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### Swami Ramanand



Ramananda (1400-1476 CE), also referred to as Sant Ramanand or Swami Ramanand, was a Vaishnava sant. He is considered to be the reviver of the Ramanandi sect. Ramananda for the most part of his life lived in the holy city of Varanasi, and was a pioneer of the Bhakti movement, as well as a social reformer in Northern India. He was known for communicating in vernacular Hindi, and accepting disciples of all castes. His 12 disciples are very famous - Anantananda, Bhavananda, Dhanna Bhagat, Kabir, Nabha, Naraharyanda, Pipa, Ravidas (also known as Guru Ravidas), Bhagat Sain, Sukhanada, Ranka and Tulsidas (not the author of the Ramcharitmanas).

Saint Ramananda is generally considered to have been born around 1400 A.D., some say that he was born in 1366 CE. The birthplace has been suggested to be Triveni Sangam Allahabad, Prayaga. He was born to an upper-caste Brahmin family, and his parents were probably named Sushila and Punyasadan Sharma. He was spiritually inclined right from his childhood. Acharya Raghavanand who is also known as Dakshinayat Rishi (as he lived in Jagannath Puri which is always considered a southern city in Hindu scriptures) included him in the Ramavat sect. Ramananda spent most of his life in Kashi (Banaras / Varanasi), where, as a mark of respect, people built a memorial that stands there to this day.

When Ramananda was a child, he studied the Hindu scriptures and showed great interest in spiritual thoughts. He received his early education in Kasi. A renowned philosopher and the prophet of the new Vaishnava religion, known for his downplaying the role of caste, Ramananda was particularly known for worshipping Lord Rama and his wife Goddess Sita. Ramanuja and Ramananda both believed that the human soul is distinct from the Supreme Spirit and retains its identity and separate consciousness. His footprints are visible at Srimath, Panchganga Ghat, Kashi. Ramananda visited many places of pilgrimage, including Jagganath Puri, where a memorial in his honour still exists.

When Ramananda was as young as twelve, he left home and became a sannyasi (ascetic) and lived at Varanasi. There is much controversy concerning the place and date of Saint Ramananda's death due to the lack of information available about his life. Many historians believe that Ramananda died around AD 1470-80, yet there is no unanimity regarding the date. However, there is a story about Ramananda which claims he escaped death altogether by entering a Samadhi state, a meditative state and remaining alive, where his Charan paduka is still visible at Srimath in Kashi.

### Contributions

Ramananda was an influential social reformer of Northern India. Ramananda played an important role in reviving a religious sect that provided a spiritual pathway to people of all castes. Ramananda realised that God can be worshipped by everyone because Lord Rama himself has never stopped the people of any caste from reaching Him. Instead, the Ramayan is full of stories about Shabri, Kevat, etc. who all were Lower castes, but Rama gave them equal respect, the way he respected Brahmins. Ramananda believed that in spiritual pursuit, the caste system of India is redundant. He believed that to truly devote oneself to Lord Rama, one must forget one's caste identity and social status. Ramananda is quoted as saying, "Let no one ask a man's caste or with whom he eats. If a man is devoted to Hari, he becomes Hari's own." Ramananda had disciples of all castes.

He took a very radical approach to teaching and preaching through the inclusion of the poor and the people of low castes. After Ramananda's death, the members of the Ramanandi sect led a social revolution in the Ganges basin by recruiting women and members of low castes into their sect. In addition, Saint Ramananda was the driving force of the popularization of the devotion of Lord Rama.

Ramanandi sect also played a significant role in the development of Hindi literature, because Ramananda generally spoke and wrote in Hindi. The study of modern Hindi literature as it is taught in the colleges of India today, generally starts with the telling of devotional stories and poems written by people whom the Vaisnavite bards claim were spiritual descendants of Ramananda. These men include the great saints Tulsi Das, Mira Bai, and Kabir.

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- [Aims](#)
- [Concept](#)
- [Parenting](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Training Programmes](#)
  - [October 11](#)
  - [December 09](#)
- [Expansion](#)
- [Development](#)
- [Syllabus](#)
- [Bal Vikas Administration](#)
- [Past Students](#)
  - [June 2010](#)
  - [September](#)
- [Home](#)

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## Teachings

The institutional centrality of Ramananda has long been reflected in the 'guru parampara' that connects every Ramanandi through an unbroken succession of gurus with Ramanand himself and, eventually, Ramchandra. Ramananda defined his own studies with his dedication and self-surrender to the Supreme Soul, 'Paramatma'. According to Saint Ramananda, Lord Rama was the Supreme Spirit and the human race was simply one large family, 'Vasudaiva Kutumbakam'. He was a skilled and impressive preacher, who drew large crowds wherever he traveled. Ramananda was a learned man. Many of the books which are supposed to have been written by him such as Sri Vaishnava, Matanbuj Bhaskar and Sri Ramarachan Padhti are still available. He is also said to have authored a commentary called Anandabhashya.

## Focus on Rama

Ramananda taught his followers to pay special attention to Rama and his wife Sita. Because of political dangers looming on the horizon, Rama was a natural focus of worship due to his position as the faultless prince. As outlined in the famous Sanskrit epic, the Ramayana, Rama, while an incarnation of the deity, 'Vishnu', was a successful warrior capable of defeating the terrible ten-headed demon-king of the Rakshasas, Ravana.

One poem of Swami Ramanand is recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs. This poem, called the Raga Basant, describes Ramananda's profound philosophy. This poem, originally written in Hindi, professes Ramananda's great teaching of the giving up of caste for Ram, or the, "true guru", who remains, "all-pervasive and forever unchanging." This poem expresses Ramananda's belief that Rama is a sturdy foundation in whom one should place faith, instead of the caste system. By comparing the "Brahma in the temple" with the Brahma that "dwelt in [his] own heart", Ramananda compares the highest caste to the highest spiritual figure, Lord Rama.

In this poem, Ramananda also uses many themes that appeared in his other works. Ramananda believed that in the state of deep spiritual communion, when the disturbances of the mind are gone and the attention is not searching for outward distractions, all consciousness settles into the core: the heart. Ramananda believed that if one looks deep into themselves, they are able to find that everything has always been held in the heart and there is no need to search the Vedas for God, for God abides within the mind.

Along with his practices of yoga, Ramananda thought that looking into oneself and into one's heart will bring the feeling of absolute contentment and interconnection. Another theme that is prevailing in the works of Ramananda and many other Hindu texts is that of perfume. The scent is tantalizing and is sometimes called the Celestial Drink. The blissful scent can be thought of as a tool to awaken sacred ardour upon a spiritual journey. The third theme in the Raga Basant is water. In this poem, water is used as a metaphor to describe each human being on earth as a small drop of water within the Ocean of Rama. This metaphor suggests the insignificance of one man, or an entire caste of humans, in comparison to Lord Rama.

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