

well-versed in the Vedas; he is sinless; he is not tormented by desire; he is a knower of Brahman; he is super-eminent; withdrawing himself into Brahman, he is ever at peace; he is like a smouldering fire unfed by fuel. The guru is the ocean of unmotivated compassion. He is a friend to the noble who make obeisance to him' (*Vivekachudamani*, 35).

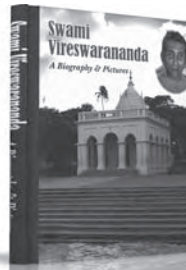
This two-volume sacred treatise may aptly be called *Sat-smarana Ratnamalika*, a gem-necklace of holy reminiscences. A perusal of this absorbing narrative shows the infinite possibilities of spiritual quest and growth open to any earnest spiritual aspirant and also the astounding altitudes of divinity attainable by the worthy heirs to Sri Ramakrishna's rich spiritual legacy.

The unshakable conviction of the true devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, is that there is, behind all their noble endeavours, his unseen hand. Viewed in this light, it was he who deposited the seed of the lovely rose sapling of this book in the devout mind of the editor who nurtured the sapling with great care and carried out the much needed act of pruning and shaping of the plant with skill and sagacity. And we have this beautiful rose plant smiling with 111 variegated and multi-hued rose flowers of life-sketch, reminiscent essays, collection of teachings, and compilation of essays, diffusing their heady fragrance. May the fortunate ones enjoy the exotic fragrance!

The two volumes comprising four parts are a fine hardbound set with precious contents, professionally edited by Swami Satyamayananda, the previous editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*. This two-volume set should make a prized possession, as it has the double merit of being a sumptuous repast for the mind and a delicious feast for the eyes. While its 111 essays regale the mind with their depth and variety, the 184 glossy photographs, mostly in colour, are nectarine feast for the eyes. On opening the charming book, we are greeted by an array of colourful photographs of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, and Swami Vireswarananda, the hero of the treatise, and of the nine monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, who gave valuable spiritual guidance to Swami Vireswarananda. The thoughtful design and layout of the book is a tribute to the resourcefulness and creative imagination of the

people behind it as it is bound to lift the mood of the readers to the requisite lofty level of solemnity and veneration to enable them to be readily receptive to the sanctifying ideas of the sublime narrative. The holy treatise should be possessed and perused by the vast circle of spiritually-inclined readership as it is a spiritual elixir from which they can, at any time, draw copious draughts of wisdom for their spiritual regeneration. This book is certainly a feather in the cap of the enterprising editor. The price indicated for the wonderful book marked by fecundity of thoughts, felicity of expression, and finality of conviction is undoubtedly a measly one.

N Hariharan
Madurai



**Swami Vireswarananda:
A Biography and Pictures**

Compiled and Edited by
Swami Chaitanyananda

Swami Vireswarananda Smriti
Committee. 2014. 252 pp. HB. ₹ 750.

Living in a monastic community is one of the most self-abnegating tasks that a monk is called to live out from one mundane day to the other. To live amongst strangers and those whom one has not chosen by one's own free will is a form of self-sacrifice which only a monk can understand. Swami Vireswarananda, the tenth president of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission, lived in and guided a monastic order that is truly cosmopolitan. We may choose to ignore this fact of linguistic and socio-cultural differences among monks, but if we are to really understand the life of Swami Vireswarananda, we have to understand the Ramakrishna Order. This order has amongst its monastic ranks, men of various religions who, while respecting their religions of birth, chose and continue to choose Advaita Vedanta as their *raison d'être* of existence; striving to experience the supreme Godhead qua Brahman in the *here and the now*. This order of monks is a sign that cosmopolitanism is possible amidst heteroglossia. Swami Vireswarananda through his own life grounded in the Brahman-experience made the ideas of Brahman simpler for many.

The book under review, compiled and edited by Swami Chaitanyananda and published by Swami Vireswarananda Smriti Committee traces the life-trajectory of Swami Vireswarananda, who experienced the Atman. The pictures say it all. The copious notes accompanying each picture further clarify the evolution of the human to the divine. This book begins by situating Swami Vireswarananda within his religio-historical context or lineage (9–15). Swami Chaitanyananda's editorial expertise is evident since while he begins by mapping the young Panduranga's genealogy in page 10, by page 15 we get to see and know the future monk's real genealogy—his monastic pedigree as it were. A jiva who would be transformed into a knower of Brahman by the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Brahmananda, who mentored the young novice who began his monastic or real life at the Order's Chennai Math. The ten Mahavidyas had reincarnated as the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi. It was Shakti herself, who initiated Swami Vireswarananda (27). Swami Chaitanyananda is careful throughout this book to emphasise the vanity of this world and the importance of the detestation of all that is worldly. For example, we have the anecdote of Swami Turiyananda cautioning a monk against even indirectly appreciating a house, which is meant for worldly purposes (38). Hindu ideas of sannyasa brook no dependence on other humans. Swami Vireswarananda was truly not of his earthly parents, but of the Totapuri *gotra* of Advaitin sannasins: 'In every action, in everything you have to be conscious and get rid of the Vasanas by practice and also by "Vairagya"; dispassion and by spirit of renunciation. ... there is no other way' (146).

This dispassion and renunciation are the hallmarks of a Hindu monk and Swami Chaitanyananda's incessant highlighting of these aspects of Swami Vireswarananda's life is proper since the Hindu monk is not mere flesh but the Atman. Therefore, to highlight any other aspect of Swami Vireswarananda's life is superfluous and practically useless. His life is worth studying and reflecting upon not just because he became the tenth president of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission, but because he embodied the *sangha* in a way that few could. The

photos in this book have been painstakingly retrieved from various archives and—along with the two volumes of *Swami Vireswarananda: A Divine Life* edited by Swami Satyamayananda, the previous editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*—should be mandatory reading for those interested in the Ramakrishna Order or Hindu monasticism. The facsimiles of letters with Swami Vireswarananda's handwriting are of immense value (212–9).

Darshana or the act of seeing is a reciprocal event. Swami Chaitanyananda's book facilitates the act of seeing the veritable body of Sri Ramakrishna—each page of this book demands us to respond to the ancient anthropomorphic call to renunciation that we find in all major and the minor Upanishads. This book modifies our perspective and forces us to become noble and more spiritually inclined. This book's 'cultural work' lies in making us aware of the need for Vedanta in a world wracked with violence and desire. Swami Vireswarananda showed the world that 'service to humanity is' not 'the antithesis of Vedanta ... One who says' that Vedanta is antithetical to the service of humanity 'has not realised the essence of Vedanta' (195). One very important point needs to be mentioned in discussing Swami Vireswarananda. He never pointed to himself as the locus of spirituality and divinity, but always and unfailingly pointed to Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda for spiritual sustenance. And thus this book under review does not begin with his photograph, but those of these three personages, who made Swami Vireswarananda abide in Brahman.

If this book is available in an electronic format and may be, free of charge on various e-book platforms, then it will reach the world at large. Devotees of the Ramakrishna Order already know of Swami Vireswarananda; the Swami's direct disciples know of him, but the sick need unction, not as much as the healthy. There may be many hearts which will change if this book were available online since extremists should know that:

Here is one thing more. We have in India, people of various ethnic backgrounds. There are so many languages and so many social customs, all different in different parts of India ... How will you integrate them into a great nation?

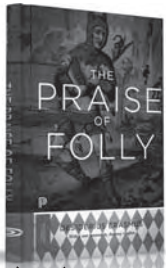
This also has been answered by Sri Rama-krishna. He found that behind every human being is the Atman. Deep behind is Atman, whatever the superficial differences. ... So, whatever difference may be there between man and man, this ideal of Atman behind everyone is the only principle which can unite us into a nation by removing all the differences.

Not only in India but all over the world, this ideal of Atman is the new revelation (163–4).

The ancient cynics were right: it is possible to revel in the oneness of humanity; but their methods were wrong. Only through renunciation of sense-objects and the rejection of identification with the mind and body can we have true cosmopolitanism. The members of the Swami Vireswarananda Smriti Committee deserve praise for publishing this elegant and well-researched book.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay

Assistant Professor of English,
Ramananda College, Bishnupur



The Praise of Folly
Desiderius Erasmus

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To understand Hamlet's exclamation: "What a piece of work is a man!" (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2), for understanding 'the swerve' to modernity (see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W W Norton, 2011)) that men like Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98), Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), and Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) forced upon Europe, we need to watch first the movie *The Name of the Rose* (1986). This should be followed by watching the movie *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). From the darkness, literally *The Name of the Rose* is tinted forbiddingly subdued and dark throughout; of the Middle Ages we enter into the splendour of the Renaissance in the tortured world of psychopaths in *The Silence of the Lambs*. From degenerate cultic monastic learning of the Middle Ages

we now enter into a world where everything is anthropocentric; the movement from Scholasticism to the Renaissance is best caught on camera when we find Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* listening to Renaissance music; Lecter even studies and teaches Renaissance art and re-enacts the murder of Girolamo Savonarola. The irony of understanding the Renaissance through *The Silence of the Lambs* will not be lost on the Renaissance scholar. Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) cannot anymore compete with the micro attention spans of scholars and students living their lives as 'Twitterati' and engaged social media addicts whose faces are open books for everyone to read. Movies at least demand lesser attention spans than Burckhardt's tome or Erwin Panofsky's ruminations on Renaissance and earlier art. Akin to this prescription of getting crash courses on the Middle Ages and on the Renaissance is the irony of knowing the Renaissance overreacher through studying the book under review. For according to Erasmus, epistemology is folly, as all manner of things are follies. Everything is just dust. Hamlet would conclude that man is but only a 'quintessence of dust' (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2). Also, Ficino, Savonarola, and Pico della Mirandola, along with Erasmus erased religious fanaticism and xenophobia from Europe. Today we need these men more than ever since various ideological beasts slouch towards Bethlehem to be born, their hours come around at last (see W B Yeats, *The Second Coming*).

Erasmus's mockery of Thomism and the Vitruvian Man has become an uncategorisable classic indispensable for appreciating the Renaissance as simultaneously profoundly literary, a paradigm changing historical epoch, and also as a theological cusp where Martin Luther's angst regarding the Catholic Church was intellectually validated as at least permissible. It was Erasmus, who eventually shaped the Reformation. The discipline-transgressing nature of *The Praise of Folly* is clear when we have a professional historian writing a foreword to the book and the translation and commentary is the well-known English version of Hoyt Hopenwell Hudson's (1893–1944). Hudson was a great Renaissance literary critic in his own