

Religious associations and development in India: a study of the Ramakrishna Mission

Sumedha Dutta¹

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, and 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: *Religious associations, Development, Ramakrishna mission, Civil society*