

Religious Associations and Development in India: A Study of the Ramakrishna Mission

Sumedha Dutta

Abstract

India has had a relatively long tradition of religious associations providing autonomous spaces of power, social and civic activism, which dates back to the birth of Buddhism and Jainism, followed by the medieval Bhakti and Sufi movements, through the plethora of socio-religious associations that had cropped up during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, until the ones that have emerged in the post-colonial era. Notwithstanding the fact that the fundamentalist and divisive politics of certain religious associations has led to several gory riots and the very partition of the country, many of them have played a pivotal role in ensuring that development remains inclusive, although, their role continues to be undermined in academic writings. Again, with the onset of the ‘LPG era’ in India by the 1990s, that saw a roll back of the state mechanism, and the phenomenon of development taking a ‘participatory’ turn following the 74th Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution, the gaps which evolved in service delivery are increasingly being filled up by civil society associations.

In this context, the proposed paper seeks to analyze the contribution of one of the most prominent religious philanthropic associations in India, the Ramakrishna Mission, in the field of development. Using the purposive and snow ball sampling techniques, the study interrogates the members of the Ramakrishna Mission, apart from the beneficiaries of some of its projects and a few state officials, to elucidate as to how a ‘traditional’ association negotiates its existence within the paradigm of a ‘modern’, bureaucratic and ‘secular’ state. The study observes that through its emphasis on Practical Vedanta, the Ramakrishna Mission has made colossal contributions in the field of education, health, relief work, rural and tribal development. In the ultimate analysis, the proposed paper compels one to rethink the relationship which religious associations share with the nebulous concepts of ‘development’ on the one hand, and ‘civil society’ on the other.

Key words: Religion, religious associations, development, Ramakrishna Mission, civil society

Introduction

The concepts of ‘development’ and ‘civil society’ are projected in the dominant (Eurocentric) discourses, as the exclusive domain of ‘modernity’. The basis of this modernity is provided by numerous sets of dualisms, prime amongst which are that of the opposition of ‘modernity’ to ‘tradition’, just as the ‘sacred’ is opposed to the ‘secular’, ‘fact’ is opposed to ‘value’, ‘Nature’ is opposed to ‘Society’, with some other dualisms being that of ‘non-humans’ and ‘humans’, the ‘global’ and the ‘local’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘power’ etc. (Latour, 1993; Uberoi, 2002). In this milieu, the entity called ‘God’, is completely sidelined to a remote sphere since he no longer has anything to do either with the natural laws, or with political laws; nevertheless, He remains “effective and helpful within the spirit of humans alone” (Latour, 1993). Following from this argument therefore is the urge to dissociate any association or organization that has anything to do with ‘God’ from the concepts of ‘development’ or ‘civil society’, since the latter are considered a product of the ‘Modern Constitution’, to use a Latourian phrase, or that which seek their origin from a Durkhemian ‘organic’ world based on ‘specialization’, or the Weberian ‘rationalized’ and ‘disenchanted’ world, that has undergone the process of *societalization* whereby different spheres emerge, each with their own logic of development, and hence autonomous of other spheres to a certain degree. These Western inspired distinctions and institutional boundaries between the political, economic and the religious have been found to be spreading across the world, and even to places where previously other overlapping or incommensurable distinctions were made (Gellner, 2009).

However, one may note that India has had a relatively long tradition of religious associations providing autonomous spaces of power, social and civic activism, which dates back to the birth of Buddhism and Jainism, followed by the medieval Bhakti and Sufi movements, through the plethora of socio-religious associations that had cropped up during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, until the ones that have emerged in the post-colonial era. It may be observed that these religious associations have contributed greatly in India, to relief and rehabilitation measures after natural calamities, during *melas*, plagues, in the field of health, education, rural and tribal development etc. The philanthropic activities of these organizations are performed in the public sphere, and in many cases, without reference to the client’s religion. In this context, it becomes essential to interrogate as to whether religious associations in India, which are often used as a synonym for the ‘sacred’ and ‘traditional’, are completely opposed to civil society and to the phenomenon of development which are used synonymously with ‘modernity’ and ‘secularism’, or is there a possibility of their coexistence in a symbiotic relationship with each other, not only in theory, but also in practice. This would be done by specifically focusing

on one such religious philanthropic association that has significantly contributed towards humanitarian activities and development in India, since the late nineteenth century, namely, the *Ramakrishna Mission*.

The Ramakrishna Mission and the Dictum of Practical Vedanta:

The Ramakrishna Mission was founded by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) on 1st May, 1897, with the help of his brother monks and lay disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, in Kolkata, while the Ramakrishna Math was founded in January 1899. Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was the mystic priest at Dakhineswar Kali temple in Bengal, and is deemed responsible for the transformation of Narendranath Datta to Vivekananda, whom the latter considered his Guru. Seven years after the demise of Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Mission came to be registered in May 1909 under the Act 21 of 1860, and its management was vested in a Governing Body consisting of the trustees of the Belur Math; Belur being the headquarters of the Order (Buddhananda, 1994). Over a hundred years of its history, the Ramakrishna Mission has been able to establish itself as a significant religious philanthropic association that has been making vital contributions in the field of education, health, disaster management and relief to victims of natural calamities, man-made disasters etc. in India and has also become noted globally for such activities as well as for the spiritual guidance and counseling that it provides to seekers across 19 other countries of the world.

Although there have been many studies on the Ramakrishna Order, most of them focus on the epistemological underpinnings and philosophical orientations of the Mission, and those few studies which do highlight the service aspect, do so only in the manner of description. Some sociological studies have focused on how the Mission has contributed to development (Watt, 2005; Jodhka and Bora 2012), but they have done so without any attempts at drawing relationships of these philanthropic activities to the concept of civil society, which the proposed study attempts to interrogate. Thus the following sections of the paper seeks to give an account of the range of philanthropic activities engaged in by the Ramakrishna Order in the public sphere, and thereby to interrogate into the relationship which can be drawn between such ‘traditional’ and ‘religious’ associations and the concept of ‘civil society’ and ‘development’, that are exclusively seen and related with the processes of ‘modernity’ and ‘secularism’.

Health related measures undertaken by the Ramakrishna Mission:

The Ramakrishna Mission has been significantly contributing to the field of health and well-being especially of the poor and the needy, ever since the setting up of the first *Sevashram* at Varanasi in the year 1900, through its hospitals, dispensaries, mobile medical units, medical camps, awareness

programmes, immunization drives, besides imparting training to nurses, etc. During 2010- 2011, the medical and allied units under the Ramakrishna Mission were as follows:

Table 1: Medical and Allied units under Ramakrishna Mission in the year 2010-2011

Units Inmates/ Students	No. of Units	No. of beds	In-patients	Out patients
Hospitals 32,77,876	15	2269	-	96,045
Dispensaries 31,75,507	129	-	-	-
Mobile medical 10,99,847 units	60	-	-	-
Medical camps 1,74,122	1038	-	-	-
Old age homes -	5 184	-	-	-
Nurses training Institutes Colleges 279 Schools 470	2 5	- -	- -	-
Institutes for Post graduate Studies - and Research	2 136	-	-	-
Institutes of - Paramedical Courses	1 83	-	-	-
Total 77,27,352	1257 1,152	2,269	-	96,045

Source: 'Medical Services', in The General Report of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission (2012): 22

Educational measures undertaken by the Ramakrishna Mission

Education has been a very important field of operation of the Ramakrishna Mission, and it has made very vital contributions in this field, both in the sector of formal education as well as non-formal education. The following is a list of the educational institutes operating under the Ramakrishna Mission during the year 2010-2011.

Table 2: Educational Institutes under Ramakrishna Mission in the year 2010-2011

Units	No. of units	No. of students		
		Boys	Girls	Total
Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University Faculty Centres	5	709	241	950
Degree Colleges	7	7528	43	7571
Sanskrit Colleges	1	42	28	70
Teachers Training Institutes	4	488	9	497
Colleges of Physical Education	1	129	-	129
Junior Basic Training Institutes	5	173	85	258
Higher Secondary Schools	31	25,080	11,751	36,831
Secondary Schools	37	11,949	5,611	17,560
Sanskrit Schools	3	340	201	541
Junior High/Middle Schools (VI – VIII)	32	4043	2816	6859
Junior Basic/U.P./ L.P. Schools (I – V)	88	11,235	7,624	18,859
Pre- Basic/ K.G./ Nursery Schools/ Crèches	243	9212	8,561	17,773
Hostels/ Students' Homes	109	14,553	2,440	16,993
Orphanages	10	1537	66	1603
Polytechnics	4	2,508	-	2,508
Junior Technical and Industrial Schools	6	946	-	946
Schools of Languages 1,14,551	3	80,016	34,535	
Computer Training Centres 10,572	23	5,778	4,784	
Blind Boys's Academies	1	194	-	194
Vocational Training Centres 18,305	87	10,589	7,716	
Institutes of Agriculture 4,017	2	2,951	1,066	
Rural Development Training Institutes 8,310	24	7,470	840	
Non-formal Education Centres 8,704	126	4432	4,272	
Night Schools/ Adult Education Centres 451	9	187	264	
Chatushpathi (Sanskrit Schools)	1	61	-	61
National Open School Centres 2,205	7	1,046	1,159	
Coaching Centres 26,485	378	13,625	12,860	
Total 3,23,803	1,247	2,16,831	1,06,972	

Source: 'Educational Service', in The General Report of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission (2012):23-24

The Ramakrishna Mission also conducted and organized the following workshops, cultural camps etc. during the same year.

Table 3: Extra-curricular activities organized by the Ramakrishna Mission during 2010-2011

Units/Programmes	No. of Units/ Programmes	No. of Participants/Delegates
Cultural Units (Balak Sangha, Jnana Vahini, Institute of Human Excellence etc.)	68	47,129
Workshops , Symposiums, Seminars (Medical- CME, Educational- Scientific, etc.)	506	56,800
Cultural Camps (Personality Development etc.)	76	38,563
Value Education Programme	327	95,415
Total	977	2,37,907

Source: 'Educational Service', in The General Report of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission (2012):24

Measures for Rural and Tribal Development undertaken by the Ramakrishna Mission

The Ramakrishna Mission has been working for rural and tribal development over the hundred years of its existence, through the headquarters as well as the numerous branches spread all over the country. In the year 2010-2011 the Mission conducted several awareness programmes regarding sanitation, cleanliness etc., provided drinking water through digging of bore wells and tube wells, constructed concrete houses and low cost toilets, conducted free soil – testing, disseminated information about improved methods of cultivation, provided for agricultural inputs, financial inputs, undertook programmes for wasteland development, while also undertaking plantation of fruit and forest trees, etc. Besides, during the year, free schools for children were run, whereby underprivileged children from rural and tribal backgrounds had been provided with free boarding and lodging, clothes, stationery etc., apart from running night schools for laborers and working children, organizing audio visual shows, farmers' fairs etc. The Mission also organized self – help groups and training schemes for teaching lathe-turning, carpentry, bee-keeping, pisciculture, dairy and poultry-farming, weaving, incense-stick rolling etc. in order that by using these skills, rural and tribal folk could achieve self-reliance. Free medicines were supplied to a large number of patients, besides organizing free diagnostic and eye operation camps, apart from undertaking preventive and promotive measures through health education and immunization schemes on a regular basis (*The General Report of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission*, 2012).

Relief and Rehabilitation measures undertaken by the Ramakrishna Mission

The Mission provides relief and also works towards the rehabilitation of victims of natural and man-made disasters. The landmark operations in this regard include the relief and rehabilitation measures after the Bihar earthquake of 1934, Latur (Maharashtra) earthquake of 1993, drought relief operation in Gujarat and Rajasthan in 2000, earthquake relief after the Gujarat earthquake of 2001, flood relief in Bhagalpur (Bihar) (1899), South India (1924), Arakan Burma (1936), Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, erstwhile East Pakistan (1954) and West Bengal (1978), cyclone relief in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (1977) and Orissa (1999), tsunami relief in Chennai and Port Blair (2004) (The Ramakrishna Mission's Relief Services: An illustrated outline of a century and beyond of service (1897-2010)). Of the innovative and novel rehabilitation projects undertaken by the Mission, mention must be made of the 120 meter bridge across the Vruddha Gautami, East Godavari, Andhra Pradesh, the construction of cyclone proof buildings, and economic and rural development at Latur, Maharashtra (The Ramakrishna Mission's Relief Services: An illustrated outline of a century and beyond of service (1897-2010)).

During 2010-2011, the Ramakrishna Mission rendered relief services for victims of cyclone (in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh), distress (in Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttarakhand and West Bengal), conflict and disturbances (in Meghalaya), floods (in Assam, Chattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand), storms (in Assam, Bihar), ravages of winter (in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chandigarh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Meghalaya, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal), besides providing medical relief (in Chandigarh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal) and distribution of milk to the affected victims (in Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal). As part of the rehabilitation measures, houses were constructed for flood affected families of Karnataka, tube wells sunk in West Bengal, along with the distribution of roofing materials in Assam and Meghalaya, and weaving and sewing machines in Assam (*The General Report of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission*, 2012). The Ramakrishna Mission has also played a very important role in the distribution of food, pressure cookers, cooking pots, tumblers, bowls, solar lamps, candles, blankets, buckets, books, and other stationery materials to thousands of affected victims of the tragic Uttarakhand floods of June 2013, while it has also treated thousands of flood affected patients in their medical relief camps.

Apart from the relief and rehabilitation measures in India, the Ramakrishna Mission has also carried out relief operations related to disturbance, scarcity, floods and cyclone etc. in Bangladesh since 1971, flood relief in Brazil in 2008-2009, flood relief in Fuji in 2008-2009, earthquake relief in Nepal in 1980-81, distress relief in Russia (Moscow) in 1992, apart from a number of relief operations in Sri Lanka, such as those related to floods (1947, 1958), riots (1958), refugee relief (1986-88, 2006-2008, 2009-2010) and tsunami relief (2004 – 2005, 2005-2006) (The Ramakrishna Mission's Relief Services: An illustrated outline of a century and beyond of service (1897-2010))

Welfare Programs for Women undertaken by the Ramakrishna Mission

Among the Ramakrishna Mission's permanent programmes for women, the most important are the maternity departments of Kolkata, Vrindavan, Thiruvananthapuram etc., an old age home for women at Varanasi, educational institutes for women and girls at Chennai, Jamshedpur, Sarisha, Aalo, Coimbatore, Kalady, Jairambati, Bhuvaneshwar, etc., nurses' training institutes attached to the Mission's hospitals at Kolkata, Lucknow, Vrindaban, Itanagar, Thiruvananthapuram etc, various projects for enhancing women empowerment by the formation of self- help groups, dissemination of vocational education, etc. (*The General Report of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, 2012*)

It may also be noted that in keeping with the long nurtured aspiration of Vivekananda to construct a Women's Math, which would be autonomous, and would be conducted on exactly the same principles as that for men, the Sarada Math came to be established on the 2nd of December 1954, by the seventh President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Swami Shankarananda. While the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Association came to be registered under Act 21 of 1860 with the object of carrying on educational, cultural, charitable, and similar activities among women and children, looking upon them as veritable manifestations of the Divine. It also has its headquarters in Kolkata, West Bengal. Sarada Devi was the wife of Ramakrishna, whom the latter had once worshipped as the living goddess - *Tripuri Sundari Devi*. Thereafter, particularly after the death of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi became popular as the Holy Mother among the monks and followers of the Ramakrishna Order. Nuns of the Ramakrishna Sarada Order claim that it is the largest autonomous women's spiritual organization in the world. The Ramakrishna Sarada Mission runs several schools, orphanages, old age homes, hospitals and various other projects for the welfare of women and children. A case in point is the Sister Nivedita's Girl's School in Kolkata, which was established by Margaret Noble or Sister Nivedita in 1898, with the aim of the education of young girls as well as married women and widows of the locality, whom she trained in various arts as well as in the secular discourses such as history, geography, science, arts,

literature, etc. apart from spiritual discourses and lessons in nationalism. The School which completed a hundred years of its existence in 1998, also proved to be a Teacher's training centre, wherein some women associated with the Brahma Samaj received training in the kindergarten method. In the course of time, the school grew in terms of size as well as nature of activities. The Ramakrishna Sarada Mission currently runs 10 primary schools, 3 high schools, 1 college, 1 pre-primary school, 1 cultural centre, 5 adult schools, 8 Bal Mandirs, 8 coaching classes, 1 painting class, 5 computer classes, 2 spoken English classes and 1 nursery school. Apart from several dispensaries, it runs a 100 bedded charitable hospital called Matri Mandir established at Kolkata in the year, 1950 that serves women and children from low and middle income categories. The Ramakrishna Sarada Mission also conducts relief and rehabilitation drives, apart from working towards rural and tribal development etc. Outside India, the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission has centres in Sri Lanka and Australia.

State Aided Projects of the Ramakrishna Mission:

The Ramakrishna Mission is aided by the Central and state Governments for various projects. Prime amongst the ones that are being undertaken at present under the 150th birth anniversary celebrations of Swami Vivekananda are the *Gadadhara Abhyudaya Prakalpa*, which is targeted towards the all-round development of children in poor and backward areas, the *Vivekananda Swasthya Parisheva Prakalpa* that aims to improve the health of children from deprived categories through immunization drives, elimination of malnutrition etc., the *Sarada Palli Vikas Prakalpa* that seeks to promote the educational development and self-empowerment of rural women in ten villages, the *Swami Akhandananda Seva Prakalpa* with the objective of the elimination of severe poverty in ten selected pockets in rural and urban areas, various seminars on promotion of inter-faith dialogues and inter-faith harmony, and programmes on tribal and folk culture, apart from several special programmes for the youth, like seminars, conferences, counseling, competitions, value education programmes etc. (*The General Report of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission*, 2012). Besides, as mentioned above, a number of projects in the field of health, education, relief and rehabilitation are provided administrative as well as financial support by the state as well as the central governments. The Mission emphasizes on transparency, accountability and professionalism with regard to the implementation of such projects, as well as its other projects, and hence it has managed to receive substantial grants from the state on many occasions. An important point to be noted here is that the state of India owing to its policy of 'secularism' does not promote any religion over the others. Hence, it is seen to promote mostly those endeavors which are presented to it as religiously neutral, the beneficiaries of which would not be chosen on the basis of religion. Also, the Ramakrishna Mission has also been found to maintain a cordial relationship

with most of the state governments on account of its flexible and pragmatic approach, depending on the nature of the ruling party in that particular state. Thus the Mission seems to have adapted itself to the needs of the changing times, and hence has been able to establish itself as an important partner of the state in service delivery, in this age of public private partnerships.

The Philosophy behind the Philanthropic Activities of the Ramakrishna Mission and Some General Observations

The above account gives one an idea of the range of activities that the Ramakrishna Mission undertakes in the public sphere – in the field of health, education, relief and rehabilitation, rural and tribal development, women and child development etc. It has also been able to respond to the challenges of globalization, secularization and bureaucratization by adapting to these processes through its professionalism, an emphasis on religious harmony, and a firm focus on the ideal of service, through its motto of ‘Atmano Mokshartham Jagad-hitaya Cha’ or, “For the Freedom of the Self and the good of the World”.

In fact, to the lay observer these humanitarian activities may appear to be quite ‘secular’, since the beneficiaries of the varied programmes of the Mission are not chosen on the basis of the religion, caste or even region of the persons concerned, while there are few restrictions with regard to food even with reference to the diet of the monks of the Order, apart from the fact that eggs are frequently distributed to the needy patients of a number of hospitals run by them. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the monks of this Order vehemently state that service in the Order takes the form of a ‘Sadhana’ and thus they are opposed to any such dichotomy between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’ on the one hand, and the labeling of their organization as a ‘social-service’ organization on the other. In this context we may note that the ideological background set by Vivekananda in his original rules and regulations states that the ‘Organization’ is the symbol of Sri Ramakrishna, and the medium for the working of His will. The service of the Order thereby becomes the service of God through the living social symbol of the ‘Incarnate Deity’. Thus the Mission is guided by the philosophy of ‘*Practical Vedanta*’ or the rejection of the confinement of the primary message of Vedanta philosophy, i.e. the oneness of Brahman, as a merely theoretical discourse, and an application of the same in real life, in the form of service to the needy- the worship of ‘*Daridra Narayana*’ (the poor as manifestations of God), while they are in constant check that these service works do not get “degraded into mere secular activities” for they are serving *narayana* in the poor and the needy. In this context one may observe that according to Swami Vivekananda (1957) *karma* performed as a sacrifice to God and in a spirit of disinterestedness is quite as efficacious as any other method, and there is no need to subordinate it to the method of wisdom or to that of devotion. This message attempted at bringing about a much required

shift in the paradigm of worship in the Hindu tradition by reinterpreting the Vedanta philosophy; a shift from excessive ritualism, to the worship of fellow human beings as God, through a revival of the traditional notion of ‘seva’ as social service in the modern context (Watt, 2005). It reinterpreted the entire discourse of Hindu religion which had come to be confined to the four walls of the temple, and shifted the emphasis to the service of the poor, the downtrodden and the needy. At the same time, the monks of this Order do not want to identify themselves as Hindus, but rather as ‘Sanyasins’, since a Sanyasi is one who has transcended every worldly identity, and in fact his very ego. However, owing to the belief that the fundamental basis of every religion of the world is realization of the same Truth, it respects the choice of those monks who want to adhere to their religion, and thus one may find ‘Christian Sadhus’ as well as ‘Muslim Sadhus’ apart from ‘Hindu Sadhus’ in the Order. Again, owing to this very belief that all the religions of the world are complementary rather than conflicting, at least in their basic ideals, the shrines of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in a number of countries abroad also has paintings and idols of Jesus Christ alongside that of Ramakrishna, while the birthdays of Jesus Christ as well as that of Gautama Buddha are observed by all the centres of the Mission .

Thus the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission might clearly lead the analyst to argue that it is a significant part of the Indian civil society, whereby civil society is defined as mediating institutions between the state, and the individual/family/citizens, while being separate from the market on the one hand and political society on the other, and which provides autonomous spaces of power, social and civic activism, outside the state apparatus. In this context it may be analyzed that the strong drive to write off religious associations from the discourse of civil society altogether is informed by an exclusivist, ‘militant secular’ (Pathak, 1998), anti-theistic (or active opposition to religion, as in Hitchens, 2001) logic which has been ‘borrowed’ from the West, without having tested its significance in the Indian context, while the Ramakrishna Mission could be seen to be based on a dialogic and accommodative spirit, like many other socio-religious associations of the country. In this context it may be noted that while Kothari (1988) argues against the militarized secular logic of the modern state and vouches for an alternative paradigm based on pluralism, Kumar (2011) argues for an Indian model of civil society which has evolved out of the Bhakti and Sufi movements and the Gandhian Satyagraha, that seeks to realize religion in society, and looks away from the Western godless model of civil society as ‘non-sustainable’. Again, Uberoi (1999) observes that in the context of India, civil society is the locus of God –realization or self-realization as well as of the common usage and custom of the people, while Oommen (2001) argues that when one observes civil society in India from the vantage point of religion, caste, and language, it is clear that the associations and movements anchored to them are indeed instruments of establishing equality

between the privileged and the deprived groups and communities. He analyzes that after independence, both social reform and social reconstruction were efficiently brought about by religious organizations. Finally, when one analyzes the debates surrounding the term ‘secular State’ in the Indian Constituent Assembly one notes that the term was used more often to imply not a ‘Godless’, ‘irreligious’ or ‘anti-religious’ state but rather one that adheres to the principle of respect for all religions (Baird, 1981).

It may also be noted that the role of the Indian state has undergone a significant shift over the decades since Independence. Following the ‘decline of the moderate state’ since the Indira Gandhi regime (Kothari, 2001), and the roll back of the state mechanism ever since the liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) project has been implemented, a new era of identity politics has been unleashed, owing to rights violation on many fronts. Land grabbing from poor farmers for setting up various projects by multinational companies, who are hand in gloves with the state, the farmers suicide and the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, the classes and the masses has led to the emergence of several citizens groups and movements, which has given a tremendous boost to associationalism and civil society in India. At the same time, the government has refrained from spending generously on infrastructure related projects, owing to the problems of cost recovery. The Indian economy has been opened up to the global markets, and the private sector is being encouraged to play a significant role in the lives of the common people. Thus in the current times, government funds may be seen to constitute only a part of the resources meant for most of the extant anti-poverty programmes in India, while the remaining is expected to come from private agencies, religious associations as well as non-faith based organizations, apart from the local bodies, especially since the 74th Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution, whereby development was given a ‘participatory’ turn. In this context, one may easily argue for the inclusion of religious associations in the discourse on civil society, for they clearly mediate between the state and the individual/family, in terms of service delivery, and that too in the public sphere. However, in doing so, one would have to look beyond borrowed concepts and Western dichotomies, and unravel new possibilities beyond the domain of the ‘Modern Constitution’.

Conclusion

The development discourse in India is firmly rooted in the modern Western knowledge system, which is replete with dualisms of every kind, particularly the dichotomy of the ‘modern’ vs. the ‘traditional’, and ‘fact’ vs. ‘value’, where everything that is ‘traditional’ and ‘value’ based ‘ought’ to be replaced by all that is ‘modern’ and ‘fact’ based. This obsession with dichotomies has resulted in an apparent glorification of a ‘militant secular’ and ‘anti-theistic’ logic and of institutions based on such a logic, along with a denial of the many positive

contributions being made in the field of development by not so ‘secular’ associations, such as those based on religion. This is because the ‘secular’ discourses often out-rightly label, reject and write off such associations as ‘anti-secular’, ‘anti-modern’, ‘anti-development’ and exclusivist in nature. However, on tracking the inclusive development based initiatives in India, one finds that a substantial contribution in this regard has been made by religious associations, which have even partnered the state in several public-private initiatives in the recent times. A reckless imitation of Western capitalism, the opening up of the economy under the LPG drive, and hence the rolling back of the state has left a number of gaps in service delivery, which are increasingly being filled by many of the socio-religious associations, apart from the varied other non-governmental organizations, especially after the 74th Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution. These associational cultures have been active in social reform and social service since their very inception and in the various forms which they have assumed, be it the cultic forms, or in the form of socio-religious associations. Again, it may be observed that science and technology is not opposed by several religious associations in India, rather it is ‘sacralized’, through its utilization in the ‘seva’ of the needy by the latter.

This is not to ignore the pernicious role played by the sectarian and fundamentalist associations to perpetuate the hegemony of certain sections which have amounted to massive violence at times, and the very partition of the country, and undermined the rights of fellow citizens. But both the tendencies of associational cultures, that is for attaining dignity, as well as for the perpetuation or the reinforcement of hegemonic dominance, when played out in the public sphere, are aspects of civil society. Thus contradictions and contestations are an inherent part of civil society, which is not the equivalent of ‘good society’, and dismissing religious associations such as the Ramakrishna Mission from the discourse of civil society on the grounds that these are communal institutions, amount to our portrayal of a myopic vision of civil society, informed by a very Western understanding of the concept. Finally, as John Keane suggests, reflexive, self-organizing, non-governmental organizations that some call civil society, can, and do live by other names in other linguistic and cultural milieu (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2003). The challenge only lies in accepting the existence of such alternative models.

References

Baird, Robert D. (1981). “Secular State” and the Indian Constitution’, in Robert D. Baird (ed.), *Religion in Modern India*, New Delhi: Manohar

Buddhananda, Swami (1994). *The Ramakrishna Movement*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama

Chandhoke, Neera (2003). 'The 'Civil' and the 'Political' in Civil Society', in Carolyn M Elliott (ed.) *Civil Society and Democracy: A Reader*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gellner, D N. ed. (2009). *Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia*. Delhi: Sage Publications.

Jodhka Surinder. S. and Pradumna Bora (2012). 'In the Name of Development: Mapping Faith Based Organizations in Maharashtra', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVII, No. 1, January 7, 77-85

Kaviraj, Sudipta and S. Khilani (eds). (2001). *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, Cambridge: CUP.

Kothari, Rajni (ed). (1970). *Caste in Indian Politics*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd.

----- . 1988. *The State against Democracy: In Search of Humane Government*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications.

----- (2001). 'The Crisis of the Moderate State and the Decline of Democracy', in Niraja Jayal (ed.) *Democracy in India*, Delhi: Oxford .

Kumar, Anand (2011). 'Power Culture and Civil Society: The Context of India', in Amit Kumar Sharma, (ed.) *Religion and Culture in Indian Civilization: Essays in Honor of Prof. C.N. Venugopal*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld.

Latour, Bruno (1993). *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated from French by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

Letters of Swami Vivekananda (1989). Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.

Oommen, T.K. (1995). *Alien Concepts and South Asian Reality: Responses and Reformulations*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

----- (2001). 'Civil Society: Religion, Caste and Language in India', *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 50 (2), 219 – 255.

----- (2004). *Nation, Civil Society and Social Movements: Essays in Political Sociology*. New Delhi: Sage Publications .

Pathak, Avijit (1998). *Indian Modernity*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Viewed on 29 September 2013(http://www.belurmath.org/relief_news_archives/relief_latest_news.htm)

Robinson, Mark (2003). 'Civil Society and Ideological Contestation in India' in Carolyn M. Elliott (ed.), *Civil Society and Democracy: A Reader*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Rudolph, Lloyd and Sussane Hoerber Rudolph (2003). 'The Coffee House and the Ashram: Gandhi, Civil Society and Public Spheres', in Carolyn M. Elliott (ed.) *Civil Society and Democracy: A Reader*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Sri Sarada Math and Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, Viewed on 27 September 2013 (<http://www.srisaradamath.org/>)

Tapasyananda, Swami (2002). *Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission*. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math.

The General Report of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission: From April 2010 to March 2011 (2012). Howrah: Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission

The Ramakrishna Mission's Relief Services: An illustrated outline of a century and beyond of service (1897-2010), Howrah: Phildon

Uberoi, J.P.S. (1999). 'On Civil Society', *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 48 (1 and 2), 19 – 40.

---- (2002). *The European Modernity: Science, Truth and Method*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press

Varshney, Ashutosh (2003). 'Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society: India and Beyond' in, Carolyn M. Elliott (ed.) *Civil Society and Democracy: A Reader*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Vivekananda, Swami (1957). *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.1. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.

Watt, Carey Anthony (2005). *Serving the Nation: Cultures of Service, Association and Citizenship*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

