



A Journey of One Hundred Years

A Historical Overview of Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama in Kanpur

SWAMI ATMASHRADDHANANDA

A green, clean oasis

As you walk through the bustling city of Kanpur, the second most populated city of India's most populated state, Uttar Pradesh, in its busy Gumti-5 locality, known for its crowded market, an obstructive, busy railway level-crossing right in the midst of the city, the popular Hanuman Mandir and a Gurudwara thronged by numerous devotees daily and a congested Grand Trunk Road, and if you happen to peep into a small lane in-between numerous shops and small hotels, at the end of the lane you will see something that would undeniably catch your eyes---a neatly painted iron door with a large monogram resting on a horizontal cement beam supported by two pairs of concrete pillars. As you step into the premises, what meets the eye is a temple-like structure flanked by well-taken care green lawns, a double storey on the right side, a

signboards saying 'Library and Reading Room' and 'Vivekananda Sabhagar' and another structure on the left of lawns, with a signboard: 'Charitable Dispensary'. A sense of cleanliness and orderliness prevails in the place, besides a feeling of peace and holiness. The writing on the flat surface atop the pillared structure at the entrance of the campus says---Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Ramakrishna Nagar, Kanpur. Established: 1931.

1931? That was some eight years before the Second World War (1939-1945) was to begin! Yes, that was also the time when this quiet place was to begin its journey.

The beginning of the journey

Actually the story started even earlier, in 1921 when a young man, initiated by Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and later initiated into monastic vows, came to Kanpur from Bengal.



Known as Nepaleshwar Banerjee, the young man was born in 1895 in Kolkata and was actively involved in the freedom struggle. He was a member of Anusheelan Samiti, the well-known revolutionary organisation during India's freedom struggle. The members of the Samiti believed in arm-training and revolutionary methods to attain their goal of political freedom of India. Many members of Anusheelan Samiti, however, would silently visit Belur Math to meet the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna to quench their spiritual hunger, and obtain succour and guidance from these saintly sannyasis. Some of these young men later joined the Ramakrishna Order as sannyasis and lived exemplary lives of spiritual practices and service to God in Man. Nepaleshwar too was one such revolutionary-cum-seeker. He had met Swami Shivananda and Swami Premananda who, on learning that he was on a lookout by the police, advised him to go away to Varanasi. He followed their suggestion and came to Varanasi where he disguised himself in ochre clothes and moved about the lanes of Varanasi, supporting himself by doing some simple jobs to avoid being caught by the police.

He had earlier got acquainted with the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, and was much inspired by them. It was this spiritual search which finally took him to Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi who had come to Varanasi in 1918. Holy Mother gave him mantra-diksha and on learning told that he was being pursued by the police, she advised him to leave Varanasi and hide himself. He was 24 years old then. He took Mother's advice seriously and went away to the Garwal region in the Himalayas. After spending some time in the Himalayas, he finally came to Kanpur, a growing city known for its daring spirit and industrial development.

He soon got acquainted with one Dr. Surendranath Sen, a successful doctor and well-known for social service activities. Dr. Sen had founded Banga Sahitya Parishad and also started and ran a lower-middle school. He welcomed young Nepaleshwar to join the school as a teacher. While in Kolkata, Nepaleshwar had obtained a Sahitya Bhushan degree in Bengali literature. He accepted the proposal and took up teaching in the school and soon became popular among the students through his attractive personality and inspiring character. He was affectionately called 'Master Moshai' by students and others.

Founding of Ramakrishna Seva Sadan

In 1920-21, Nepaleshwar drew many young men to higher values through his personality and interactions. He soon organised a group of local youth who met regularly and discussed spiritual and social ideas besides meditating, praying and reading sacred books. They read and discussed the ideas of various thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita, Netaji Subhash Chandras Bose, and Booker T. Washington (the eminent black reformer, educationist of USA). In due course came there came into existence Ramakrishna Seva Sadan, an organisation dedicated to the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. This was the informal beginning of Ramakrishna Mission activities in Kanpur.

The Seva Sadan began to grow and the members would organise the birthday celebrations of Sri Ramakrishna besides holding daily morning and evening prayers and bhajans. They also set up a hostel for students, a gymnasium (called Akhara in Hindi), a middle school and medical facilities to treat the poor people of the locality. Nepaleshwar took initiative to start a homeopathic dispensary and later when some allopathic doctors agreed to offer their services, an allopathic section was

added. By 1924, things expanded considerably well and thus an Advisory Committee was set up with several eminent citizens of the city as its office bearers. All activities of the newly started organisation received enthusiastic response from the general public. The school-cum-hostel was named Sarada Vidyapeeth (or Vidyalaya) and the hostel (or Boys' Home) was called Brahmananda Hostel. At one point of time, there were nearly one hundred boys in the Brahmananda Hostel! On Sunday mornings the hostel boys would go collecting *mushthi bhiksha* (a fistful of food obtained by begging) from various localities in the city and distribute what was collected to the poor and the needy.

The gymnasium (akhara) run by the Seva Sadan too attracted many young body-builders and wrestlers who found the facilities provided there quite satisfying. The Seva Sadan also ran a village-school in Unnao, a town (now a district) some 15 km from Kanpur on the road to Lucknow.

Ramakrishna Seva Sadan, however, did not have a place of its own. It conducted its activities in rented buildings and had to shift to various locations in the Kanpur city like Karachi-khana, Raza Manzil, Afeem Kothi, and Anwarganj. Paucity of funds was always a problem and hence they hired such premises where the rent was low and affordable. They had to pass through many hardships.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Kanpur

In 1931, Ramakrishna Seva Sadan was affiliated to the Ramakrishna Order, and was renamed as Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Kanpur. During this period, Swami Abhayananda, popularly known as Bharat Maharaj, a disciple of Holy Mother visited the fledging Ashrama and later Swami Shuddhananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, came and gave a few talks and interacted with people to motivate them to

carry further the message of Sri Ramakrishna-Vivekananda. Slowly things began to take a better shape. An old application by the Kanpur Ashrama to Kanpur Improvement Trust for land dramatically got approved and a piece of land measuring 1.5 acres in the Gumti-5 off the Grand Trunk road was given to the Ashrama on a lease. A number of well-wishers of the Ashrama worked hard to get the land and later helped in collecting funds for constructing the buildings.

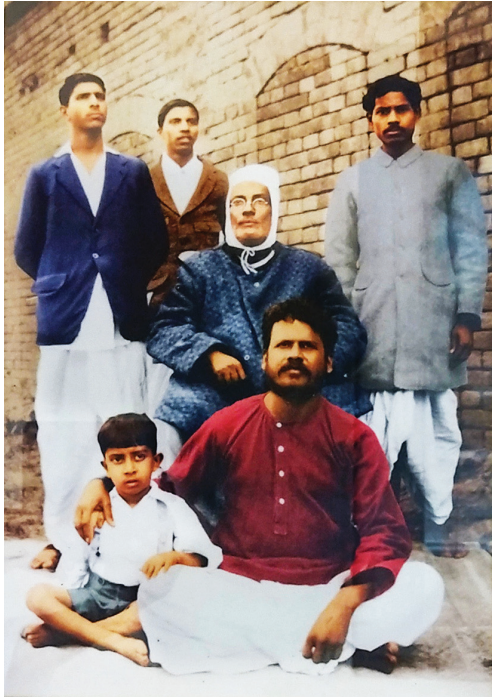
Meanwhile, Nepaleshwar who led an austere celibate life decided to take the vows of sannyasa. Swami Shivananda, the then President of the Ramakrishna Order blessed him with the vows of sannyasa and gave him the name Swami Nityananda. Though not an official member of the Ramakrishna Order, he continued to serve the cause of Sri Ramakrishna-Vivekananda until his early passing away in 1943 at Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama in Kankhal, Haridwar. But for his initiative and hard work, the Kanpur centre would not have come up and grown.

In recalling these early days of the Kanpur Ashrama, one must mention the name of Alopi Maharaj or Swami Chidatmananda (born in 1910), who came to the Ashrama as a young boy, was an early member of the Students' Home, completed his studies, joined as a Brahmachari of the Ramakrishna Order, was a member of the Ashrama and then became its Secretary. He was later an editor of Prabuddha Bharata, the English organ published from Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Himalayas and one of the Assistant Secretaries of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission until his passing away in 1975. During his more than three decades of association with Kanpur Centre, Swami Chidatmananda contributed enormously for the growth of the institution in many ways.

Kanpur Ashrama owes much to Swami Nityananda and Swami Chidatmananda, along with other monks, devotees and well-wishers, for its growth in its initial period and establishing it on firm footings.

Swami Vijnanananda's visit to Kanpur

At the invitation of the sannyasis and devotees of Kanpur centre, Swami Vijnanananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and then a Vice-president of the Ramakrishna Order, came to Kanpur on 25 October 1936. It was a historic moment for the



cause of the Ramakrishna Mission in Kanpur. He was to lay the foundation for the new Prayerhall-cum-temple at the newly acquired land. Interestingly, 1936 was Sri Ramakrishna's birth centenary!

He came from Allahabad or Prayagraj to Kanpur by Kalka Express. The train arrived at the Kanpur Central at platform number 9 while

the members of the Reception Committee were waiting for the train on the front porch of the Station. Vijnananandaji's tall stature and rather unkempt but spiritual looks drew the attention of the people in the station. The Reception Committee had hired a photographer to take a group picture with the honoured sannyasi (that was unlike now when anyone can click a picture with his mobile phone!). In the picture, Swami Vijnanananda stood in middle with members of the Reception Committee and eminent citizens standing on either side. A copy of this historic picture, one of its kind, now adorns the office of the Chief of Kanpur railway station. Besides the sacred nature of the moment, it has a truly archival value for the railways!

Swami Vijnanananda was a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and later the fourth President of the Ramakrishna Order. When he came to Kanpur, he was accommodated in the Ashrama's rented premises in Aga Kothi area where he stayed for six days. He came to the present site of Kanpur Ashrama on 28 October 1936 and laid the foundation for the new building which was to house a Shrine-cum-prayerhall, rooms for monastics and a dormitory for the students. The land was not even and had a mound in the middle and needed to be filled and made level.

During his stay in Kanpur, Swami Vijnanananda gave mantra-diksha to eight people. While it is not recorded whether he gave diksha, at the new premises or in the rented premises in Aga Kothi area, it is recorded that he gave the initiated devotees a rudraksha mala each after doing Japa on it. He not only uttered the mantra as is done while initiating a seeker, but he also wrote the mantra on a piece of paper and gave to each one of them! An unusual act indeed.

During his stay of six days in Kanpur, Swami Vijnanananda would mostly be in his



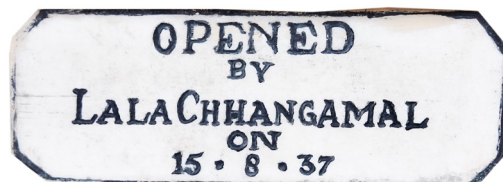
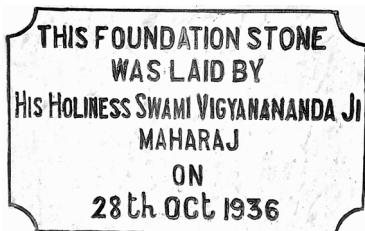
room but would meet the devotees, visitors and students before the evening Arati. He would mainly discuss about Sri Ramachandra and Sri Hanuman. He would smile and tell the boys who gathered to hear him, "Do you see me? I am Ramji's monkey." While discussing the life and character of Hanuman, he would make facial expressions which monkeys make! He did not give any lecture nor was interested in any philosophical discussions. For instance, when a devotee who had read Swami Vivekananda's books asked him about the Kundalini Shakti, he ignored the question and asked everyone to have devotion to Sri Ramakrishna.

A picture of Swami Vijnanananda with the inmates of the Ashrama was taken. He is seen

seated on the chair and on his left is Alopi Maharaj as a student, and Nepaleshwar Maharaj at his feet. Among the others present in the picture, only one Basant Bannerjee has been identified.

After staying for six days at Kanpur, he returned to Allahabad by train. It is said that while a car from a well-to-do devotee had been arranged to drop him to the Kanpur Central Station, Vijnananandaji, who had his own ways of doing things, left for the Station on a rented horse carriage! A Paramahansa, it is said, cannot be caught in social norms and etiquettes; he transcends all relativity.

(To be Continued ...)



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(Continued from the previous issue. . .)

An important digression

Let us digress here before proceeding to complete the narrative.

Kanpur is an old city. Earlier called variously as Kanhapur, Cownpore and other similar sounding names, the city of Kanpur is located on the banks of the Ganga. During the British regime, it was called the 'Manchester of the East'—a reference to many industries and factories located in Kanpur (Manchester in North West England is known for its rich industrial heritage). Many British people resided in Kanpur and remnants of their stay can still be seen in the old structures of the city. There is a cemetery called Gora Kabristan or the 'cemetery of the white people' right in the middle of the city.

Its colonial past aside, Kanpur is now home to many scientific and academic institutions like the Indian Institute of Technology, the Indian Institute of Pulses Research, and the National Sugar Institute. Kanpur is home also to the Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University (a public university), the Chandra Shekhar Azad University of Agriculture and Technology, several medical colleges and a large number of government-run and private schools and colleges. The city also has a Central Ordnance Depot as well as small arms manufacturing units under the Government of India. Sometimes called the 'Leather City of India', Kanpur has a large number of tanneries and leather-based industries. No wonder, the city is known for its



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highly polluted air too. Of late, Kanpur has also become a hub for coaching institutes where thousands of students from Kanpur and other parts of Uttar Pradesh receive coaching for various entrance and competitive examinations. A metro-railway line is under construction as well in Kanpur; all set to add to the city's 'smart city' status!

Kanpur played a vital role in India's First War of Independence against the British in 1857; the Peshwas of Maharashtra—who settled in Bithoor, a small town in Kanpur district, some 23 km from the centre of Kanpur city—played a big role in it. Situated on the right bank of the Ganga, Bithoor is a Hindu pilgrimage centre. Called Brahmavarta in the Puranas, Bithoor is believed to be the place where Brahma performed austerities before he started human creation! A small temple called Brahma Khuti, on the Brahmavarta Ghat on the Ganga in Bithoor, is supposedly, a testimony to it. Besides, it is believed that Sita, the divine consort of Bhagavan Rama, came to Bithoor where sage Valmiki lived, and it was here that she gave birth to Luv and Kusha—the twin sons of Rama. What stands as Valmiki Ashrama is an old Shiva temple and a few old buildings including a temple dedicated to Mother Sita who is known as Vanadevi in this region. These are maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India.

Nana Sahib Peshwa who played a crucial role in the great revolt of 1857 was also based in Bithoor. The place where the Peshwa's army was based, imparting training to soldiers, was destroyed by the British. There is now a well laid out memorial park there in memory of the Peshwa's contribution to the national spirit. It has a tall statue of Nana Sahib Peshwa, and two busts of his assistants, Azimulla Khan and Tatyasaheb Tope. Rani Lakshmi Bai, the queen of Jhansi (230 km from Kanpur) too received her

training in sword fighting and in the use of other arms in Bithoor. Her statue has been installed in two public places in Bithoor. Of course, Bithoor had to pass through a very bloody and cruel time after the 1857 War.

Swami Shivananda, one of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, came to Bithoor and stayed for some time in the early 1900s. In a letter from Bithoor, he writes:¹

Glory to the Master

Kanpore, 4 March 1895

My dear,

It's been a long time since I wrote you. I hope all is well with you—you yourself and the members of your family.

Since coming here I have spent a few days at Brahmavarta—that is Bithur. There is an old monk there known as Khanderao Baba. It was a great pleasure meeting him. He is truly a self-realized monk. He is from Maharashtra. He lives at an elevated spot at the far end of Bithur. The place is right on the Ganges. It is surrounded by trees, and it strikes you as a real hermitage. He has some cows, and their milk is his only food. He lost his mother in the year of the Mutiny [the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857]. He cremated his mother's body and then started his spiritual practices on the very spot where he performed the cremation. He has never left the place [i.e., the hermitage] even for once. He has been sitting at the same spot praying for the last thirty-eight years. His very appearance is like that of a sage of the ancient days: long matted hair and beard, all grey, wide forehead, eyes half closed. He is normally sparing of words, but in my case he made an exception. He very kindly had a long, lively discussion with me about religious matters. Among other things, he said: 'Looking at you, I spontaneously feel like talking to you. Words are coming out automatically. In fact, I seldom meet a person

with whom I can share my inmost thoughts. Those who come are people busy showing off superficial knowledge. They never want to know the truth which is within. They do not even talk about it.' This ascetic, on the other hand, knows the Truth, but he is very modest. He enjoys talking about Self-knowledge. As he goes on talking, he time and again salutes you with folded hands and says, 'Sir, please come again.' He is a learned man. Sometimes he starts speaking in Sanskrit and he speaks the language without the least difficulty. When he speaks, he is not himself.

It is as if he is under a spell. He is indeed a great soul. It is a privilege to meet such a person.

My love and blessings to you, your children, and grandchildren.

Yours,
Shivananda

It is not known who this holy man was and where in Bithoor he lived. Some research needs to be done to find out more details about him.

Kanpur city also had the blessing of a visit by Swami Saradananda and Swami Turiyananda—both direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Before taking his monastic vows, Swami Yogananda (another direct disciple) spent some months in Kanpur in the house of his close relatives.

Kanpur Ashrama over the years

The building for which Swami Vijnanananda laid the foundation stone was completed in a year, thanks to the tireless efforts of many devoted well-wishers including the Commissioner of the Kanpur City Municipal Board, and his wife. The Kanpur Ashrama shifted to its permanent premises on 13 August

1937. The completed structure was opened by Lala Changamal, an eminent businessman of the city and a close devotee. This was a great milestone in the history of the Kanpur Ashrama.

Present Activities of the Ashrama

a) *Charitable Dispensary*: The Ashrama had been running a dispensary to serve the poor and needy in the vicinity. Hence, besides the main building, another block to house the charitable dispensary was planned. Lala Padampat Singhania of the J K Group took the initiative and donated Rs.7000/- to erect a building in the memory of his illustrious father Sri. Lala Kamapat Singhania, who was keenly interested in the activities of the Ashrama. The foundation stone for the dispensary block was laid in December 1937 by the noted freedom fighter and leader Pandit Govind Vallabh Pant. He was then the elected Premier of United Provinces. Later, a set of rooms were built on the first floor. Many years later some more rooms were built behind the present building to house the various facilities the dispensary provided. In due course, due to the fact that sannyasis (often called Babaji in Hindi) managed the dispensary, it came to be



Charitable Dispensary

popularly known as *Babaji Ka Aspatal* (the sannyasis' hospital)! The dispensary has an OPD. As part of its outreach programme, the dispensary conducts medical camps in nearby villages once or twice a month.

b) Library and Reading Room: In 1965, Swami Madhavananda, the ninth President of the Ramakrishna Order, laid the foundation stone for another block in the Ashrama to house a public library and reading room. A considerable amount of funds to construct this Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Library Building was raised by organising a charity music concert by Smt. M S Subbulakshmi, the famous Carnatic musician who later was conferred the Bharata Ratna. The concert brought in nearly Rs. 56,000/-, a huge sum in the 1960s.

The Library was inaugurated in 1969 by the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Sri Chandra Bhanu Gupta. In 2020, the library was thoroughly renovated and improved with better lighting and seating facilities. It was opened online by Swami Gautamananda, presently one of the Vice-presidents of the Ramakrishna Order. The library has nearly 25,000 books on various subjects and the reading room is

equipped for seating 80 readers. It is a popular place for students preparing for competitive and other exams.

c) In 1969, another building housing monastic quarters and kitchen-cum-dining room was built. In 2019, yet another floor was added to it to accommodate monastics.

d) In 1978, another storey was added to the library where a hall, now named Vivekananda Sabhaghar, with a seating capacity of 200 people, was built. Religious discourses, youth seminars and cultural programmes are held here occasionally.

e) Important Associations: Between the 1940s and 1970s, a number of eminent sannyasis, speakers, musicians and thinkers came to the Kanpur Ashrama and spoke or performed during the annual functions. Some of these eminent sannyasis of the Ramakrishna Order include Swamis Sharvananda, Sambuddhananda, Ranganathananda, Nihshreyasananda, Lokeshwarananda and others. Ustad Faiyaz Khan, Ali Akbar Khan and other music maestros performed in the Temple and Dispensary halls. Pandit Ramkinkar, the noted thinker and speaker on Ramacharit Manas, spoke in the Ashrama on many occasions.

The famous Hindi poet and writer Pandit Suryakant Tripathi Nirala would often visit the Ashrama from Unnao. Alopi Maharaj would drag him from his world of poetic imagination and he would recite before the gathering his Hindi rendering of Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore's inspiring poems. Ramadhari Singh Dinkar, the eminent poet and essayist of modern Hindi literature would often come to the Ashrama and spend time in the library.



Library

Also, nearly all revered Presidents of the Ramakrishna Order have come to the Kanpur centre on different occasions, and blessed the devotees with mantra-diksha.

f) Ramakrishna Mission School in Kanpur: What started as the Sarada Vidyapeeth/Vidyalaya in the 1920s, slowly developed into a middle school in the 1940s. A single-storeyed building was constructed for the school on the plot allotted for it across the narrow lane next to the Ashrama premises. Mr. Robert Menziz, Chairman of the British India Corporation, and others donated money for the construction of the school building. In 1947, the Education Department of the Uttar Pradesh State recognised the school which was renamed as the Ramakrishna Mission Uchchar Madhyamik Vidyalaya. Another two floors were added to the building in the 1950s. The school began receiving grants for its teachers in 1973. The school was given the Best School Award by the Uttar Pradesh Government in 1983-84. The school has over 500 students from classes 6 to 10. It is a boys' school with Hindi as its medium of instruction and follows the Uttar Pradesh

State Syllabus. A majestic fibreglass statue of Swami Vivekananda under a canopy was installed in the school premises in March 2020.

This is the only school run by the Ramakrishna Mission in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

g) Other Activities:

1. *Sale of Books:* The Ashrama has a well-designed and stocked book-sale counter named Ramakrishna Pustak Bhavan located at the left corner of the main gate of the premises. It also has a mobile book-sale facility called Vivekananda Jnana Vahini in which monastics, volunteers, and staff go out to different strategic locations in Kanpur city to sell books on Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda.

2. *Gadadhar Abhyudaya Prakalpa* is a scheme for the holistic development of children hailing from slums and poorer sections of the society. Some 50 students are studying under this scheme.

3. *Winter and distress relief* is done by the Ashrama whenever the need arises. Clothes and



Ramakrishna Mission School and the statue of Swami Vivekananda

sweaters are given to students in rural areas. During the recent Covid-19 induced lockdown the Ashrama conducted relief work benefitting more than 500 families.

4. Organising occasional Youth Conventions, Satsangs, personal interviews by sannyasis, regular Puja and evening Arati in the temple (which is also live-streamed on Facebook and YouTube everyday) and other cultural activities are part of the Ashrama activities. Several hundred devotees receive *Prasad* on all Puja-celebrations.

Conclusion

The seed for the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission in Kanpur started in an informal way in 1921. In 2021 it has completed 100 years. Surely, Sri Ramakrishna's divine presence and Swami Vivekananda's inspiring words along with Holy Mother's silent blessings are keeping the journey going! In comparison with some of the large institutions run by the Ramakrishna Mission, the Kanpur Ashrama is rather on a smaller scale. Yet on many occasions the Ashrama authorities politely declined to accept offers of property gifts to expand the Ashrama activities. On one such occasion, Swami Gambhirananda, the then General Secretary and later the President of the Ramakrishna Order, remarked that he liked this



Ashrama campus

small Ashrama and there was no need to interfere with this characteristic of the Ashrama.

Though the Kanpur Ashrama became a branch centre of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1931, its informal beginning, as narrated in the beginning of this article, was in 1921 when a group of youths came together to study ennobling literature and practice meditation. This resulted in the setting up of the Ramakrishna Seva Sadan in 1924. Swami Vijnanananda then blessed the Ashrama by laying the foundation stone for its shrine building! Through its multifarious activities, the Ashrama continues its journey of *atmano mokshartham jagad hitaya cha*, 'For one's own mukti and for the service of others'!

(Concluded.)

Reference: 1) *Letters of Swami Shivananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, p.47

Acknowledgement

This article is based on the reminiscences of Ramakrishna Mission Kanpur by late Sri Pati Ram Bhat, a disciple of Swami Vijnanananda, and the founder-principal of the Ramakrishna Mission School, Kanpur. Besides this, much help has been taken from a long document on the history of Ramakrishna Mission, Kanpur by Swami Satyamayananda, former secretary of the Kanpur Ashrama, and a few old devotees like Bhuta and Kamal Banerjee.