्तगणानं मानदं वरम् ||22||

I bow down to Balaram Basu, Rama Chandra Datta, Surendra Nath Mitra (Suresh), Shambhu Charan Mallik and other devotees who took shelter at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna.

एकं यं बहुनामरूपपवसधजभः हहन्ुः िदा ह्यच्वपत
यं बौ्धा अपप बु्ध इत्यनुददनं िङ्ीत्य्व रोमाहञ्चताः ||
योऽयं हरिस्पदाजभधो बहुजनवैरलिदेपत चदेड्यश्च यः
तं िच्चित्ुखमानतोऽहस्म परमं श्ीरा
मक ृ ष्ं  गुरुम् ||23||

I bow down to the Supreme Guru Sri Ramakrishna, who is of the nature of Pure Existence, Consciousness, and Bliss; whom the Hindus worship in many names, forms, and rituals; whom the Buddhists with ecstasy glorify as Buddha; and who is adored by many in the Christ and Allah.

असुक्ख्भक्तमपुष्पा यत्पादकमलाश्श्ताः ||
यत् प्देमप्मत्ास्दे तत्पादं शरणं व्रजदे ||24||

I surrender at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna at whose lotus feet innumerable devotees have taken shelter like bees, and who are intoxicated with love for Him.

एतदेन स्ोत्पुष्देण भक्तामोदयुतदेन च ||
अचर्नन् रामक ृ ष्ं  यदे तदे ब्रह्पदमाप्ुयुः ||25||

Whoever worships Sri Ramakrishna with these flowers of hymns having the bliss of devotion, will attain the state of Brahman.
**Question**: In that case, should we avoid society?

**Maharaj**: A certain group of people in Greece always used to see faults in people; they gradually became people-haters. Not having any lofty philosophical vision, they saw people only from the outside. There was among them a man who always carried a lantern when he moved around. As soon as he came across anyone, he would raise his lantern to see if that person had any trace of humanity in him. But he never found it in anyone. People thought he was mad.*

In our land we have a distinct philosophy. We know that there are two aspects of a human being: one is the external form and the other is the eternal truth within. The external man undergoes changes – sometimes for good, and sometimes for bad. But the eternal entity – the divinity in him – is always aglow. We therefore cannot hate anybody. So where is the need to avoid society? Let us not talk about ordinary people; they can drag a thing down to any level!

**Question**: Why can't we see God in the world?

**Maharaj**: Listen to how God lives in the world. His *leela* or divine play is of three kinds: 1) *Sruti leela*, or the play of creation, where Brahman plays, assuming the form of this world and its *jivas* or living beings. They forget themselves completely, live under the influence of maya, and experience the fleeting world according to the effects of their own earlier karma. Only by praying to the Lord can the jiva regain its true identity. 2) *Nara leela* or the play as an incarnation – like Krishna, Buddha, Chaitanya and Ramakrishna. 3) *Nitya leela* or the eternal play, where God lives in the *anandamaya kosha* or blissful sheath. Krishna is Consciousness, His abode is Consciousness, and His playground Vrindavan is eternal. Brahman witnessing Its own form is like the finger looking at its own body. Swami Vivekananda retained his individual existence within *Akhanda* or the Indivisible Whole, and yet enjoyed himself in the company of the Indivisible Whole!

Vaiśnava texts describe Sri Radhika as walking, carrying on her head a pitcher with a thousand outlets. Trying to imitate her, the Vaishnavas started practicing illicit love! See how even lofty ideals degenerate in the hands of the ignorant!

**Question**: Sri Ramakrishna would always say, ‘by Mother’s will’, and ‘Mother is making me act thus’. We too generally say, ‘by Sri Ramakrishna’s will’. What is the difference?

**Maharaj**: Sri Ramakrishna would say, ‘I am following Her will’, and ‘She is making me act and speak (as She wills)’. It was okay for him to say this, but we cannot do the same. This is because Sri Ramakrishna was *Nirguna* Brahman or the Attributeless Absolute. He created a body named ‘Ramakrishna’ and delivered his message through it. He didn’t have *samskaras* of earlier births. [Samskaras, or sense impressions from previous lives, are the reason why we take birth.] But all our actions are driven by the samskaras of our earlier births, and by the fruits of our past actions. So how can we say, ‘This happened to me by God’s

---

* This was Diogenes of Sinope. Tradition says he was looking for an honest man, or a true human being. He was dedicated to living as simply as possible. He lived in an empty wine cask, or a barrel. He threw away his only possession, a cup, when he saw a boy drinking out of his cupped hands.
Building Capacity to Respond

SRINIVAS V.

These ideas have been developed through several experiences in helping large organizations with a national footprint (like State Bank of India & Bharat Petroleum), engage with and catalyze change in communities where they have a presence.

Preamble

It is now becoming clearer that the fight against corona is not just a ‘health’ battle, but also an economic and social rehabilitation battle.

We still do not know how many Indian citizens will be impacted by the corona virus, nor do we know the extent of the economic and social damage that the ‘cure’, in the form of a lockdown and emergency, will have or the time that it will take.

What we do know is that we need to be ready – once the immediate crisis is past – to help the country bounce back into normalcy and enter into a positive growth trajectory at the earliest.

What we also know is that we can come out of this crisis in two ways.

One, treat the episode as a memory and try to get on with life as before.

Two, use the crisis to build a new ‘response capability’ within our society, so that we are able to use this capability for handling future crisis and building new opportunities for our citizens.

This short note seeks to visualize how we can use this crisis to build a new ‘community response platform’ nationwide, as a new model of dealing with both challenges, and opportunities in the future.

Key concepts

In this note, we use three key constructs, each of which are described below:

1. Capacity to respond

Capacity usually means institutional/infrastructural capacity (like hospitals, hospital beds, school buildings), or human capacity (skills, education, knowledge, ability to do productive work, etc.)

We use ‘capacity to respond’, which refers to our ability to utilize or harness existing institutional, infrastructural, or human capacities effectively to deal with a challenge or crisis.

‘Capacity to Respond’ refers not to what we have, but how well we utilize what we have to engage with a challenge. This includes the quality and speed of our response, appropriateness of response (the mix of resources), and the locus of response (where the resources are directed).

Capacity and capacity to respond are different: while capacity can be built through planning, energy and resources, capacity to respond will have to be awakened in individuals and in communities, and nurtured through appropriate mechanisms.

In simpler terms, building capacity refers to increasing the resources we have, while...
enhancing capacity to respond refers to awakening and developing our resourcefulness as a collective in using what we have in the service of a shared goal.

2. Ecosystems of response

Groups of individuals can develop ‘capacity to respond’ when they become ecosystems of response. An ecosystem of response is a group of stakeholders playing different roles, but together having a common goal.

A simple example is a football team. The team is a group of individuals who together become an ‘ecosystem of response’ which deals with an opposing team. Each member of the team is expected to play a certain role, and works synchronously with other team members to achieve shared goals and deal with the challenges as they emerge.

Just like football or other sports teams, there are some formations like ‘task forces’ which are supposed to act as ‘ecosystems of response’.

Our challenge here is not to create new formations to deal with a crisis or a challenge, but to teach/enable existing formations (institutions and communities) to transform into ecosystems of response.

But real pay-offs come to a society when numerous institutions (like banks and government agencies), communities and industrial institutions, and purposive groups of individuals (like socio-religions bodies), all learn to act as ecosystems of response who can act purposively to achieve societal and community goals.

3. Response models

If organizations, or communities, or groups of individuals have to learn to respond effectively to challenges, or work together to achieve shared goals, they must go beyond the existing models of working, thinking, and living.

Existing models of working, thinking, and living are designed for productivity and efficiency, not for speed, agility, responsiveness, and purpose-oriented behavior. Furthermore, they are designed around the narrow self-interest of individuals, and not around the welfare of the larger collective.

If we want organizations and communities to become ‘ecosystems of response’ who will be able to deal with a crisis, or any challenge, we need to help them learn to adopt new dynamic models of living and working which we call “response models”.

It means large corporations and government institutions need to be provided new community engagement models that force them to expand their thinking to include shared purpose and collective welfare, beyond profit and growth.

It means communities need to be provided with new models of response not just for an immediate health crisis but also for other community-level challenges such as unemployment, increased value addition from their production of good and services and addressing gaps in access to government schemes and priorities, which impact both the individuals within the community, and the community as a whole.

It means individuals and families need to be provided with models via their communities so that they can better their well-being and prospects.
Thus, if we want a community to become an ‘ecosystem of response’ we need to support it with new ‘response models’ that it can adapt or take up which will allow it to use/leverage all its existing resources in the best possible way to help communities.

In a challenging time, everyone—organizations, communities, families, and individuals, all need new ‘response models’ to deal with the challenges faced at their levels.

**The opportunity**

Seen from the above perspective, there is massive educational and enablement challenge/opportunity we face:

Can we catalyze hundreds and thousands of communities and commercial and non-commercial organizations into becoming ‘ecosystems of response’, who will not only share in the immediate responsibility of engaging with the present health crisis, but also share in the longer-term responsibility of nation-building and social-regeneration.

Even if a single organization with a nation-wide footprint transforms into an ecosystem of response, the impact can be significant.

*How is this to be achieved at speed and scale?*

The answer lies in a four-stage intervention model:

**Stage 1:** Identify different community morphologies (such as slum communities, agricultural communities, trading communities, etc.) which might have distinct challenges and needs in the months to come.

**Stage 2:** Create ‘future roadmaps’ that anticipate rather than react to the potential problems which these communities face. These can be improved upon as the situation evolves.

**Stage 3:** Provide ‘response models’ for as many of the potential challenges likely to come up as can be visualized early. They can be rapidly refined and evolved based on experiences and early trials in some communities

**Stage 4:** Ensure that the feedback from the response models creates policy and process-level responses from institutions and individuals.

*Who will undertake such a massive intervention involving ‘dynamic community education’ in our society?*

It is here that large social organizations, the political class, large socio-religious movements and NGOs have a role to play.

It is also possible for large public sector organizations, such as banks and oil retailing companies who have a nation-wide footprint and presence in thousands of communities, to play a positive and enabling role, in community interventions.

Members of these groups can take on the role of Response Enablers, who will play different roles as this crisis evolves.

Firstly, response enablers may be necessary to help promote the creation of a pool of active citizens within communities and help them organize into ‘ecosystems of response.’

Secondly, Response Enablers address the challenge of helping communities respond proactively and effectively to the evolving nature of any crisis or challenge. This means that they must be in a position to rapidly connect the latest priorities and actions at a national/state level with the specific responses at the community/ecosystem level.

Thirdly, Response Enablers play the role of resilience builders in communities who are able to help the community respond to all kinds of crisis and challenges in a systematic and knowledge-based manner.

They now become the bridge between communities and government to ensure rapid return to normalcy and positive growth. This means providing various communities with
solutions and models of dealing with their unique combination of challenges in a manner appropriate to the particular needs of each community, and helping them with access to right services for necessary help.

This group effectively acts as the configurator who translates the governments’ multi-pronged support into appropriate solutions for the community.

Scaling such an approach will help create a *nation-wide community response platform*. Such a platform will help the government:

(i) handle various kinds of crises impacting different communities
(ii) support and accelerate a range of development initiatives involving a direct participation by the people of this country.

**Case: Architecting a Community Response Model during the Corona Crisis**

How do response enablers harness “collective capacity to respond” in a crisis such as this one?

*The first task of the response enablers is to enable the chosen communities to self-identify themselves as “ecosystems of response”* instead of self-identifying themselves as passive bystanders in the interplay between the government and the individual.

What does an Ecosystem of Response mean in this context?

It could range from buying essentials for the elderly, supporting those suffering from other ailments, providing care and concern, to helping weaker members tide over cash-flow issues and providing informal credit. The list is endless.

In short, it means creating community level ability to handle the human cost of — first the lockdown, second the illness itself, third the recovery of the community and society beyond the lockdown.

Communities in this context may be defined in multiple ways: by geography— such as a group of people who live together in a slum or an apartment complex, a religious group – such as a church or temple community, a business group such as the trading communities, an ethnic group, etc.

But what is critical is that these groups or communities are catalyzed into ecosystems of response at the earliest so that they become aware of their role and responsibility in

(i) protecting themselves at a community-level against the threat of transmission,
(ii) building resilience in the community to deal with the crisis, and
(iii) partnering with the government authorities in handling an unprecedented crisis as it unfolds.

A parallel task for the response enablers is awakening active citizenship within these communities.

Harnessing the power of communities will require the creation of active citizens in every community who will proactively aim to protect the community from the spread of the disease. For example, the government can ask housing colonies to nominate one active citizen for every 10-20 families.

During the lockdown phase, Active Citizens will be urgently needed to help in reconciling the need to (i) keep social distancing and ensure effective lockdown on one side, and (ii) ensure access to all the living necessities on the other side.

During the social distancing phase and during the early stages of community transmission, we can expect that a large proportion of the population will actively avoid reporting, given the
education levels, fear of institutional authority, and the threat of quarantine. Active Citizens will be needed to create a highly vigilant community that will identify cases early and control the spread of the disease within the community due to unreported and misdiagnosed cases.

As the crisis proceeds, it is these active citizens who can enable those affected to access the right kind of help, and ensure that they are quarantined without overloading the larger institutional infrastructure. Given the paucity of healthcare resources, it is critical to follow a staged approach to getting treatment, with mild cases being handled at the community-level itself.

Beyond the period of the immediate crisis, it will be the other, economic and social consequences of lockdowns, and extended periods of income loss that will make themselves felt.

At this stage the response enablers can help active citizens to translate the range of measures that the government will take up into effective solutions for the community.

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**Reminiscences of Sargachhi**

(Continued from page 15...)

will? All this is happening as a result of my own karmaphala, or the fruits of my past actions.

As a result of my past actions, I develop attraction for God, and somehow conditions become favourable. Everything happens as a result of our past actions. A boy from Tentulia heard Shraddhananda’s lecture at Berhampore and immediately felt an attraction. A thousand people had heard that lecture; how is it that none of them felt the attraction? A potter or a farmer’s son may feel the attraction – all this is due to his own past actions.

Noble thoughts are reflected in the mirror of a pure mind. Sometimes we see a person who initially led a bad life, only later on to lead a good life. Perhaps he had strayed from the path of yoga and suffered due to his sins. But as soon as that causal force was exhausted, the earlier good impression raised its head. Such was the case of Vilvamangala. But it is noteworthy that even when Vilvamangala was in the company of a prostitute, he did not lose the one-pointed focus of his mind.

As soon as the impurity of the mind is exhausted, the sun of knowledge rises. In such a case, where is the scope for Brahman’s grace? Whatever happened was the result of my own previous actions. Although this is true, we should always pray to God to purify our mind and enable us to perform selfless actions. This is because, even though we may perform actions for an infinite period of time, their fruits will not be exhausted. The mind will become pure only by thinking of God, the purest of all. In such a mind alone will Truth be reflected.

In the Gita it is stated ‘O Partha, all actions without exception culminate in knowledge.’ (4:33) The devotee who knows all this can say, ‘Everything happens by God’s will’, with the idea that one day he too will see Brahman in all beings and realise that everything happens according to that One Will. This too is a kind of spiritual practice.

We cannot always remain in the state of Soham, ‘I am That [Brahman]’. Therefore, we try to experience this manifest world as Brahman by serving it with the spirit of Shiva Jnane Jiva Seva [serving fellow beings looking upon them as the Lord].

**Question**: The Gita speaks of vikarma and akarma (4:17). What do they mean?

**Maharaj**: Akarma is action that is contrary to the noble ideal of the sannyasin; for example, looking upon a dear person’s family as one’s own family. That action is vikarma, which is totally devoid of the sannyasi’s high ideals and which causes great harm; for example, excessive mingling with women and householders.

(To be continued...)
What is a Virus?

We have to first understand the simple structure of a typical cell very briefly. Then even as laymen, we will be able to understand how the structure of coronavirus is different from a typical cell. It is a common man’s understanding and knowledge of Coronavirus which is the key to the implementation of preventive measures and solutions to prevent pandemic.

“Protoplasm is the physical basis of life” is the fundamental concept of cell biology and life science as defined by William Huxley, an English biologist, and anthropologist. The cell content within the cell membrane is called protoplasm. The matrix residing within the cell membrane and outside the centrally located nucleus is called cytoplasm. So, cytoplasm with organelles and nucleus containing the genetic material (DNA) are the constituents of protoplasm.

Virus as a bridge between the living and non-living

A virus is an unusual very primitive parasitic entity that has both living and non-living characteristics. It is a mysterious invisible, non-living, micro-crystal or dust particle when outside the living host. But it assumes life soon after it enters a living host (ranging from amoeba to man and also plants). Therefore, it is an obligatory parasite. It has neither cytoplasm nor cell organelles. It has only genetic material, either DNA or RNA surrounded by a protein coat. Therefore, the virus is considered as a bridge between the living and the non-living. This is known to all those who studied biology and theories on the origin of life.

Understanding the nature of Coronavirus

This coronavirus is a virus belonging to the family Coronaviridae. It is opined that the original reservoir of this virus is a non-human host, the horse-shoe bat (in which it does not
cause any harm) from which it jumped to humans. The immune system of the bat is distinct from the human immune system and allows the virus to rapidly multiply within the bat while also protecting it from the harmful effects. Accordingly, bats have been the source of other recent viral disease outbreaks such as SARS, MERS and Ebola. This coronavirus emerged in the city of Wuhan, China in December 2019 and has spread all over the world in a short period. This epidemic is now known as COVID-19 and the virus is known as SARS-CoV-2. The virus is a mutant variety of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) coronavirus. This non-living micro dust-like form of the virus is transmitted between people through respiratory droplets when an infected person sneezes or coughs.

**Structure of the Coronavirus**

This coronavirus is a spherical, single-stranded RNA (genetic material) virus with a protein coat. It has corona like extensions called spike proteins on its surface. Hence the name coronavirus. These spike proteins bind to the receptors on the host cell. It is called novel coronavirus (nCoV) because of these spike proteins which are different from those of other coronaviruses.

**Fast replication process once it enters the host**

In general, coronavirus swiftly multiplies once it enters the living host. Its RNA replicates after entering the host and produces multiple copies of itself. These RNA particles get themselves covered by protein coats and then come out of the host cells only to infect new cells. During infection, they enter through the mouth or nostrils through respiratory droplets, gradually make their way into the bronchial tract and lungs and multiply in the alveoli of the lungs. This reduces the expanding and contracting mechanism of the alveoli leading to fibrosis of the lung. As a result, the function of our oxygen supplying organ, the lungs, gets badly mutilated and respiration gets hindered making us unable to breathe. This results in the shortage of oxygen supply to the brain and the entire body and the patient dies within a few days.

**Why Coronavirus is so lethal and fast spreading?**

How to break this protein coat of the virus and paralyze its RNA when it is in the non-living form outside the host and in a living form inside the host is a matter of research. Of course, its duration of life outside the host is very limited to the extent of 3 or 4 days, especially in a tropical hot climate like India.
where the relative humidity is also higher. It is believed that a type of WBCs called the natural killer cells (NK cells) which are a component of our innate immunity and which resist any pathogen as the first line of defense are not very effective against these viruses. People may be carriers of the virus for 1 - 14 days before developing symptoms. The most common symptoms are fever, dry cough, tiredness, and excessive drowsiness. In severe cases, breathing will be difficult. If not contained, it can be fatal, particularly in individuals with co-morbid health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure, and chronic diseases of heart, lungs, kidneys and liver and infants aged 12 months and under. Since the coronavirus is spread through respiratory droplets, it is advised not to touch the nose and mouth as these viruses stay on the surface of the hand in a viable state for quite a long time. Also, it is advised to wash the hands thoroughly for at least 20-25 seconds frequently with soap. Sanitizers can also be used to keep the hands clean.

**Prevention of COVID-19 - The scientific and social approach:**

Our body’s immune system is yet to develop a new strategy to counter this novel mutant coronavirus. Presently, our WBCs can kill many other invading pathogenic forms like bacteria and others. But we have not yet developed an immune system that can kill this SARS-CoV-2. So, we are neither able to effectively deal with this coronavirus outside the body nor inside. The great challenge now is to find a way to deactivate this RNA of coronavirus when it enters the human body by our own defense mechanism or by antibiotics or by developing a vaccine. Since it is fast spreading through the human agency, the epidemic has now become a pandemic and has killed thousands in a short time all over the world. One definite way to contain the pandemic is by making humans inaccessible to it by social distancing. People affected by coronavirus have to be isolated in quarantine. Thus, the virus chain can be broken by not allowing it to enter the human host, so that it perishes after being deprived of a host for a considerable period.

**Social distancing and “Stay at Home” are the only Mantra**

That is why we have messages of preventing coronavirus infection on the telephone ring tone. We should broadcast such messages in all media and all possible manner. It is with this intention that the Government of India and all the States have gone for strict lockdown. That is why the COVID-19 preventing “mantras” are “stay at home” and “maintain social distance” everywhere. Even while shopping one must maintain a distance of one or two meters from the next person. ‘Prevention is better than cure’ is the golden proverb we all have heard, but in the context of coronavirus prevention is the only cure thus far.

**Therapeutic approaches being tested for potential treatment of COVID-19 in the future**

Scientists and physicians all around the world are working together to explore potential treatments for coronavirus. Clinical trials are underway to test a number of candidate treatments that are already approved and safely administered to patients for other diseases.
These include the anti-malarial agents chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine and HIV treatments lopinavir and ritonavir. An experimental antiviral agent called Remdesivir that was previously developed for treating Ebola is also being explored. Another treatment called convalescent plasma is also under investigation that involves transfusion into critically ill patients with plasma obtained from the blood of patients who have recovered from COVID-19 and built up high levels of antibodies to SARS-CoV-2 to help stimulate a stronger immune response. Several unconventional approaches for rapid vaccine development are being explored and they are expected to deliver results in 12-18 months. The first patient was recently dosed in a clinical trial in the USA for a candidate mRNA based vaccine which encodes for a stabilized form of the coronavirus spike protein.

Need for a positive attitude at the time of fear and uncertainty

It is very hard to retain positive energy when we are being constantly bombarded with the news of death and economic crisis. However, lockdown is a golden opportunity for reflection, spending quality time with family and exploring hobbies we never had a chance to pursue due to the unending grind of routine life. While social media is a blessing in times of a lockdown to keep in touch with family and friends, it is also a source of rumors and misinformation. We should only rely on government agencies for the most accurate information and guidelines.

Need for basic existential solidarity transcending the barriers of caste, creed and religions

It is time for we Indians to demonstrate that we are all solidly united transcending the barriers of caste, creed, religious customs and traditions to protect not only our country but the whole world. Let us pray intensely for the well-being of all. Let us invoke the noble and powerful survival instinct and motherly caring instinct hidden in all of us. Let us work together constructively, lovingly as Indians. This feeling of unity, amity, and love for each other is needed now to keep the COVID-19 pandemic away. This should be our religion, throb of life, the wave of mind and line of action. So, let us together pray for protection from this lethal coronavirus and the well-being of all. The famous French surgeon and Nobel laureate, Dr. Alexis Carrel, a French surgeon and biologist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1912 says, “Prayer is the most powerful form of energy one can generate. As a physician, I have seen the patients coming out of melancholy and disease by the serene efforts of prayer.”

Our united and sincere cry of the soul shall be heard by the Almighty, the Omniscient, Spiritual Consciousness which has created and is sustaining this universe. Let our patriotism, universal brotherhood and unity find its true expression in this hour of worst crisis. Let the scientific capability of the West and the spiritual capability of the East come together and work reciprocally to fight this terrible pandemic and avoid nemesis. If all the political and religious leaders, government employees, the police force, the medical, pharmaceutical and nursing brigade, and the business community work with sincerity and honesty as per the scientifically defined line of action, we shall not only conquer this coronavirus disaster but shall also create a new eco-friendly, clean and a spiritually vibrant world of understanding, friendship and love.
"Stupid," Naren yelled at his sisters. “Wait till we catch you,” the girls chased him around the courtyard. When he saw that they might corner him, he dashed out of the house and jumped into a drain. “Idiot,” he shouted, sticking out his tongue. The sisters stopped at the edge of the drain, afraid to step into the dirty water. Naren clapped his hands and laughed gleefully.

Complaining to Bhuvaneshwari Devi, the girls said, “Naren is calling us names ma... from where has he learnt all these bad words?” Their mother looked at them in surprise, “It has been only two days since he began going to school. He must have picked them up there.” She called Naren and when he ran in, she caught him by the hand and marched him to Vishwanath Datta’s office. “Tell your father the names you been calling your sisters.”


Vishwanath looked grave. “Do you know the meaning of these words?” Naren shook his head. “It is rude to talk like that. You must apologize to your sisters.”

When Naren left the room, Bhuvaneshwari Devi told her husband, “I’m not sending him to this school.”

“Alright,” Vishwanath agreed, “I know of a good tutor. Naren and his cousins can begin studying at home from tomorrow.”

Early the next day an earnest, bespectacled man arrived and was shown into the worship hall. Five little boys stood up to greet him. Gesturing them to sit, the tutor announced he would teach them the alphabet. “I already know it, sir,” Naren beamed, “my mother taught it to me.”

Borun Ghosh raised an eyebrow, “Let’s hear it.”

Taking a deep breath, Naren recited the alphabet. “Good,” Borun said approvingly. “We will study the sentence, but first I will give the others their lesson.”

When Borun took Naren to another part of the hall, the latter lay down on the carpeted floor. Borun was taken aback. “This is my classroom,” he said, “even though it is within your home. Please do not sleep.” Naren sat up but as soon as the lesson began, he lay down again and closed his eyes. What a strange boy, the tutor shook his head, but continued to read aloud.
For the next few days Borun watched Naren in growing anger. Every time he began the lesson, his little student made himself comfortable and shut his eyes. At last, unable to control himself, he shook the boy vigorously. “How dare you sleep in my class,” he shouted, “I’m going to complain to your father.”

The other boys hurried over just as Naren managed to slip from Borun’s tight grasp. “Sir, you are mistaken! I heard every word,” he said looking distressed.

“Then tell me what I have been teaching you all these days.”

“You were teaching the past, present and future tense of verbs.”

The tutor gasped. Naren’s cousins exchanged glances, smiling behind their hands.

“Give me an example for each tense,” Borun demanded.

Promptly, Naren gave proof of his learning and when Borun stared at him dumbfounded, the other boys chorused, “He is very intelligent, sir. He knows the entire Ramayana and Mahabharat too!”

Finding his voice, the tutor asked, “How do you manage to memorize your lessons so well child?”

Naren looked up at him earnestly, “When I close my eyes, I block out all sounds so that only your voice enters my ears, and then I understand the lesson very well.”

Borun Ghosh patted Naren’s curly head, “I wish all my students were like you!”

How has all the knowledge in the world been gained but by the concentration of the powers of the mind? The world is ready to give up its secrets if we only know how to knock, how to give it the necessary blow. The strength and force of the blow come through concentration. There is no limit to the power of the human mind. The more concentrated it is, the more power is brought to bear on one point; that is the secret.

— Swami Vivekananda
What we can learn from Swami Vivekananda’s Plague Manifesto - for our response to the Covid-19 crisis

A brief background about the Plague Manifesto:

In May 1898, when a plague epidemic broke out in Calcutta, large numbers of terror-stricken residents fled the city in panic. Swami Vivekananda, who was recuperating his health in Darjeeling, rushed to Calcutta to join in the relief work.

The first thing the Swami did was draft a plague manifesto in Bengali and Hindi, which was printed and freely distributed amongst the people, which considerably reassured them.

He also devised the plans and completed the arrangements for how the service was to be conducted — which included teaching sanitation and cleanliness to the people; organizing segregation camps for housing patients in compliance with Government regulations; and using appropriate ways of nursing the patients (which do not offend the community).

When the plague appeared in Calcutta again the next year (1899), the Ramakrishna Mission plague service was promptly instituted on March 31, under the Swami’s instructions, and did considerable work in a well-organised way.

Swami Vivekananda himself went to live in the slums to inspire courage in the people and cheer up the workers.

The whole management was placed in the hands of Sister Nivedita and Swami Sadananda, assisted by Swamis Shivananda, Nityananda and Atmananda.

“Come, let us give up this false fear and, having faith in the infinite compassion of God, gird our loins and enter the field of action.

Let us live pure and clean lives.

Disease, fear of an epidemic, etc., will vanish into thin air by His grace.

Excerpt from the Plague Manifesto; The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 9

> Turn overleaf for an action plan...
Key Messages from the Plague Manifesto which we can apply today

We feel happy when you are happy, and we suffer when you suffer. Therefore, during these days of extreme adversity, we are striving and ceaselessly praying for your welfare and an easy way to save you from disease and the fear of an epidemic.

If that grave disease — fearing which both the high and the low, the rich and the poor are all fleeing the city — ever really comes in our midst, then even if we perish while serving and nursing you, we will consider ourselves fortunate because you are all embodiments of God. He who thinks otherwise — out of vanity, superstition or ignorance — offends God and incurs great sin. There is not the slightest doubt about it.

We humbly pray to you — please do not panic due to unfounded fear. Depend upon God and calmly try to find the best means to solve the problem. Otherwise, join hands with those who are doing that very thing.

We should...

- A) Depend on the God within
- B) Calmly try to find the best solution possible

Or, join hands with others who are working to find answers...

All people serving at the frontline are serving embodiments of God

We can consider ourselves fortunate if we are able to use this opportunity to serve God in man.

If others suffer, each one of us suffers; when others are happy, we are happy — because we are all essentially One.

We humbly pray to you — please do not panic due to unfounded fear. Depend upon God and calmly try to find the best means to solve the problem. Otherwise, join hands with those who are doing that very thing.

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We humbly pray to you — please do not panic due to unfounded fear. Depend upon God and calmly try to find the best means to solve the problem. Otherwise, join hands with those who are doing that very thing.

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We can consider ourselves fortunate if we are able to use this opportunity to serve God in man.
In order to remove the fear of the epidemic, you should sing Nāma Sankirtanam [the name of the Lord] every evening and in every locality.

Each one of us can chant the name of God and send out positive thoughts to the whole world.

What is there to fear? Through Collective Action the effects of the disease in our country and on our people can be mitigated.

What is there to fear? Through God's will, nothing of the terrible form that plague takes, as seen in other places, has occurred in Calcutta. The government authorities have also been particularly helpful to us. So what is there to fear?

Come, let us give up this false fear and, having faith in the infinite compassion of God, gird our loins and enter the field of action. Let us live pure and clean lives. Disease, fear of an epidemic, etc., will vanish into thin air by His grace.

Arise! Awake!
— Give up false fear
— Have faith
— Enter the field of action
— And live correctly.

Disease, fear of an epidemic, etc. will disappear with the Lord's grace.
Guidelines for Action

1. Keep the environment clean
   “Always keep the house and its premises, the rooms, clothes, bed, drain, etc., clean.

2. Strengthen your body and your immune system (build physical strength)
   “Do not eat stale, spoiled food; take fresh and nutritious food instead. A weak body is more susceptible to disease.

3. Strengthen your mind through positive thoughts (build mental strength)
   “Always keep the mind cheerful. Everyone will die once. Cowards suffer the pangs of death again and again, solely due to the fear in their own minds.

4. Strengthen yourself by trying to be as ethical as you can (build character strength)
   “Fear never leaves those who earn their livelihoods by unethical means or who cause harm to others. Therefore, at this time when we face the great fear of death, desist from all such behaviour.

5. Sustain and strengthen your psychic energy
   “During the period of epidemic, abstain from anger and from lust — even if you are householders.

6. Try to follow reliable sources of information — don’t fall prey to WhatsApp and false news
   “Do not pay any heed to rumours.

The Mother of the Universe is Herself the support of the helpless.
The Mother is assuring us: "Fear not! Fear not!"

The Vedanta Kesari May 2020
A spray of water hit Poorva’s face. Her eyes snapped open. The first thing that she registered was loud laughter. She turned her head sharply and saw some children playing in the water. How did she get here, to the bank of a river? Poorva sat up, rubbed her eyes, and drank in the new surroundings. And where was Swami Thaatha?

Looking around, she spotted him sitting under a tree. What was he watching so intently? Poorva followed his gaze and saw a couple walking by. The man held a baby in his arms. Something prompted her to follow them. Briskly brushing the sand off her skirt, Poorva ran behind them and was soon close at their heels. She could see the baby clearly. It lay absolutely still, giving the impression that it was lifeless, yet its face glowed with breathtaking radiance.

The man and his wife entered a temple courtyard and stopped to pray at the foot of a tree. Then they slung a cloth cradle from one of its branches and gently placed the child inside. Once again, they clasped their hands in prayer and soon left the place. Poorva felt sad. The world seemed to be full of cruel parents abandoning their babies.

“Listen to the story of this baby before you arrive at any conclusion.” The Swami’s voice came from behind and she turned around to greet him. She was getting quite used to his sudden appearances and disappearances.

“We’re at the temple of Lord Polindhu Nindra Piraan of Thirukkurugoor,” the Swami began. “It is a tiny hamlet in the kingdom of the Pandyas. Incidentally, the river which you saw was the Thaamraparani. The two people whom you followed here were Kaari and Udaya Nangai. Kaari is a chieftain in this part of the country. He and his wife are great devotees of Lord Nambi of Thirukkurungudi. They had prayed to Him for a child. Through
the temple priest, God had assured them that they would be blessed with a divine child. Kaari and Udaya Nangai’s baby is an incarnation of Vishwaksena, the commander-in-chief of Vishnu. He is different from other children because he neither eats nor cries. So his parents have named him Maaran – one who is different.

Maaran will grow into a saint who will be known and respected, through the ages, as Nammaazhvaar. Nam, a Tamil word, means ‘our’ – so ‘Nammaazhvaar’ is ‘our own Aazhvaar’. Thirukkurugoor, the place of his birth, will be renamed ‘Aazhvaar Thirunagari’.

Also, this tamarind tree, under which the child has been placed, is none other than Adhisesa, the serpent ‘couch’ of Vishnu. That thousand-headed snake has come down to earth as this tree to protect the child from sun and rain. In times to come, this tree will also be worshipped as ‘Thirup-puli-Aazhvaar’. Of course, it is not included among the twelve Aazhvaars.”

The Swami now paused to clear his throat and Poorva wanted him to clear her doubt as well. She asked, “I know puli in Tamil means ‘tamarind’ and I know the meaning of ‘Aazhvaar’. But what is the meaning of ‘Thiru’? Ever so many words begin with it!”

“Good question!” complimented the Swami. “Thiru is a special word that denotes the auspiciousness of things. It also refers to Goddess Lakshmi.”

Even as Poorva registered this piece of information, the tree disappeared.

(To be continued…)
Maari – the Mother

PROF SUDHA SESHAYYAN

This article introduces Goddess Maariamman who is the local deity in several villages across South India. Devotees worship Her for relief from viral diseases and chicken pox, measles, etc.

In the hoary tradition of Mother Goddess worship, Goddess Maariamman ranks high, both in belief and effect.

The goddess is hailed by different names like Maari amman, Maari aathaa, Maari and Maari aayi and is seen almost in every village of Tamil Nadu. She resides under the neem tree or near an ant-hill. She is often hooded by a five-headed or a seven-headed snake. She expedites marriages and grants children. More than others, she removes infirmity and disease.

The Tamil term ‘maari’ means ‘rain’. The ancient Tamils personified rain and the effects of rain, namely, coolness and fertility as a beautiful woman and in turn, worshipped her. In as much as a mother feeds her children, rain feeds the world and the soil. Hence, the ancient people looked at ‘rain’ as the Mother who offers fertility and flourish to the soil thereby also making the people of the earth healthy and prosperous. ‘Maari’ – the term for rain, and ‘amman’ – the term for mother, were combined to give the goddess the name ‘Maari amman’.

Why is she a graama devatha of almost every village?

There is an interesting and legendary story about maari amman.

She was originally called Renuka. She was the wife of a rishi by name, Jamadagni. The sons of a cruel king by name Kaartha Veerya, killed Jamadagni. Seeing the cruel fate that befell her beloved husband, Renuka jumped into fire. But as she was an amsa or aspect of Shakti, her burning in fire would have terrible consequences for the world. Recognising this, Devendra, king of the devatas, who is also the god of rains, immediately rained over the fire to pacify Renuka. The fire was extinguished. However, the garments that Renuka wore had all been burnt down and in the bargain, blebs had appeared all over her partially burnt body. Finding a huge neem tree nearby, she immediately draped herself in bunches of neem twigs and leaves. She reached a small colony of people nearby. She was hungry and so asked them for food. Beholding such a beautiful woman in such a pitiable state, they offered her...
rice, jaggery and flour. They thought jiggery and flour will give her immediate relief from hunger and also provide with immediate energy. Seeing her burnt in some places and wanting to cool her body, they gave her tender coconut water and a watery preparation of jaggery called the paanagam. Some even offered her some dresses. Accepting all that was offered, Renuka went to the devaloka in search of Jamadagni. The gods there pacified both of them.

Lord Shiva then appeared before Renuka, Jamadagni and the gods. Since Renuka is an aspect of Shakti, the Lord reminded her of her responsibility of protecting mankind. The Lord also gave the following dictat and boons:

- Any bleb or pustule that appears on the skin of human kind will subdue and disappear by the grace of Renuka;
- The neem leaves that she wore will be instilled with anti-septic and anti-disease properties;
- The food offered to her by the village people will thenceforth become her naivedhya;
- Since the rain God poured rain for her sake, she also will be christened ‘maari’ (meaning rain)
- And Maari would shower Her Grace like rain.

Renuka, who came down to the Bhuloka on Lord Shiva’s command, stayed at places where people would congregate. Thus, she came to reside under trees and at the common places.

Maari is also sometimes called Muthu Maari. ‘Muthu’ means ‘pearl’. Since the blebs resemble pearls in appearance (globular) and she dons them as ornaments, she is called by the name ‘Muthu maari’. The legendary Tamil poet Bharathiyar composed a song on muthu maari in which he calls her desa muthu maari, thus making her Bharatha Maatha. In yet another verse, he sings ulagathu naayakiye engal muthu maariyamma, “O, the ruler of the world, our (dear) Muthu maari.”

Maari amman -- the goddess of cure

Maariyamman is traditionally worshipped when people are afflicted with viral diseases and diseases which cause blebs. To the latter category belong the small pox, chicken pox, mumps, measles and related diseases. Even today, when someone in the family is afflicted with mumps or measles, the others of the family maintain vratham. Devotees undertake paadha yaathra or pilgrimage on foot, to her temple carrying the water pot, turmeric and neem leaves. Such paadha yaathraas are customarily undertaken before the onset of summer, when viral diseases are on the rise.

There are several temples dedicated to Goddess Maari amman in Tamil Nadu. The goddess graces as Samayapuram Maariyamma, Salem Kottai Maariyamma, Bannari Maariyamma, Ellai Maariyamma, Punnainallur Maariyamma, Thiruverkadu Karu Maariyamma, Virudhunagar Maari and many more. There are some Maariyamman temples in Karnataka and the Telugu region. The Tamil people have built temples to Maariyamma in all those places they live. Thus, there are Maariyamman temples in Singapore, Malaysia, Pretoria in South Africa, and Indonesia.

How does Maariyamma appear?

She is young and beautiful with a reddish complexion. She wears a red saree. Very often, she is depicted to have two or four hands. If she has two hands, she bears the abhaya and the vara hasthaa in them. If she has four hands, in addition to the abhaya and vara mudhraas, she holds the paasa and the anuksha in the upper hands. She also prefers to hold a thrishool and is so often referred to as ‘thrishooli’. Sometimes, to indicate that her capabilities are beyond description, she is depicted to have eight or more hands.
Why is she often depicted with only the head?

Devotees often find Maariyamman in the form of only her head. The popular story behind this tradition goes like this: Jamadagni was a great rishi. Renuka, the beautiful daughter of Varma Raja, married the rishi. They had four or five sons (there are differences in the number in various references; and differences in the names too). Thannuva, Anula, Viswaavasu, Parashurama by one account; Vasu, Viswaavasu, Brihudhyanu, Brithwakanwa, Bhadhra raama by another; Som, Ruthu, Thurvaasu, Megh, Parashurama by yet another. Whatever the list, the last son was Parashurama.

One day, Renuka was collecting water from the Ganga. As she was looking at the water surface, she saw the reflection of a gandharva flying through the skies. Attracted by Renuka's beauty, the gandharva named Chithrasena kept circling the same area. Attracted by the gandhavar's image repeatedly floating on the water surface, Renuka thought for a second – 'How handsome he is!'

Jamadagni immediately knew of the incident through his jnanadrishti. Enraged that Renuka could be attracted by another man, he ordered that she be beheaded. The elder sons would not carry out the command. The youngest of the lot, though attached to the mother, agreed to fulfil the words of the father. And he did so. After beheading his mother, when Parashurama approached his father, Jamadagni praised him for his vairagya and courage. The son then sought a boon that his mother should be brought back to life. The disturbed Jamadagni gave waters empowered with mantra sakti to be sprinkled on Renuka's body. Parashurama rushed to the spot where his mother's head lay. He could find the head but not the rest of the body. As he frantically searched for her body, he was told that her body was thrown in an area where lay the bodies of several other women. In his anxiety, Parashurama fixed his mother's head over the body of some other woman. Renuka came alive and stood before Jamadagni, of course with a stranger's body.

Jamadagni knew of her powers as the shakti amsa. Not willing to deprive mankind of her grace and benefits, he requested her to reside in the villages and places of human settlements. Since only the head was that of Renuka, these temples have only that part of the figurine.

Samayapuram Mahamaayi

Maariyamma of Samayapuram, near Thruchiraapalli has a special name, Mahamaayi.

A Chozha king of the region, had his sister married to a king of the Ganga dynasty. He also gave the sister, a gift of a fortress in a place called Kannanoor (which was near the present day Samayapuram). In course of time, the fortress became dilapidated. It came to be known as the 'Kottai medu' or the 'aranmanai medu' (Kottai=Fortress, aranmanai = palace, medu = raised area). Neem trees covered the place.

Years passed by. There was an idol of Vaishnavi devi in the temple of Srirangam (which is a few kilometres south west of Samayapuram). She was extremely fierce. A godman of the temple opined that the idol of Vaishnavi devi should be resigned to a forlorn area, less used by people. Accordingly, the idol was carried away. The party that carried the idol rested overnight in a place and proceeded to Kannanoor the next day. Vaishnavi devi was left at Kannanoor in the Kottai medu.

The goddess was pleased to reside in the neem forest of Kottai medu and came to be called Mahaa maayi. Vaishnavi devi is the Maya shakti of Lord Vishnu. To indicate that she is maha shakthi, she was initially called Mahaa maayi. The name became mahamaayi in due
course. She is also called Kannaathaal, which name is a shrunken form of kannanoor aathaal (the mother of Kannanoor). The place where the party stayed overnight is called Inaam samayapuram and on the eighth night of the annual Maariyamman festival, the goddess goes to the place where she rested for a night and recaps the same incident.

During the 17th century, the region of Trichy was part of the Madurai Nayak kingdom. An army battalion was stationed at Samayapuram, which at that point of time was called Vikramapuram. The chieftains noticed Mahaa Maayi in the neem forest. They appealed to her for victory in the wars and also vowed that they would build a temple to her if they were bestowed with her grace and victory. Vijayaranga Chockanaatha Naayakkar, the grandson of Rani Mangammal is supposed to have built the temple. The goddess never lets down her devotees.

Mahamaayi maariyammaa of Samayapuram has eight hands. She is seated with the left leg folded and the right leg hanging down, on a high pedestal, with the five headed snake hooding over her. The right foot is resting on the heads of rakshasas. The eight hands hold sword, skull, trishool, bell, bow, arrow, paasa and damaru. Though she holds so many weapons in her hands, her face is full of peace and grace. Her smile captivates all. She is called by several other names – Akhilaanda naayaki because she rules over the universe, Kaarana soundhari because she is responsible for the creation and sustenance of the universe, Saambraani vasaki because she is satisfied with the incense and fragrance of simple things, Aayiram kannudaiyaal because she bestows all her anugraha through her eyes, Veppilaikkaari because she has the neem leaves as her identity, and Aathaal because she is the mother.

Mahaa maayi protects from all kinds of diseases. She also gives fertility. Worshipping her with pongal in the Tamil month of Aadi (equivalent to Jyeshta) is an integral part of Tamil culture. The devotees build a mud stove within the temple area, and cook pongal in mud pots. The pongal is offered to Aathaal as naivedhya. Yet another custom, is the Maa vilakku. The original offering to Renuka as she came out of fire may be remembered here – Rice, jaggery and flour. All the three are mixed and offered. The same mixture is used to make small dhiyaas and the lamps are lit before her. Maha maayi is also happy to accept lemon garland and a garland of red flowers.

Punnainallur Maariyamma

In the 17th century, Thanjavur was ruled by Chatrapati Venkoji Rao. Appearing in his dream one night, Maariyamma announced that she was dwelling in the Punnai forest (Oil nut tree or Alexandrian laurel) about 3 km. away from Thanjavur. The king built a temple for her. In the same dynasty was another king by name Thuljaji. Thulja’s daughter lost her eyesight, probably due to some disorder. The king prayed to Maariyamma and the princess regained her sight. Even today, it is customary for devotees to pray to Punnainallur Maariyamma with small replicas of the body part when one is ill.

Bannari Maariyamman is another famous goddess. In the steel town of Salem resides Kottai Maariyamma. There are several other maaris in Salem itself. Sevvapet maari, Gugai maari, Mettu theru maari, Kumaraswamippatti maari, Ammapettai maari, Cmaari, Paavaadi maari, Aatrora maari, Pudhutheru maari are all maaris surrounding the centrally located Kottai maari. While Kottai maari is called Periya maari or big maari, the rest of them are called Chinna maari or small maari.

Maariyamma is the darling deity of Tamil Nadu. And of course, she is the equivalent of Shitala Devi worshipped in West Bengal and some parts of North India. ❆
APPEAL FOR FREE DISPENSARY

We pray that Sri Ramakrishna and Madurai Sri Meenakshi-Sundareshwar Shiva will bestow THEIR blessings on you all.

Our earnest appeal to devotees, well-wishers, and the public is to extend helping hand for our Free Dispensary Services.


Medical Services in the following special fields are rendered free of cost to all the patients without any discrimination of gender, caste, and creed:


On all weekdays Homeopathy section is opened between 10.00 am and 1.00 pm and the Allopathy section is opened between 5.00 pm and 8.00 pm. On an average 100 patients are benefitting daily.

**Free Eyecare camps:** Every third Sunday of English month, a Free Eye camp is conducted. This is going on for the past 7 years. More or less 13,000 patients benefitted and 2450 underwent cataract operation free of cost.

**Our Earnest Appeal:** The number of patients is increasing day by day. Consequently, the expenses on medicines are also increasing. So far we don’t have a separate fund for our dispensary. At present, we incur nearly Rs.2,50,000 per month and Rs.30,00,000 per annum exclusively on the purchase of medicines.

Therefore, we request you to donate liberally towards this noble cause either for recurring expenditure or as an endowment. We thankfully accept the amount sent to us wholeheartedly.

Donations may be sent by cheque/DD in favour of “Sri Ramakrishna Math”. Online payment is also accepted. Bank details:

Bank: Tamilnad Mercantile Bank; Branch: Thallakulam branch, Madurai 625002;
IFSC: TMBL0000163; SB A/C No.: 1631 0005 0308 739

After online payment please intimate us by email your address, Mobile number, and PAN number.

Yours in the Service of the Lord
Swami Kamalatmananda
Adhyaksha
Offering to Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna: An Appeal

Dear Devotees & Friends,

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math declared open a Math centre at Uttarkashi, an ancient holy town in the Garhwal Himalayas on 20 Oct 2017. There was already an ashrama, named “Ramakrishna Kutir”, on a small piece of land since 1963. It was maintained directly by the Belur Math, and sadhus of our Order used to stay for intense tapasya in the traditional monastic way, begging food from outside and living a simple austere life. The same tradition continues till date.

In view of expanding Swami Vivekananda’s ideal of service and spirituality among the masses we plan to purchase some land measuring at least one acre around Harsil Valley, near Gangotri. Along with retreat centres for sadhus and devotees, some welfare activities for the benefit of the poor and underprivileged will be taken up after acquiring and developing the land.

An estimated cost of Rs. 2 crores is required to set up and develop this additional unit of our Math. We request our friends and devotees, trusts and corporate bodies to contribute liberally to complete this project of welfare and spirituality at the earliest.

Donations can be made by NEFT/RTGS to the account given below:

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<th>A/C Name</th>
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Foreign contributions may kindly be sent through the headquarters at Belur Math (Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, Howrah-711202; email- accounts@rkmm.org) requesting it to credit the fund in Uttarkashi Math A/c.

Kindly send us email (to uttarkashi@rkmm.org) or SMS (to 9447051231) after the transaction intimating the purpose of your donation as “Donation for purchase of land and development of the Math.” Please also send your PAN and full postal address.

Donations towards our Math are exempted from IT under 80G Act.

May Sri Ramakrishna, Ma Sarada, Swami Vivekananda bless you all.

Yours in the Lord,

Swami Amaleshananda

Adhyaksha
AN APPEAL TO SERVE GOD IN MAN

Dear devotees and well-wishers,

We pray that Sri Ramakrishna may shower His blessings on all your endeavours. Thanjavur is a historically and culturally important city, famous for its art and ancient architecture, especially temples.

It was Swami Vivekananda’s earnest desire to install Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna in every town and spread the culture of worship and service. We now propose to begin a centre in Thanjavur and initiate various activities:

- **Youth Camps** - to develop self-confidence, awareness of health and yoga etc.
- **Balaka Sangha** - to train children in cultural and spiritual traditions, etc.
- **Spiritual Practices** - daily puja, bhajans, japa yajna, parayanam, discourses.
- **Spiritual & Cultural Literature** - promotion and sale.
- **Seminar/Workshops** - for teachers, doctors and other professionals.
- **Medical Services** - for the poor and needy.

To establish a new centre and conduct the above activities, an amount of **Rs. 7 Crore** is required. We invite you to contribute whatever you can and be a part of this noble mission.

Names of those who contribute Rs.10,000/- and above will be inscribed in the Math premises.

Donations are exempted under Section 80 G of the Income Tax Act, 1961.

Donations may be sent cheque/DD in favour of “Sri Ramakrishna Math”. For Online donation please visit https://donations.chennaimath.org

After online payment please intimate us by email your address, and PAN number.

Yours in the Service of the Lord,
Swami Gautamananda,
Adhyaksha.

**Sri Ramakrishna Math**
31, Sri Ramakrishna Math Road, Mylapore, Chennai-4.
☎ : 24621110. email : mail@chennaimath.org
Website : www.chennaimath.org
For more details - Mob : 98409 87307
Urgent Need for a General Physician

The Dispensary at Mayavati, Uttarakhand, urgently needs a General Physician (Male). One with a spiritual bent of mind will be preferred. The Dispensary provides an ideal setting for a spiritually oriented doctor where he will be able to serve God in patients, and also be benefited by the sublime ambience of the Himalayas. If he wishes, he can stay with his family. The dispensary will pay the candidate reasonably and will provide him free boarding.

Anyone interested should write to us at mayavati@rkmm.org

Advaita Ashrama
(A branch of Ramakrishna Math)
P.O. Mayavati, Via Lohaghat
District Champawat, Uttarakhand – 262524
Phone: 05965-234-233
AN APPEAL
TO THE DEVOTEES AND WELL-WISHERS FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO BUILD MONKS’ QUARTERS

Kalady is the Birthplace of great Sri Adi Shankaracarya. Sri Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama was started in 1936, by Swami Agamananda (a disciple of Swami Brahmananda) Later it was affiliated to Ramakrishna Math, Beur Math, Howrah in 1942.

Ashrama is one of the old Spiritual, Cultural, Educational and Social service centre of Kerala. It has a School (Brahmanandodayam Schools) from Kindergarten to +2, Gurukulam Hostel for Boys, Computer and Typewriting centre for Scheduled Caste and economically backward classes. Ashrama conducts flood and disaster relief programmes in the State. Besides there are other services and rural activities. Ashrama has a temple with a marble statue of Sri Ramakrishna and an Auditorium to conduct worship, prayers, spiritual activities, retreats and discourses.

All the above services during these 83 long years are tendered by the tireless services of dedicated monks. Due to the paucity of funds, there is no dedicated building (Sadhu Nivas) for Monks. Monks are staying in the buildings which are more than 80-90 years old. They are made of clay mortar and have tiled roofs. The walls are feeble, rafters are weak, roof always leaks during monsoon. This has rendered the buildings uninhabitable.

Hence the construction of a suitable monks’ quarters and a devotees dining hall is the+ urgent need of the hour. Project is estimated to cost around 1.5 crores.

We appeal to the benevolent people, devotees, corporate units to join hands in this noble project with generous financial help. We earnestly hope that this Appeal will receive the compassionate attention of you all.

Donations are eligible for tax exemptions under Sec. 80G of IT Act. Donations may be sent either by cheque or bank draft in favour of Sri Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama or by transfer through RTGS/NEFT to (i) A/c No. 2921101005444, Canara Bank, Kalady (IFSC: CNRB0002921) or (ii) A/c No. 10367019646, State Bank of India, Kalady (IFSC: SBIN0070717) and for foreign contributions, A/c No: 338602010005806, Union Bank of India, Kalady (IFSC: UBIN0533866, MICR Code: 682026047, Swift Code: UBININBBKCH).

Please provide PAN No. for payments of Rs.10,000/- and above. Kindly send an email to kalady@rkmm.org intimating us your name, address, phone nos. and the payment details.

Yours in the Service of the Lord,
Swami Srividyananda
Adhyaksha
After returning from a pilgrimage, pilgrims often have two types of reactions: they either indulge in excessive sense enjoyments, or become depressed because they feel they have not gained anything spiritually from the pilgrimage.

The first type of reaction is seen in pilgrims who soon after returning from the pilgrimage slip into overeating delicacies, binge-watching movies, going out with friends to parties, etc. This type of reaction may be explained by behavioral psychology. They think that they have undergone a great austerity by suppressing worldly tendencies, and so must now relax and reward themselves with some sense pleasures. A professor often visited Swami Brahmananda, who was a direct-disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and a powerful spiritual dynamo. Once this professor told the swami’s attendants, “I don’t know what kind of boys you are, but if you can live in the rarefied atmosphere of Maharaj day after day, you must be great. I myself cannot stand it for long; I need to breathe a little worldly air.”

The second type of reaction is seen in pilgrims who take spiritual life more seriously. During their pilgrimage, they would have had a strong motivation to achieve some type of spiritual transformation. Yet, at the end of the pilgrimage, they do not find any change within themselves.

Sister Nivedita is an example of the second type. She was a sincere spiritual aspirant who had properly cultivated the pre-pilgrimage mindset and then successfully applied Sri Ramakrishna’s pilgrimage mindset during her trip to Amarnath. Just as Sri Ramakrishna recognised the living Viswanath in Trailanga Swami, Sister Nivedita saw the living Amarnath in Swami Vivekananda immediately after his darshan of Lord Amarnath. Describing Swamiji’s darshan in the cave of Amarnath, she writes: “... he had received from Shiva the gift of Amar – not to die, until he himself had willed it. ... The purity and whiteness of the ice-pillar had startled and enwrapt him. The cavern had revealed itself to him as the secret of Kailash.”
However, unlike Sri Ramakrishna who experienced ecstasy during his visit with Trailanga Swami, Nivedita experienced conflicting feelings of joy and sadness. On the one hand, she was "deeply and intensely glad of [Swamiji’s] revelation [of Lord Amarnath]." And yet on the other hand, she was dissatisfied with her own inability to go beyond the external and enter into the inner world of spirituality. She writes, “But oh…it is such a terrible pain to come face to face with something which is all inwardness to someone you worship, and for yourself to be able to get little further than externals.”

She even goes to the extent of momentarily blaming Swamiji for not imparting to her this deeper spiritual experience: “Swami could have made it live, but he was lost. Even now I can scarcely look back on those hours without dropping once more into their abyss of anguish and disappointment…in some strange way I am nearer to him and to GOD for the pilgrimage. But oh, for the bitterness of a lost chance—that can never come again.”

Consoling her, Swami Vivekananda pointed out: “You do not now understand. But you have made the pilgrimage, and it will go on working. Causes must bring their effects. You will understand better afterwards. The effects will come.”

Here, Swamiji’s statement “you have made the pilgrimage and it will go on working” implies that after completion of the pilgrimage, there is a waiting period, or incubation period, for all spiritual aspirants before they experience the results. Just as a bud needs time to blossom into a full-blown flower, similarly spiritual aspirants need time—after the pilgrimage—to receive the full benefits.

Does this mean that upon completion of the pilgrimage, spiritual aspirants need not do anything further, because the spiritual fruits will automatically come to them? No. Sri Ramakrishna says that it is not sufficient for spiritual aspirants to merely stay idle during this waiting period. He insists that, for spiritual aspirants to experience a permanent spiritual breakthrough from their pilgrimage, they must create a permanent impression or divine samskara in the mind. This is known as the post-pilgrimage mindset.

But how to practice this?

Sri Ramakrishna teaches a two-step process for the post-pilgrimage mindset: 1) Cultivating a divine narrative of the trip, and 2) Practicing constant recollection of the pilgrimage.

Stage 1: Cultivating the divine narrative

First, upon completion of the pilgrimage, we should shape the divine narrative by emphasising the encounters with the local deities and holy people—as opposed to recollecting worldly encounters. Two pilgrims who travel together may have the same experiences: have a nice darshan of the local deity, face some difficulties in food and accommodation, and also perhaps have unpleasant experiences like losing something, or being insulted by someone. But when they return, their memories of the trip may be completely different. The first pilgrim may forever cherish the darshan of the Lord, whereas the second pilgrim may brood over the things he lost or the insults he received.

Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna would particularly ask devotees who had returned from pilgrimage to immediately recount their experiences, and to highlight their divine encounters with the local deities and also talks with holy people—as opposed to their worldly encounters. An example of this, described in the previous issue, is his interaction with Manilal after the latter’s return from a pilgrimage to Varanasi. Sri Ramakrishna asked Manilal to
recount his conversations with Trailanga Swami and Swami Bhaskarananda, then positively affirmed Swami Bhaskarananda’s advice to “repeat the name of Rama”, and discouraged Manilal’s worldly criticism of Trailanga Swami. Sri Ramakrishna thus helped Manilal to reinterpret and mould his divine narrative of his visit to Kashi.

Stage 2: Practicing constant recollection of the pilgrimage

Once divine incidents are selected and worldly encounters excluded, Sri Ramakrishna advice to pilgrims is to frequently re-visit interactions with the divine. He says, “As cows eat their fill of fodder mixed with oil-cake and water; then sit and happily chew the cud, likewise, after visiting temples and holy places, one should sit in a secluded spot to ruminate and become absorbed in the godly thoughts that arose in the mind there. After visiting sacred places, one shouldn’t immediately put one’s mind on worldly things and drive holy thoughts away. If that happens, those godly thoughts cannot leave permanent impressions on the mind.”

Neuroscientists would refer to this as depositing an event into our long term episodic memories.

In fact, modern studies show that rather than remembering an actual event, people are more likely to recollect their subjective verbal or written description of the excursion and a few incidents from the pilgrimage—as opposed to replaying the entire trip in our minds.

Once a devotee accompanied Sri Ramakrishna to the Kalighat temple. From there he went to his father-in-law’s house for the night’s stay. When he learnt of this, Sri Ramakrishna rebuked the devotee: “What! You saw the Divine Mother. You were supposed to ruminate on thoughts of Her and of your visit to Her; but instead you passed the night at your father-in-law’s like a worldly man! After visiting a temple or a sacred place, one should be absorbed in holy thoughts and contemplation. Otherwise how can divine feeling settle in the heart?”

A modern example of this principle can be seen in Swami Sridharananda, a senior monk of our Order, who had the opportunity to serve two spiritual luminaries, Swami Virajananda and Swami Shantananda. Although he is now 95 and served them more than seventy years ago, even today these reminiscences remain ever fresh in his mind. He once revealed his secret: “Every day for the past seventy years, I have been constantly revisiting and cultivating them. This is why they stay fresh in my mind.”

As with anything holy, these auspicious memories will continue to help us to evolve as we gain spiritual maturity.

Similarly, after her trip to Amarnath, Sister Nivedita recorded her experiences in her letters and books: Some Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda and The Master as I Saw Him. Months after her Amarnath pilgrimage, she experienced a permanent transformation and understood the power of her trip to Amarnath. She wrote to Ms. Hammond: “I am so glad to have been there with him. That must be
a memory forever, and he did dedicate me to Siva too. As I look back on this wonderful summer, I wonder how I have come to heights so rare. We have been living and breathing in the sunshine of the great religious ideals, all these months, and GOD has been more real to us than the common men." 12

Here, Nivedita’s reflections on her trip—as a “memory forever” and also her wonder at how she could “come to heights so rare...living and breathing in the sunshine of the great religious ideals”—indicate the degree to which her Amarnath pilgrimage had permanently taken a deep root in her mind.

But Nivedita’s recollections were not limited only to her pilgrimages. She also cherished and practiced constant recollection of her meetings with the Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. Recollecting her first meeting with the Holy Mother she writes: “Six years ago this very day—and on a Thursday I saw the Holy Mother for the first time... Do you remember?” She also remembered the day Swamiji gave her the name Nivedita and regarded it as her birthday: “Friday next, March 25th, will be my birthday, when I was first called ‘Nivedita.’” 13

The point to note is Nivedita’s capacity not merely to mechanically recollect her encounters, but also to constantly cultivate them with intimacy and emotion. As a result, her deep affection for both Holy Mother and Swamiji can be tangibly felt. These constant intimate recollections resulted in her transformation from Margaret Noble into Sister Nivedita—and ultimately from Sister Nivedita into Loka Mata.

In conclusion, as sincere spiritual aspirants, let us practice these principles of the pilgrimage mindset and experience a spiritual breakthrough in our lives!

(Concluded.)

11) The author recorded this interview with Swami Sridharananda back in the year 2000 at Lake Tahoe, California, USA

Sri Ramakrishna’s family shrine in Kamarpukur.

Goddess Shitala was the original family deity of Sri Ramakrishna. His father Kshudiram Chattopadhyay, daily worshipped goddess Shitala by invoking her presence in a consecrated water-vessel. When Kshudiram would pluck flowers early in the morning, goddess Shitala would appear before him as an eight-year-old girl dressed in red and wearing many ornaments. She would accompany him smiling and help him pluck flowers by bending the branches in blossom.

At Jayarambati, the native place of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, her family worshipped at the temple of goddess Shitala. In 1909 when Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi contracted chicken pox, the Brahmin priest of the Shitala temple in Baghbazar treated her with naturopathy every day.
The Dread Seven

SISTER NIVEDITA

Shitala is the goddess of smallpox. Sister Nivedita presents a charming account of Goddess Shitala’s personality and her worship, in this write-up titled ‘The Dread Seven’ which appears in her Studies from an Eastern Home. This selection from ‘The Dread Seven’ is taken from the second volume of The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita, p.381

Beneath the Neem they sit, as did the Norns of old beneath Yggdrasil—those seven dread sisters, of whom Shitala, goddess of Smallpox, is the first. All the rashes and eruptions they share amongst them, and the youngest of the seven is the old friend of our childhood, no less a personage than Measles herself. It is strange, we feel, this element of fear that seems so often associated in ancient mythology with the idea of femininity. Head of the Fates is she who cuts the thread of life, and all the three are womankind. Ate, the sleepless doom that pursues after the shedder of blood, is a woman. The Harpies and avenging Erinys are daughters, not sons, of the gods and of Night. And here in India the power that is seen in the burning of fever and the wasting of disease is conceived as the presence within a man of the Mother Herself.

The fact is an added token of the antiquity of the association. When the administration of justice took the form of a curse or a vendetta, pronounced by the grey-haired women of the village; when all power was as yet in the hands of the Mothers, and men were at best but their fierce and courageous children; when rulership could not be conceived of apart from the feminine—thus early awoke the idea of the divinity that is seen in the terrible and the irrevocable. Among peoples whose geographical compactness and comparative density hastened their political differentiation, the terror was more apt to take the form of a reflection of the fear of man and his just wrath. Righteous punishment was a thing to be looked for. The avenger of blood was most to be dreaded of all foes. But in India, that land of vast spaces and extended populations, the ideal of malign power remained mysterious, incalculable, and supernatural. From the beginning there was something inexplicable in the exercise of omnipotence. Could any sign of divine presence be more convincing, because more incomprehensible, than the spells of fever, or the anger of a rash? Naturally, then, the practice of worship developed the opposite power, that of healing.

Very quaint are the descriptions given by the faithful of the Seven Fearsome Sisters. That
Smallpox makes affrighted goes without saying. Her power is open and irrepressible, afflicting men at noonday. But each one, even the youngest, has a potency of her own. Being the youngest, indeed, gives to Measles, it is said, a peculiar ability to do mischief. Her very age makes her the pet of her father and mother. She is therefore much indulged. She lives suppressed: that is to say, she is apt to exercise her powers in secret, and to leave behind her, when she goes, some terrible memento of her visit, in a permanent blindness, deafness, lameness. It is evident here that a good deal of fine medical observation has been put into the curious old myth of the Seven Sisters.

It would be strange, however, if so careful an index of diagnosis were entirely dissociated from all consideration of methods of treatment. As we might have expected, the priests of Shitala come from a peculiar caste, being known as Dom Brahmins, and are, in fact, doctors of a very ancient order. The oldest worships are connected with libations, the pouring-out of water before God; but in the worship of Shitala the idea of a sanative cleanliness is very prominently brought forward. One will sometimes, in the by-ways of some busy city, see women after nightfall pouring out water in the road before a temple and sweeping, the place with a broom. They are praying to Shitala, the guide will tell us. For those who know have laid down the law that this goddess demands salutation with water and a broom.

Many students will feel that the assignment of one whole divinity to the province of a single disease argues a state of society in which there was a very elaborate division of labour. Nor can we help connecting this advance in social organisation with that sudden accession of medical science of which the worship of Shitala constitutes a remnant. The whole idea is a rare mixture of piety and wisdom.

When the patient first succumbs to the malady, there is many a village-wife whose diagnosis is as valuable as the physician’s or the priest’s. The one anxiety is that the eruption should have free way. Should it remain suppressed, the case is regarded as
grave. But if this is not so, and matters appear promising, the next step is to feed with a sufficient quantity of milk. The amount of this food that can be digested by a smallpox patient of robust constitution is said to be quiet incredible. If the case is bad, however, there is nothing to be done but call for the special attendance of a priest of Shitala. In this case the sick man will be laid on the floor on cool banana leaves. He is also given medicine brought by the priest. A twig of Neem is supplied to him, and except with it he is not allowed to touch his own skin. To tickle it with the sacred twig is an invocation of blessing. At the same time devotions are going on. At first, when the fell visitant was announced, the women of the household repaired in the evening to temple or tree, to offer their worship. Part of this consisted in placing flowers on top of an inverted pot, at the feet of the goddess. If the flowers fall, she is pleased, and grants the prayer of her suppliants. But if they remain where they were placed, she is obdurate, and the end can hardly be bright. I have been told of one case in which the women had placed their flowers, and sat in the attitude of prayer to see what was to be their fate. The blossoms did not fall, and in agony of mind the whole party bent still lower in prayer, imploring with clasped hands that the Devi might take pity, and grant a life much loved. At this second prayer, as they watched and waited, the flowers fluttered down, slowly, slowly, and each one felt that an invisible hand had taken them, and the prayer would be fulfilled.

Only half the necessary offering is thus made, however. The idea, in Bengal at least, is that the Mother has been asked to visit the abode of her children and bless them with a healing touch. This is the element in the myth to which prominence is given, though it is not quite clear that there is not mixed with it an older notion that it is the presence of the goddess that has brought disaster, and that she is being begged to withdraw. Outside Bengal this last seems to be frankly the thought. But here we are mainly in the attitude of entreating the Mother to enter the house and bear away its misfortune. The more archaic fear may be traced in the fact that, while the illness remains, none in the house will venture to call it by any name but, “the mercy.” And the visitors who generally throng to see an invalid remain here, it is true, on the threshold; but still they come, saying they are adoring the divine Mother, present in the sick. So the conception of the healing divinity of sweetness has not yet wholly emancipated itself from an older and less noble worship of fear; but it is on the way to do so, for when the recovery has taken place it is always unhesitatingly attributed to a visit of benediction, and many are the household tales of special experiences illustrating this. From the moment of the announcement, then, when the worship is offered, the house and everyone in it has to be kept in a state of such exceptional purity as is meet for those who expect a divine advent. No meat or fish may be cooked within the walls. Only after bathing, and wearing the cleanest of garments, may the sick be attended. Fresh flowers and incense are to be offered daily. Water and the broom must do even more than their ordinary work in constant cleansing. And finally, when the last remnant of his illness is well past, the patient marks his own recovery by a delightful bath, for which he has been prepared by massage, being rubbed with sandal-paste and turmeric, ancient luxuries of the toilet, full of coolness and fragrance.
Does Vedanta have an explanation for the coronavirus pandemic which is currently engulfing the world?

Yes, it does. The explanation lies in the theory of karma. As we have sown, so we are now reaping. The human species is getting exactly what it deserves.

Readers may wonder what we ever did to deserve this.

First, we have over-reproduced. There are too many of us. Too many humans means not enough space and resources for other species.

In the Hebrew creation myth, after creating the world, God created man, and “put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” (Genesis 2:15.) This implies that God made us the custodians of the whole planet. What sort of job have we done?

We have fouled our own nest. We have driven many other species to extinction and inflicted multiple atrocities on our planet. This is our home. But we have choked our oceans with plastic and our rivers with garbage, killing millions of aquatic creatures. Our factories and our automobiles belch forth pollution that poisons the air and fills it with filth. We have produced more trash than our planet can contain. Even beyond the atmosphere, we have filled the skies with space junk. We have become a parasite species, feeding off our planet and defiling it with our wastes.

I do not subscribe to the theory, cherished by some romantics, that the Earth itself is a living organism. But it acts like one. Whenever the balance is severely disrupted and a gross imbalance prevails, forces are set in motion to restore the balance. The coronavirus may be a consequence of such forces. It might even be said that, for our planet to live, our species must die—or at least be greatly reduced.

The ancients would have said that the gods are angry, and are punishing us for our crimes. We do not have to believe in ancient gods to notice that the effects are similar. By now the old Hebrew prophets would be thundering from Dan to Beersheba. But we have no prophets anymore; and if we did, nobody would believe them.

We have raped our planet, not as individuals, but as a species; and it is as a species that we shall reap the fruits. Collective justice is rarely fair: the innocent suffer as well as the guilty. It is said that the mills of the gods grind exceedingly slow, but they grind exceedingly fine. Both the good and the evil are caught in the cogs, ground into chaff, and swept away in the cataclysm.

Thus also it is with the coronavirus. We can think of it as the scythe of God, which is cutting down a weed that has grown too high, too abundantly, and too rapaciously. Whether our species will be utterly extinguished or only reduced in numbers, only time will tell. ✳
Rabindranath Tagore and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic

A ship carrying Indian troops from World War I docked at the port of Bombay on 29 May 1918. With it secretly arrived the H1N1 influenza virus. Soon it spread across Bombay and travelled by train to the rest of the country. The “war fever”, as this new disease was then called, killed about 18 million people until the end of 1920 in India alone. No other country suffered such a high number of casualties. This number exceeded even the total number of lives lost in the War. The situation was exacerbated by negligence on the part of the colonial rulers, who did nothing to provide people with food in the face of a famine caused by drought. Reckless swindling of food grains out of India only made the rapidly deteriorating situation much worse. There were very few doctors to attend to the ailing as most of them were on War duty. The dying died with nearly no help.

The fever also entered into the gurukula school run by Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan, Bolpur, West Bengal. The medical facilities were poor. In a letter Tagore wrote: “This place [Santiniketan] has only Kshitimohan Babu [grandfather of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, who had a sound knowledge of Ayurveda] and I for doctor.”

The poet, who had great interest in medicine since boyhood, now felt compelled to put his knowledge to practice for the sake of the inmates. He personally visited all the afflicted students every day to inquire about their health and hygiene. He prepared an ayurvedic concoction— the “Panchatikta Panchan”-- from teuri (roots of banana), neem-leaves, gulancha, nishinda (Nirgundi, or *Vitex negundo*) and thankuni (*Centella asiatica* or Indian pennywort), and mandatorily gave it to all the inmates.

On 1 January 1919 he wrote to Jagadish Chandra Bose: “My daughter-in-law had the pneumonia recently. She had a tough time with it. After days of struggle, she has finally been a little better since yesterday. She will probably need a long while to recover completely. Hemlata and Sukeshi [wife of the poet’s nephew] are still suffering. Hemlata has almost recovered, but Sukeshi’s condition is worrisome.

“But none of the boys [students] has got the influenza. I believe it is so because I have been regularly giving them the Panchatikta Panchan. Many of the boys had suffered from the disease during their stay at home in the holidays. Some of them are from the hotspots of the disease and have survived death. I was afraid that they would inadvertently spread the disease here on their return. But nothing of that sort has happened. Even cases of regular fever are fewer this year. Around two hundred people live here, yet the local hospital has almost no patient. This is rather unusual. I am inclined to believe that this is definitely the miracle of the Panchan.” *
The Order on the March

News & Notes from Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission

Headquarters

The annual Public Celebration in connection with Sri Ramakrishna’s birthday was held at Belur Math on Sunday, 1 March. More than a lakh people visited Belur Math in the course of the day. Khichri prasad was served to about 43,000 persons.

In the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the following preventive measures were adopted at Belur Math from 16 March: (i) distribution of noon prasad to devotees was discontinued, (ii) devotees were not allowed to sit or gather in large numbers inside Sri Ramakrishna Temple during the Arati or at other times, (iii) the museum was closed, and (iv) darshan of Revered President Maharaj for devotees was suspended. Subsequently, following the countrywide lockdown announced by the government on 24 March 2020 to contain the virus, entry of devotees and visitors into the campus was stopped from that day. These preventive measures will be in effect until further notice.

Sri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, held a meeting of religious leaders on 30 March through videoconferencing to discuss measures to handle coronavirus situation. Srimat Swami Suvirananda, the general secretary of the Order took part in the meeting and gave an account of the Order’s response to the situation.

Branch Centres

Srimat Swami Gautamananda Ji, one of the vice-presidents of the Order, inaugurated a virtual classroom project at Visakhapatnam centre. Srimat Swami Shivamayananda Ji, one of the vice-presidents of the Order, inaugurated a multipurpose hall at Koyilandy centre. A fibreglass statue of Swami Vivekananda was unveiled at the school of Kanpur centre. Under the guidance of Mysuru Ashrama, a fair to celebrate the Holy Trio was held at Ramakrishna Nagar, Mysuru, on 18 February in which 4500 people took part.

Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission
Covid 19 Relief Service

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## RAMAKRISHNA ORDER’S COVID-19 RELIEF

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## SERVICE: A SUMMARY AS ON 25 APRIL 2020

### RAMAKRISHNA ORDER'S COVID-19 RELIEF SERVICE: A SUMMARY AS ON 25 APRIL 2020

- **Sl.**
- **State / No of ashramas conducting relief work**
- **No of meals served**
- **RATION KITS (main items)**
  - Salt (kg)
  - Cooking oil (lit.)
  - Sugar, Jaggery (kg)
  - Asstd. Spices (kg)
  - Snacks, biscuits (pkt.)
  - Hand sanitiser bottle/litre
  - Soap bars
  - Facemasks
  - No. of beneficiary families

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**Total**

- 3,83,639
- 10,91,984
- 2,73,373
- 59,312
- 27,933
- 2,95,902
- 74,336
- 59,397
- 39,638
- 32,614
- 1,08,035
- 325 lit., 9415 btl.
- 1,36,392
- 1,25,822 (10050 N95)
- 1,64,651

- 275 lit.
- 90490
- 44824
- 88721

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The Vedanta Kesari

May 2020
Covid ward at our hospital centres: Ranchi T.B. Sanatorium (Jharkhand), Ponnampet (Karnataka), Thiruvananthapuram (OPD for screening) (Kerala), Kankhal (Uttarakhand), Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh), Seva Pratishthan (West Bengal)

Chennai Mission Ashrama distributed 760 PPE kits to a government hospital.

Corona Awareness Programmes by ashramas: Muzaffarpur (Online essay competition for students), Ranchi Morabadi (3000 leaflets), Mangaluru, Kankhal, Cooch Behar, Saradapitha.

Foreign Countries: Seven ashramas of the Ramakrishna Order in Bangladesh served 13995 kg rice, 1585 kg dal, 9640 potatoes, etc., 2168 kg salt, 963 lit. cooking oil, 200 biscuits, 2875 soap bars, and 500 facemasks among 2735 families. In Sri Lanka Colombo and Batticaloa ashramas distributed 7529 kg rice, 343 kg dal, 2199 kg flour, 4636 kg soybean, potatoes etc., 1240 kg salt, 1335 kg sugar, 29 kg assorted spices, 483 biscuit packets, etc. to 1373 families. Lusaka centre in Zambia distributed 200 hand sanitizer bottles. Durban centre in South Africa distributed 1100 hand sanitisers bottles, and 3300 soap bars.

(Continued from page 51...)

Centro Ramakrishna Vedanta (Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre), Curitiba, Brazil, which was till now a sub-centre of our Sao Paulo Ashrama, Brazil, has been made a full-fledged branch centre of the Ramakrishna Math. The Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of the Philippines, Manila, has been made a branch centre of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Sri V Muraleedharan, Union Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, inaugurated a solar power plant in the school of Thrissur centre. Home Minister of Bangladesh Mr Asaduzzaman Khan and High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh Ms Riva Ganguly took part in Sri Ramakrishna’s birthday celebration at Dhaka centre, Bangladesh.

Values Education and Youth Programmes
The following centres conducted youth camps, seminars, and workshops: Bagda centre—lectures in 6 rural schools (1177 students and teachers); Jalpaiguri centre—2-day residential camp (40 young men selected from 29 Bhava Prchar Parishad Ashramas); Mysuru centre—lectures (530 youth); Rajkot centre—lecture (65 school students) a state level written Quiz competition on Swami Vivekananda in which 88,519 students from 986 participated; Thrissur centre—workshop on overcoming exam fear (700 students); Bagerhat centre in Bangladesh—lecture (110 students); Batticaloa centre in Sri Lanka—2 camps (495 youth)

Healthcare
Medical Camps were held by some centres: Jaipur centre: 1 medical camp in a village – 232 patients treated; Medinipur centre: 1 medical camp in a tribal area – 1148 patients treated; Salem centre: 4 medical camps in and around Salem – 4500 treated; Seva Pratishthhan: 1 medical camp at Belur Math on Sri Ramakrishna’s Birth Anniversary – 450 patients treated.

14 centres conducted eye camps in which 10836 were examined, 1747 operated, and 788 given spectacles.

Relief Work

Fire Relief

Food grains, utensils, and grocery items were distributed to families whose houses were gutted in fire accidents: Assam: Karimganj centre—8 families at Longai; West Bengal: Belgharia centre—14 families in Kamarhati of North 24 Parganas district.

Winter Relief

The headquarters and 24 centres in India, and Lusaka centre in Zambia distributed blankets and winter garments to needy people: 6,234 blankets, 26,874 sweaters/jackets, and 660 shawls.

Distress Relief

The headquarters and 20 centres in India and Bagerhat centre in Bangladesh, and Lusaka centre in Zambia distributed the following items to needy people: 59,327 shirts/Tshirts; 18,100 cut pieces of cloth for shirts; 41,9696 trousers/jeans/leggings; 700 punjabis; 760 saris, 1,520 uttariyas; 970 lungis/dhotis; 2,246 pairs of shoes, etc.
“If the poor cannot come to education, education must go to them.”

- SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

We at the Merino Group are committed to this direction and make it our mission to fulfill our social responsibility. With the SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ARUNODAY VIDYALAYA, at Hapur, we strive to ensure the all-round development of the children belonging to the weakest section of the society.
Mere reading that it is a sin to tell a lie will be of no use. Every boy should be trained to practice absolute Brahmacharya, and then, and then only, faith — Shraddha — will come. Otherwise, why will not one who has no Shraddha speak an untruth?

— Swami Vivekananda