

# Ramprasad Sen: A Rebel in Disguise

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## Abstract:

In this paper the astounding musical personality of Bengal, Ramprasad Sen has been projected from a different perspective. In this modern age, songs of Ramprasad are widely sung and those are still immensely popular. The songs of this extraordinarily talented composer are predominantly regarded as devotional songs. Ramprasad sen was pious in the truest sense of the word and also an ardent devotee of Goddess Kali. His songs very naturally bear the testimony of intense devotion. But, if we make those compositions confined only into the parameter of devotion, we surely nullify the spirit as well as the philosophy of those incredible songs. Ramprasad made documentations on the then socio-political context along with the pain and sufferings of common people. From this particular perspective, Ramprasad's songs should be regarded as 'People's Songs'. Through his immortal songs, Ramprasad actually went on protesting against the subjugation of common people and social discriminations. In his lifetime, Ramprasad witnessed horrible events like famine, deadly invasions of Marathas and also the expansion of British royal power on his motherland along with the resultant sufferings of common mass. All these things left deep impact on him and his songs also became emblematic of it. In this paper we have tried to interpret the songs of Ramprasad from a different angle as well as perspective.

## Key-words:

Ramprasad, Devotional, Perspective, Movement, Protest-songs, History, Bengali songs, Ancient Bengal, Socio-political, Common people, Sufferings, Subjugation, Discrimination, Fundamental rights, Metaphorical, Documentation.

In the kingdom of Bengali music, Ramprasad Sen seems to be a unique figure. As a lyricist-composer he deserves special attention. It is really surprising that history remains silent about this exceptional personality to a great extent. Nothing of his life has properly been documented. His musical creations i.e. his songs are still widely sung and applied in various contexts. One of his tunes is treated as a signature tune of him and that is regarded as 'Ramprasadi Tune'. It is obviously an exceptional example as a particular progression of tune is named after the composer himself, even in the global context. It is really difficult to find out another parallel example. The very name Ramprasad as well as devotional song has become synonymous in the truest sense of the word. Here in lies the most pertinent question – should Ramprasad's compositions be regarded as only devotional ones or those have something else? To find out the answers, we have to focus on certain points both of Ramprasad Sen and music as a whole.

From time immemorial, music has been a guiding force for human civilization.’ The new International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary’ says that music is – “the science and art of the rhythmic combination of tones, vocal or instrumental, embracing melody and harmony.” It is evident that music is such a skill that involves both science and art. It is a proven fact that music does have the maximum potential to stir the human emotion. From the global history, it is also evident that music has always been acting as an active as well as powerful combatant force in the society. With the passage of time, music has become the most effective tool of art. Music can never be described as mere entertainment. It does have multifaceted dimensions and also has been one of the medium of protest against social irregularities, odds, autocracy as well as subjugation of humanities. Examples are just plenty. It can be said that art itself surpasses the boundary of entertainment and music, as a whole, is no exception.

Let us take an universal example i.e. “We shall overcome”. This song is evergreen as well as universal. This song is never emblematic of entertainment but it is perhaps the most significant protest song off all time. It is the time to trace out its root. History says that the song is related to two European songs from the 1700s – “Prayer of the Sicilian Mariners” and “O Sanctissima”. With the passage of time, after 1900, it seems another gospel song “I shall overcome someday” by reverend Dr. Charles Tindley was added to this musical mix – though the music was very different. Around 1945, gospel arrangers Atron Twig and Kenneth Morris added the essential pieces of the now famous lyric and melody line. In 1945-46, during labour strike against American tobacco in Charleston, South Carolina, “We shall overcome” first appeared as a protest song. African American women strikers were seeking a pay raise to thirty cents an hour. Lucille Simmons was one of the strikers and her favourite song was “I shall overcome”. A powerful sense of solidarity was added to the song when she changed the “I” into “We” and all the strikers sang together. In 1947, Lucille Simmons brought the song to Highlander Folk School and shared it with another labour activist. The cultural head of the school Zilphia Horton also learned it and taught the song to Pete Seeger.<sup>1</sup> The rest was a history.

Now, the question is whether there is a least little connection with the aforementioned song and Ramprasad Sen. It is quite obvious that the answer of this question would be an emphatic no. then comes the following question – is the reference out of context? Actually, we here do refer to the background history of the song “We shall overcome” in order to re establish the fact that music can never be regarded as a form of mere entertainment. Music, vocal or instrumental, always does have its own approach, philosophy, spirit and objective. It, in many occasions provides us with socio-political documentations, too. From all these perspectives, now we will pay our utmost attention to Ramprasad Sen, one of the most interesting musical personalities of Bengal.

We have stated earlier that history has never been very vocal about Ramprasad. Once upon a time there was a small town ‘Halishahar’ in the east bank of river ‘Bhagirathi’. It was actually a subdivision of the undivided district of 24 parganas. This subdivision was under the rule of Maharaja krishnachandra Ray. This locality was impregnated with scenic beauty of vast nature. This particular place was also known as ‘Kumarhatta’. One ‘Sen lineage’ of this locality was extremely famous and well known for its multidimensional activities. One noted personality of this lineage was Ramram Sen. Ramram sen was a pious Hindu but he married twice. His two wives were respectively Katyayani and Siddheshwari. Ramram’s second wife Siddheshwari gave birth to Ramprasad.<sup>2</sup>

It is very difficult to point out the birth year of Ramprasad specifically. Quite surprisingly history did not record the exceptional life of this man in a proper way. We get quite a few documentations from the research of Ishwar Gupta and from the book “Prasad-Prasange” by Dayal Ch. Ghosh. In both cases, the authors depended on numerous hearsays. It can be said that Ramprasad was born in between 1718 to 1723, but in this regard, Dinesh Ch. Bhattacharya in his book “Sahitya Sadhak Charitmala” mentioned specifically the birth



year of Ramprasad as 1720. If we accept this notion of Dinesh Chandra, we get the picture of great turmoil in the then Bengal.

The year was 1700 – Murshidkuli Khan became the ‘deyoan’ of Bengal by the order of Aurangjib. Four years later, in 1704, Murshidabad district was the headquarter of Bengal. The policy of Murshidkuligave immense tax to Aurangjib but Bengal started to face a plethora of crisis. Time went away and safarraaj was murdered. Alibardi Khan ascended the throne of Bengal and in the following year the then Bengal witnessed the most deadly attack of locusts. Vast green fields of Bengal became deserts in the truest sense of the word. Murshidkuli was not in a position to pay tax to ‘Nabab’ in Delhi. The kingly court of Delhi instigated the Marathha race to invade Bengal. In between 1742 to 1751, the dangerous cavalry mercenary group of Marathha empire i.e. ‘the Bargis’ indulged in large scale plundering of the countryside of Bengal at a stretch. Time flew away and then came the year – 1757 and Bengal witnessed ‘battle of Plassey’. History changed its course and again Bengal witnessed another deadly event in 1769 – the horrible food crisis that snatched away the lives of almost one crore people. Ramprasad witnessed all these with grown up mind as well as physique.<sup>3</sup>

Ramprasad was perhaps the first Bengali lyricist-composer who portrayed the pain and sufferings of common people through his creations. The socio-political scenario influenced Ramprasad to a great extent. In his youth, Ramprasad witnessed the extreme turmoil on the soil of his motherland. He was deeply moved by the extreme hardship of common mass. Ramprasad composed: “nun mele na amar shake”( I cannot arrange salt for my curry). The statement, here, seems to be metaphorical as it upholds the extreme poverty. In the then Bengal, the fundamental needs of common people was not met up. Prasad focused on that. The horrible picture of deadly food crisis instigated Prasad to compose – “Anna de go, anna de go, anna de go annada”( O mother give me some rice). This song evidently becomes a clear documentation of the then Bengal. In the extreme famine of 1769, man was just devoid of one handful rice. History witnessed the most horrible procession of death. Ramprasad made an heart rendering appeal to the almighty to have least little rice. Ramprasad composed: “Nim khaoale chini bole”(you have fed me bitter in the disguise of sweet) and he evidently became satirical composing this particular song. He again became metaphorical when he composed: “Sagare jar bichhana ma/shishire tar korbe ki”(the man who sleeps in the ocean is never afraid of becoming drenched in the dew).<sup>4</sup>

Now, let us concentrate on the aforementioned compositions and the corresponding approach of the composer. If we keenly go through the lines or listen to the available versions of the songs, cannot we have the impression of protest songs in a different form? The question becomes extremely pertinent and it demands keen analysis. In his compositions, Ramprasad went on portraying the sufferings of common people. When he said that he slept on the ocean, so he was not afraid of being drenched in the dew, the objective of the song became evidently clear. A man, facing plethora of major problems, generally does not pay attention to one minor problem. Ramprasad focused on that very point and conjured up the significant metaphors like ocean as well as dew. When he said that there was no salt to be added to his curry, again it became emblematic of the perpetual difference between the requirement and the arrangement. The curry Ramprasad referred to as ‘shaak’ unfolded another reality. It was not possible for a common man to buy vegetables from the market. He gathered some creeper or herbage to boil it in plain water but he had even no minimum capacity to arrange least little salt. When we listen to or go through this particular song in this modern time, we get the message that the fundamental rights of common people have never been properly protected by the state. Ramprasad voiced forth his protest against the subjugation of common people. Now, let us focus on the then political context of Bengal. The state itself was not in a position to look after a least the fundamental interest of common people. There was turmoil everywhere. What common people need is a proper governance. The Bengal of Ramprasad’s time was completely devoid of proper governance. The emergence of ‘Babu Zamindars’ as well as the rapid invasion of British royal power made the situation extremely critical for

common mass. The basic rhythm as well as the normal go of common people's life had been completely disrupted. So, in such a context, where to lodge a protest is a vital question. Being left with no other options, Ramprasad appealed to the highest court i.e. the court of supreme authority, the 'Almighty'. In this context, we must refer to one of the most popular composition of him – "Mayer emni bichar bote"( O mother is this your justice...)"which is still extremely popular. In this composition the satire really becomes heart touching. Prasad said in this song with an extremely heavy heart that the man who devoted his all to the sacred feet of Goddess Durga, had to face extreme injustice in his life. The song was impregnated with a striking metaphor of a court room drama as if an innocent person was charged with false allegations. The accused seemed to be quite helpless standing in the court and awaiting the justice to take place. The man only knew that he was innocent and did have his faith on the 'Almighty'.

All the aforementioned songs can never be regarded as merely devotional songs. There are protests in all these along with the pictures of the then socio-political contexts. These seem to be musical documentation of the then life of common people. Ramprasad focused on the sufferings of common people and spoke for the common people. He actually made musical representations.

Now, at this point we should peep into his personal life and refer to an incident. The demise of Ramprasad's father gave him an extreme shock. The demise of Ramram Sen, father of Ramprasad was sudden and it shattered the rhythm of 'Sen family'. Ramprasad was very much pious as well as an ardent follower of Goddess Kali from his early age. The sudden and untimely demise of his father affected Prasad's mental equipoise but he kept his faith upon 'Maa Kali'. In this critical juncture of life, Ramprasad had to shoulder all the responsibilities of his family which seemed to be a large one. Apart from his mother Siddheshwari and wife Sarbani, there were two daughters and one son of Ramprasad in the family. Ramprasad did not inherit any kind of ancestral property or fortune. He had small land and he tried to cultivate in it. As the days went on, economical hardship was consistently increasing. In a situation like this, Ramprasad left his ancestral house in order to earn money. He came to the then 'Kolkata' which was not very much affluent as a city and it was also not the capital city. After some days, Ramprasad got a job as a clerk and his employer was one Durgacharan Mitra. The salary was Rs. Thirty per month that for the first time gave Ramprasad one kind of mental comfort.<sup>5</sup>

So, we can say that Ramprasad himself faced the odds of life. He did not belong to a so called rich family and very naturally he had to face a lot of hardships. Witnessing the successive turmoil in Bengal, he identified himself with the common mass and started to portray the sufferings, the pain of common man. From this perspective his songs can be regarded as 'People's Songs'. Before him, in Bengali music, we hardly find any such manifestation. In Vaishnava literature there had been the deep influence of divine love and in the 'Mangalkavya' also Gods and Goddesses reigned supreme. The contents were predominantly mythological or centred around divine instruments. In 'Padabalis' the audience of ancient Bengal got the divine taste of celestial love between Lord Krishna and Radha. The deviation of Ramprasad as a composer was very much vivid as well as extremely significant. He became the spokesperson of common man. In this regard, let us pay our attention to Ramprasad's another composition – "Mon re krishikaj janona"(O mind you do not know how to cultivate) which is still extremely popular as well as widely sung. This composition again seems to be metaphorical that pinpoints to 'Yoga sadhana'. But the opening of this song is extremely striking. Bengal was predominantly agricultural in nature but the time of Ramprasad was extremely critical. The attacks of locusts, draughts, incredible torture of zamindars and looting of crops of common people's cultivation – all these factors were the inevitable impediments for the cultivation. Prasad's composition –"Mon re..." perhaps echoed the inexplicable pain in the very beginning of the composition.



In the year 1798, there was an epoch making incident in the kingdom of English literature – “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” was published. It could well be regarded as the ‘de facto manifesto’ of romantic movements. During the romantic movement, the literature spoke for common people, the toilers of the world and spoke against the subjugation as well as discrimination of common people. Did not Ramprasad do the same thing much earlier when he composed: “ Kareo dile dhon jon ma, hasti rathi jayi/Ar karo vagye mojurkhata, shake anna mile koi/keu thake attalikay, amar ichha temni roi”( you have made someone extremely affluent/someone extremely poor not having even food/ someone lives in the palace, I also wish to do so). This particular composition unfolds the saga of common people, the perpetual discrimination between have and have not. Again Ramprasad seems to lodge his complain against this social discrimination as well as subjugation in the highest court. The vivid discrimination between have and have not always touched him to the fullest extent. From this point of view it can easily be said that Ramprasad had always been a reactionary personality. In the aforementioned composition he actually questions the social discrimination. He questions that why one should be an palace and another be a pavement dweller; why one should have plenty of palatable foods and another struggling for the minimum. When he says that he also wishes to lead comfortable life, he becomes the representative of all those who are devoid of their basic needs. In the present time, after almost around 250 years, all these songs are equally relevant. Where in lies the point of relevance? All the songs speak for the people and speak against the discrimination as well as subjugation of humanity.

So, Ramprasad was a reactionary artist who dreamt of a classless society, equitable distribution of wealth and proper conservation of common man’s fundamental rights along with his rudimental needs. His songs have become an inseparable part of Bengal’s folk culture. It is really surprising, as we have mentioned earlier that history did not record the life of this extraordinary personality in proper way. Even the two most dependable as well as authentic documentations of that time – “Statistical Survey of Bengal” and “Annals of Rural Bengal”, both written by William Wilson Hunter did mention almost nothing about Ramprasad.

It is really difficult to trace out the actual causes behind this inadequacy about Ramprasad in the pages of history. His own life style as well as love for seclusion might well be one of the reasons. In the year of 1831, “Sangbadpravakar” was published by Ishwar Gupta. In 1833, Ramprasad’s ‘Kalikirtana’ was published there and after that in 1853, the biography of Ramprasad was also published in “Sangbadpravakar”. But Ishwar Gupta also depended mainly on hearsay for that.<sup>6</sup>

Ramprasad was a rebel in the truest sense of the word who rose in opposition of the then tradition. He vividly deviated from the ornamental divine love story of Lord Krishna and Radha or any other mythological influences. He was evidently a trendsetter as music became his tool and devotion became his medium. In this context we should remember the most important fact that his own spiritual perception never carried away him from common people. He had always been pro mass. In fact Ramprasad fought with the God for the welfare of common people. He appealed for justice in the ‘Heavenly Court’ for the common people. He lodged successive complains against the subjugation of common people to the ‘Almighty’. In his essay titled as “Satya”, Rabindranath Tagore described Ramprasad as a courageous pious who interacted with God like relatives. Ramprasad did have the courage to question even the divine entity regarding the subjugation of common people or the social discrimination or the anarchical injustice. Ramprasad had the courage of a rebel who always dreamt of a society where common people would retain their smiling faces with coveted comfort. Ramprasad dreamt of a society where only justice would prevail all the way. Till his last sigh, Ramprasad kept his faith on divine power and went on appealing for the welfare of common mass; perhaps it was also the belief of this rebel – ‘ we shall overcome someday.....’

## Notes:

1. We shall overcome: the story behind the song – <https://www.kennedy.centre.org> (visited on 26.05.2023 at 5:06pm)
2. Jogindranath Chattopadhyay, *Ramprasad*, Kolkata: P.M.Bakchi & Company private Limited,1423 Bangabda, Fifth Edition(reprint) pp 1-4.
3. Sudip Bandopadhyay, *Darpane Samayshashi*, Kolkata: Anandabazar Patrika(Saturday supplementary),2.04.2022, p 2.
4. Ibid
5. Jogindranath Chattopadhyay, op.cit. pp 8-13.
6. Sudip Bandopadhyay, op.cit.

