

ROLE OF DR. RAM DAS SEN (1845-1887) IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BENGAL RENAISSANCE

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ABSTRACT

Ram Das Sen was one of the prominent figures of Murshidabad district of Bengal. He was one of the antiquarians and orientalist scholars. Most of his works were written with the historical sense. His philosophical thoughts and methods of history writing which were represented in his books Aitihasyik Rahasya, Bharat Rahasya, and Ranta Rahasya are no less than the mainstream of historiography. As an eminent antiquarian Ram Das was felicitated abroad and touch the heart of such Orientalist Scholars like Max Muller, Dr. Albrecht Weber, Count Angelo-de-Gubernatis and others by his philosophical researches. This celebrated antiquarian received the title 'Doctor' from the Oriental Academy of Florence, Italy in recognition of his Sanskrit literature, antiquities writings, and research activities. He also received a 'Diploma' from 'Asiatic Society of Italy'. He also added a new dimension to the Bengal Renaissance in the nineteenth century. This work tried to focus on the role of Ram Das Sen to spread a new dimension to the Bengal Renaissance

KEYWORDS: Antiquarian, Orientalist, Intelligentsia, Antiquities

INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth Century Bengal witnessed many historical events, aspects, and idealism in which historians and scholars were involved. The Bengal Renaissance is one of them. It became a subject matter of scholarly debate. A number of scholars have put forward their opinion about the nature of the Bengal Renaissance. The influence of renaissance on the socio-cultural life of nineteenth-century Bengal other than Calcutta is a neglected field of study. Recently a few attempts were made by some eminent scholars and social scientists, which definitely added a new dimension on this study. After Calcutta Murshidabad emerged as an alternative center of the Renaissance; this has been skillfully explained by Dr. Aniruddha Das in his books 'Renaissance Revisited, Murshidabad 1853-1953' ¹

The Intellectual ferment in Berhampore was rather strong during the second half of the nineteenth century. Berhampore Court, Berhampore College, Collectorate of Berhampore, and the Estate of the Nawab (Lalbag) opened an opportunity for jobs for educated people. In this atmosphere, a number of scholars gathered in Berhampore and they enriched Bengal with their wisdom over the century. Among those, some remarkable were Pandit Madan Mohan Tarkalanker (1817-1858), Sris Chandra Vidya Rantna(1835-62), Bhudeb Mukhapadhyay(1827-1894), Prof. Revd. Lal Bihari De (1824-94), Akshay

Chandra Sarkar (1846-1917), Baikuntha Nath Sen, Tara Prasad Chattopadhyay, Rajkrishna Mukhapadhyay(1845-86), Ramgati Nayaratna(1831-1894), Ganga Dhar Kabiraj(1798-1885), Girish Chandra Basu, Prasanna Kumar Sarbadhikari(1825-86), Radhika charan Sen, Guru Das Bondopadhyay(1844-1918), Pandit Kalibar Vedanta Bagish (1842-1911), Dinabandhu Mitra(1830-1873), Acharya Brojendra Nath Seal, Bankim Chandra Chottopadhyay(1838-1894), Ramesh Chandra Dutt (1848-1909), Sasadhar Tarkachuramoni(1850-1928) and as well as Ram Das Sen.² Akshay Chandra Sarkar compared the presence of such luminaries with that of the Court of 'Vikramaditya' where 'nine-gems' were presented.³ Interestingly, most of them had good contact with Ram Das Sen(1845-1887), who was born at Berhampore in the distinguished Sen Family of 'Kayatha' caste and a prominent member of the intelligentsia of that time.

A number of personalities, who added a new dimension to the Bengal Renaissance, came to Berhampore College as teachers or principals and the college in its turn produced many great men. The college itself was influenced by the pervasive ferment of the spirit, attracted to itself scholars and teachers of an exceptionally high standard 'much above the average level of the staff of a Mufassil institution'. Brojendranath Seal, Janakinath Bhattacharjee, and E M Wheeler were illustrious names that 'added luster to the annals of the college' and were inspiring influences upon the lives of their pupils.⁴ These persons were properly helped and accompanied by the intelligentsia who were born and brought up in Murshidabad. This accelerated the process of intellectual interaction. Some zamindars of Murshidabad patronized the scholars and set themselves as key figures of the Renaissance in nineteenth-century Bengal. Ram Das Sen was one of the prominent figures. He was one of the antiquarians and orientalist scholars born in Berhampore in the district of Murshidabad. Most of his works were written with a sense of history. His philosophical thoughts and methods of history writing which were represented in his books *Aitihāsik Rahasya*, *Bharat Rahasya*, and other writings are no less important than the main-stream of historiography. The revival of classical texts viz. the Vedas, the Samhitas, the Upanishads, the Smṛiti literature, and the Buddhists texts made him a remarkable personality of the Renaissance in nineteenth-century Bengal. However, his works are of immense importance. In this context, the chief objective of the present work is to focus on his oriental activities, an art of writings, philosophical thoughts, a method of history writings, and how he became instrumental in the intellectual ferment. The contributions of Dr. Sen in the Bengal Renaissance have hardly become a subject matter of scholarly study.

Ancestor of Ram Das Sen

The ancestral house of Ram Das was situated at Faridpur. It is said that Bedacharan Sen, the ancestor of Sen's Family came from Mitrāsēnpatī of Idilpur Paragana in the District of Faridpur, in present Bangladesh.⁵ Due to the adverse situation, he along with his wife and sons came to a village near Berhampore and lived there. The residence of Sen's family was at this village till the time of his grandson, Laxminarayana Sen. Brajaballav Sen, the Son of Laxminarayana, came to Berhampore along with his two sons Krishnagovinda and Krishnakanta in the mid-nineteenth century. The third son Ramkanta was Born in Berhampore. His second son Krishnakanta became the dewan of "Nimakmahal" of East India Company possessed and the enormous wealth.⁶ In a real sense, he consolidated the base of Sen Family of Berhampore. According to Major J.H.T. Walsh "The founder of the family was Krishna Kanta, a Kayastha by caste, who was born about the middle of the eighteenth century,

and amassed great wealth in the service of Government, as Diwan to the Salt Board, under Mr.Colbart.”⁷ Lalmohan was the youngest son of Krishnagovinda. Laksmimani was his third wife. Ram Das, the brightest personality of this lineage was the son of Lalmohan and Laxmimoni born on 10th December 1845.

Sen’s Library

Ram Das cultivated the habit of collecting and preserving rare books. The information which we have got from the writing of Shis Chandra Chattopadhyaya is that Ram Das’s father maintained a library. With the passage of time, the number of books grew. In his lifetime the library became so developed, that it was considered as a special place. Ram Das Sen’s library was a noteworthy place for intellectual interaction. The persons like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Akshay Chandra Sarkar, Gurudas Bandopadhyay, Pandit Ramgati Nyayaratna, Taraprasad Chottopadhyay, Dinonath Gangopadhyay and various eminent persons used his library.¹¹ Nikhil Nath Roy, an eminent historian, and son-in-law of Sen consulted this library while writing a history of Murshidabad.¹² No doubt his library played a vital role in the revival of classical texts of Bengal. In 1951 Anuttam Sen, the successor of Sen handed over a collection of about 3500 volumes which belonged to the late Dr. Sen of Berhampore, to the National Library, Calcutta. Presently these are well protected in the galleries of gift and exchange department of the library. So many basic books of the nineteenth century on Literature, History, Philosophy, Religion, etc are available in this collection. Many rare books in Sanskrit had enriched the collection considerably. Such rare items, as Renell’s Bengal Atlas (1770), nineteenth-century Bengali works on Literature, Essay, Religion, etc are also available. There were also about 75 Bengali and Sanskrit manuscripts, it included that of Uvvata’s ‘Mantra Bhasya’ which was five hundred years old and the manuscript of ‘Supti Karnamrta’ of Shridhar Das, the court poet of Lakshman Sen, written about seven hundred years ago.¹³ Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar wrote a letter to Ram Das expressing him heartfelt gratitude for the diverse collection of his library.¹⁴ The library and the exceptional collection of Dr. Sen still exist in the mind of literature lovers and scholars of history. In this regard the comment made by Professor Dr. Srikumar Bondapadhyay in the 100th birth anniversary of Dr. Ram Das Sen in the University of Calcutta is worth mentioning

‘. . . Ram Das Sen, a local zamindar, kindled the torch of antiquarian research as one of the earliest pioneers of the subject and his famous library, with its rich collection of books on Indian antiquities, provided an opportunity to young, aspiring scholars to carry on the work of original investigation started by him’¹⁵

Bankim, Bangadarshan & Ram Das

When Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya came to Berhampore as Deputy Magistrate in the year 1869, distinguished scholars associated with Sen’s library created an atmosphere of literary activities there. The place of their intellectual exercise was Ram Das’ library at Berhampore. So, there developed a friendship between Bankim Chandra Chottopadhyaya and Ram Das Sen. Within a very short time, Bankim became a central scholar of this intellectual group. Sen’s library was one of the most favorite places of Bankim. He made the plan for publication of the famous journal Bangadarshan at Dr. Sen’s library.¹⁶ As a preliminary to the publication of this journal, Bankim Chandra convened a literary conference on the 3rd May 1875 at

Berhampore. Among those who attended this historic session, Ram Das Sen Was one of the central Scholar.¹⁷The names of seven writers were mentioned in the first advertisement of Bangadarshan, those are- Dinabandhu Mitra, Hemchandra Bandapadhaya, Jagadishnath Roy, Tara Prasad Chattopadhyay, Krishnakamal Bhattachariya, Akshay Chandra Sarkar and Ram Das Sen.¹⁸ Ram Das enriched Bangadarshan with his valuable writing on antiquities. Nikhilnath Roy said in his essay entitled with “Murshidabader Itihas, pratnatatta O Sahitya” that ‘Bankim Chandra published his famous journal ‘Bangadarshan’ with the help of Akshay Chandra and Ram Das.’¹⁹ Although Bankim left Berhampore his close-connection with Ram Das remained for a long time.

Literary works of Ram Das Sen

Ram Das Sen started writing poems from the early stage; at the age of fourteen. His most of the poems were published in Sambad Prabhakar, Somprokash, Vishya Monoranjan, Bharatranjan, Grambarta, Vidyannoti, Sadhony, and other contemporary newspaper and periodicals. Within a very short time, his works came under qualitative and quantitative measurement. ‘He has written various books with different taste within his very short life. These are- (1) Tatta Sangeet Lahori(1859), (2) Kusummala(1861) (3) Bilap Taranga(1864) (4) Kabita Lahori(1867) (5) Chaturdas padi Kabitamala (1867) (6) Aitihasic Rahasya (Pratham Bhag 1874, Ditiya Bhag 1876, Tritiya Bhag (1878)(7)Bharat Rahasya (1885) (8) Ratna Rahasya(1884) (9) Bangalir Europe Darshan(1886) (10) Buddha Bev(1891).

Ram Das Sen’s Approach to History

Ram Das was involved in unveiling the mystery of Hinduism and its culture. Hence, some of his books were entitled as Aitihasic Rahasya, Bharat Rahasya, Ranta Rahasya and Samskar Rahasya which are his most important antiquities writings. His lectures entitled “The Modern Buddhistic Researches” at the conference of Berhampore Shahitya Samiti on 19th September 1870 were highly appreciated by the contemporary scholars.²⁰ Ram Das was involved in several historical debates in his letters published in the famous journal ‘The Indian Antiquary’.²¹ He noted down his experience of visiting Europe in ‘Bangalir Europe Darshan’ which is a concrete comparative discussion of western and Indian Culture. Aitihasic Rahasya by Ram Das is the outcome of his tireless efforts and philosophical researches. He dedicated this book to his friend-Max Muller, a great German Scholar. He mentioned the following quotation in the dedication pages of Aitihasic Rahasya – ‘This work is dedicated to professor Max Muller as a testimony of respect and admiration by the author.’

He raised his voice against the construction of ancient history on the basis of Puranas, as the Puranas are full of flaw, flights, and poetic imagination. Even satirically he wrote about the Vedas that the meaning of ‘Veda’ is knowledge, but what type of knowledge can be acquired through the hymns that praise consumption of ‘somasara’ i.e. alcoholic drink and ‘gomamsa’ i.e. beef.²² As sources of history, he paid much importance on the Veda, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Smriti Shastras, Mahavamsha, Khitish Banshabali Charita and several original texts of Ancient India.

According to Dr. Ram Das, the political history of past obtained ancient coins, inscriptions, scriptures in respect of reconstruction of history and historical research is not sufficient indeed. He finds history in human living standard, lifestyle,

and daily activities. That is, we find his opinion favoring ‘Total History’ in his historical approach. In his essay ‘Aryan Sampradayer Achhar Byabohar’ he has explained the language of Aryan, their diet, production of goods, dresses, uniforms, women’s position in society, transport, trade, daily works, a lesson of honesty, rules, and regulation. He has taken part in the Aryan debate, but he could not come to a concrete conclusion. Though, he accepted the view of the probability of Aryan’s arrival from Iran.²³ He expressed his deep faith in his love for Art, Literature, and Culture of Hindus in some essays of Aitihāsik Rahasya. He articulated in his essay ‘Vedapracher’ that the Vedas were the most ancient text and most important of all books in the world. He felt proud of the European Scholars for collection, preservation and preaching the Vedas.

Ram Das made himself free from all narrowness in his historical research. He followed different ways to discover the ancient History of India. Similarly, he did not accept any speech or quotation featuring ignorance of spiritual thinking. Rather, he tried to construct a new form of history in correspondence with reasoning experience by the analyzing sources of history. In his historical approach; we find a responsible focus of attitude and scientific investigation with the rational, transparent, free, and analytical mind. He wanted to tell the plain truth in simple language while writing historical essays. Dr. Sen’s Philosophical research works definitely deserve inclusion in the studies of the mainstream history of India. His writings proved that he had applied modern methods of history writings.²⁴ His keen sense of history, objectivity, impartiality in writings history and the importance of ‘tradition’ and ‘reason’ as he defined in writing history was not only unique considering the consciousness of history among the scholars in those days, but it may also guide the present day historians in reconstruction the past.

It can be said that that most of the nineteenth century Indian antiquarians had some demerits in their methodologies of research. Their writings were featured with biasness and personal feelings. But at that time, Ram Das devoted himself to the cultural past of India with reasoning, rationality and analytical mind. He was free from self-contradiction. That is why his works acquired distinctive nature. Like an objective historian, he opined that some fact we accept as being part of the tradition, but that may not be true. He accepted the importance of the legends, inscriptions, archaeological remains, etc. in studying history.²⁵ He was not in favor of accepting those traditions and reasons which were of no importance and contradictory in nature. His empirical study and objectivity are also distinct from the other contemporary Bengali writers.

Post and Honours

Dr. Sen was a distinguished member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. He was elected as its member on December 2, 1874, was listed as its Non –Resident member. He took membership of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1884. He also took membership of the organizations like the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India, The Indian Associations, British Indian Association, the Sanskrit Text Society of London, the Oriental Academy of Florence, The Societa Asiatica Havana of Italy, Zoological Garden, Calcutta, and the Theosophical Society. It is evident that he presented his celebrated work Aitihāsik Rahasya to the Asiatic Society of Japan. He also adorned the posts of the honorary magistrate of Berhampore, Municipal Commissioner, a member of Board of Trustee of the Berhampore College and Secretary of ‘Murshidabad Sabha’.²⁶ Sri Khirod Chandra Roy informed that as the member of those institutes he played a vital role.

His role was quite desirable to the intellectuals in that contemporary situation. So, in the second session of Indian National Congress, he was a representative from Murshidabad. In protest against the Bengal Tenancy Bill, he attended the meeting of the Zamindar being a delegate of Zamindar of Murshidabad. It was the best example of his acceptability to the intellectuals of Murshidabad. His Scholarly activities were also certified by Lieutenant Governor Sir Richard Temple on 1st January 1877. This certificate is given bellow-

“By command of his Excellency the Viceroy and Government General this certificate is presented in the name of her most Grecious Magisty Victora, Empress of India, to Babu Ramdas Sen, Honorary Magistrate of Murshidabad, in recognition of his loyalty to Government the services ungrudgingly rendered by him to the public and the interest taken by him in educational matters and in pursuits of literature.

Richard Temple, Jan 1st, 1877.”²⁷

Awards & Achievements

This celebrated antiquarian received the title ‘Doctor’ from the Oriental Academy of Florence, Italy in recognition of his Sanskrit literature, writing and research activities.²⁸ Probably he was awarded this degree after Dec. 1874, as ‘Dr’ did not prefix his name in the Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1874. He also received a ‘Diploma’ from ‘Asiatic Society of Italy’. The life sketch of Dr. Sen was published with his photograph in the Biographical Dictionary published from Florence, entitled ‘Dizionario Biografico Scrittori Contemporanei.’²⁹

CONCLUSIONS

The Renaissance, as a cultural movement has been accepted by some historians as an established fact in the history of Murshidabad for the period of our study. It can be said that renaissance does not take place in any particular region all of a sudden; a suitable background helps it to take place. We believe that there was an indigenous source for the development of the renaissance movement in Murshidabad. And it was not ‘a by-product of the British rule’. The indigenous way of development should be traced in regional histories. The Bengal Renaissance was not Calcutta-centric as well. Even as Calcutta experienced the intellectual ferment, Murshidabad was not far behind, it was an alternative center.³³ In the process of the progress of the renaissance movement the Calcutta intellectuals helped the growth of the movement in Murshidabad; at the same time members of the intelligentsia on many occasions went to Calcutta and helped the movement taking place there. The intellectuals of both Calcutta and Murshidabad influenced each other.

It seems that Dr. Sen could not escape that all-pervasive influence of English. Thus no adaptation of the classical past of India or the new ideas of the West could escape the careful scrutiny made by him. His activities facilitated the synthesis of the East and the West, in which upliftment of the countrymen was an utmost preference to him. He combined the best traditions of both civilizations in his own terms. In this context, a letter of Max-Muller written to Ram Das is Remarkable- ‘Take all that is good from Europe only, do not try to become Europeans, but remain what you are, Son of Monu, Children of bountiful soil, seekers after truth, worshipper of the same unknown God, whom all men ignorantly worship, and whom all

very truly and wisely serve by doing what is just and good.’³⁴ He showed supreme importance to this advice as a speech of spiritual teacher in his life and works.

In response to the appeal of Bankim Chandra, Ram Das Sen has a massive responsibility in his shoulder for recovery of the history of ancient India. He was not a professional historian. It is also true that the situation of that period was an obstacle for him in writing a complete history. He had a magical obsession for history. And this kind of obsession led to his inspiration for writing historical-essays. He had credit in collecting rare and extremely valuable sources of history. With the help of these sources, he expressed his scientific and responsible focus in his historical-essays. In his writings, we can find the conscious efforts in the bondage of ancient heritages and beliefs. He was one of the most prominent members of the intelligentsia of that time. His philosophical researches attracted the notice of several scholars of India and Europe. He also became emotional when he entered in the deep of glorious past of his country, but he was able to control his emotions in writing proper history. He was fully free from self-contradiction. Dr. Sen wanted to go deep into the knowledge that was cherished and inherited from the ancient period of Indian history. In that, he wanted to trace the root of modern development. So his writings should be relevant in the curious mind of students and scholars of history.

The main object of our nationalist historians is establishing self-identity of the nation. For this purpose, they have deeply engaged themselves in reconstructing the social-political as well as cultural history of past of the country. If we look forward in the Ram Das Sen’s presentations, it might be proved that he started this work. He definitely added a new dimension in a new social history of the ancient Hindus. He has justified the ancient believes with his philosophical thoughts and interpretations of historical sources. What he had left in the field of antiquarianism, his followers such as Haraprasad Shastri, Rakhai Das Bondopadhyay, Radhakumud Mukherjee, and Jadunath Sarkar had tried to flourish and bloom it.

Murshidabad, however, witnessed a Renaissance (in its classical/traditional definition) that is a revival of classical text and the generation of the new ideas and innovations. The revival of classical texts denoted the fact that those were reread, re-edited, and annotated, re-explained and its basic spirits were adopted. The revival of classical texts like the Vedas, the Upanishads, Samhitas, Puranas, Smriti, and Buddhists literature as exemplified in the works of Dr. Ram Das Sen made him a remarkable personality of the Bengal Renaissance in the nineteenth century. But in the present day, Ram Das Sen’s name has gone into oblivion. A proper focus on his works would bring out the ideas of the nationalists and their methodologies of historical research.

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