

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### RamdasSen: Making of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Historian

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#### Abstract:

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal many people among the Bengalis did original research about ancient India. The two eminent researches whose names come to our mind are RajendralalMitra and Ramdas Sen. Of these two, we should be more grateful to Ramdas Sen. He enriched Bengali language as regards to ancient India by publishing his research in his mother tongue, i.e. Bengali. What RajendralalMitra did in European language and in European way, RamdasSen succeeded doing it in his mother tongue and in a completely Indian way. Apart from some original researches and discussions in 'Aitihasya-Rahasya', 'Ratna-Rahasya' and Bharata-Rahasya' etc, RamdasSen's contribution in his short span of life was unparalleled. RamdasSen was very fond of Bengali literature. He helped Bankimchandra in various ways when the latter was publishing 'Bangadarshan' from Baharampur. His generosity towards popularizing Bengali literature is also memorable. The original researches that got included in the treasury of literature because of his own efforts would live forever to the modern litterateurs and the historians.

#### Keywords:

Aitihasya-Rahasya, Ratna-Rahasya, Bharata-Rahasya, Bangadarshan, Antiquarian, Historiography.

#### 1. Introduction:

In older times history was mere collection of books, authors and different groups of writers. Gradually, evolution of thought, process of writing history and the evolving concept of the nature of history came with it. At present, the theory of history in addition to the analysis of people's understanding of the past, provides insight into the relationship of the new generation with that of the preceding generation. If we take a close look at the tradition of historiography in ancient India, we will observe, the culture of literature and philosophy was deep rooted whereas literature of history and awareness of history was neglected. In other words, totally different from western. This apparent negligence of history in Indian literature has drawn attention of all the Indian and foreign scholars. One such Indian scholar who wrote in 'Bangadarshan' a journal founded by BankimchandraChattopadhyaya, was Ramdas Sen. He

was born on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1845 at Baharampur in the district of present Murshidabad (West Bengal). Fatherless RamdasSen had started his education mainly at home at the age of just three and he also studied a few days at Baharampur College. He had much interest in his study. The library set up at his Baharampur house by him still bears witness of his education to study. From his early teen he showed great interest in his mother tongue – Bengali. Although, RamdasSen is eternally remember for his ample contribution in historical writings within his brief span of forty two years of life (1845 A.D. – 1887).

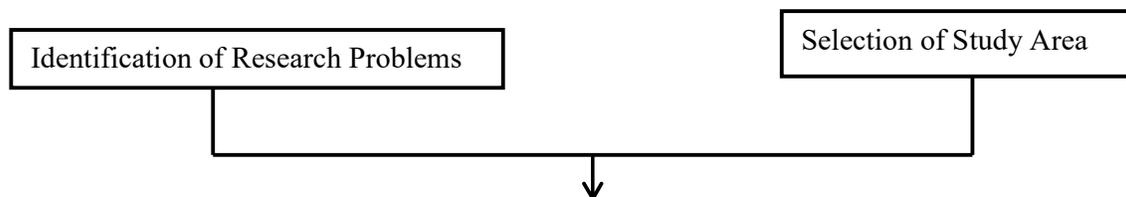
**2. Objectives:**

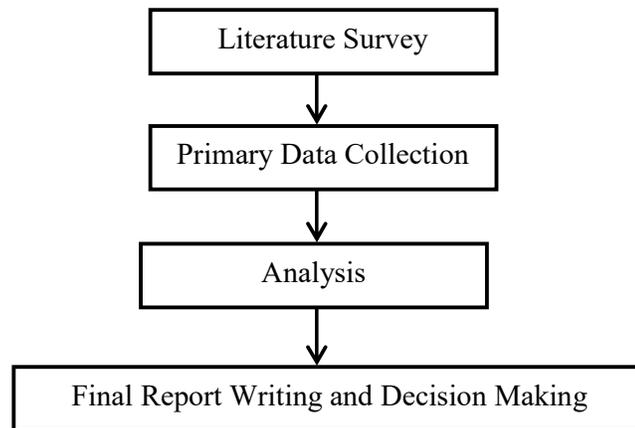
The main goal of this study is to find out the glimpses of historical writings and thoughts of RamdasSen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. So to achieve that goal the following objectives are considered:

- I. To focus the significance of ancient Indian history in respect of RamdasSen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- II. To show how RamdasSen used Bengali language for describing Indian society, culture and ancient Indian history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- III. To analyze how the Bengali community acquainted their glorious past through the historical writings of RamdasSen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**3. Materials and Methods:**

The purpose of this historical analysis is to find out the answer of the question: why did RamdasSen try to know the ancient Indian history in regard of the then circumstances of 19<sup>th</sup> century? Why did RamdasSen discuss ancient Indian history through Bengali language? Why did RamdasSen concentrate on the glorious past of India? Was the Bengali community influenced with the zeal for nationalism by the writings of RamdasSen through the Bengali language and his curiosity to know the glorious past, culture and heritage of ancient India? necessary information from books and journals has been consulted. Primary information has been collected through library, such as National Library (Kolkata), Krishnath College Library and district library of Baharampur, Bangiya-SahityaParisad Library (Kolkata), Asiatic Society Library (Kolkata) and numerous literatures related to it are collected. Collected information are quantified, analyzed and represented with the help of Microsoft Word-2010 after through study of the secondary and primary information. The steps followed in the study can be organized in the following manner.





**Flow chart of methodology adopted to this study**

#### **4. Major findings & discussions**

##### **4.1 An assessment of historical writings in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal:**

Before going through the historical writings of RamdasSen, what we have to acquaint with is the scenario of composing of historical writings and how the so-called scholars discussed the history in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first phase of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. In this context we will observe that, we had the tradition of writing history even before nineteenth century, distinctly speaking, before the battle of Plassey, in other words, before the arrival of Europeans in Bengal. But the style of historiography was mythical and archaic. The role of a human was insignificant, whereas the supernatural miracles of the divine occupied most of it. Alongside, there was a tradition of popular or social historiography which mainly dealt with the happenings in royal families. After the battle of Plassey, i.e. in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the imperialist rulers initiated the study of history and culture of India for the sake of commercial and administrative purpose. Consequently, as a necessity, an analytical writing process was introduced by the foundation of Asiatic Society in 1784 for the development of the occidental education and the research in history. Under the leadership of William James, this institution, for the first time made an organized attempt to study the society, culture and history of India.

The in-between period of 1800 A.D. – 1870 A.D can be referred as the emergence of historical conscious of the Bengali Community. Now if we analyze the historical related writings of this period, the historiography of the Bengalis can be divided in two sub-period: 1800 A.D. – 1835 A.D. and 1835 A.D. – 1870 A.D. But we do not get the real acquaintance of appropriate historical thoughts in the writings in first sub-period. Though English education was introduced, but most part of historical writings followed the medieval Arabic-Persian style of historiography (Example – ‘PratapadityaCharitra’ by RamramBasu) and genealogy of family in place of western historical methodology. Comparatively, more historical writings were published in the second sub-period than the first one. In this particular phase, two history based periodicals: ‘BibidharthaSongraha’ (1851 – 1853, 1957 –

1861) and 'Rahasya-Sandorbho' (1863 – 1866, 1870 – 1871, 1872 – 1873) were published by RajendralalMitra. So there was characteristic difference between the two phases. Effected by their western learning, the scholars, more or less, followed the western style of historiography. Moreover scattered historical sense was discerned in the writings of the second phase. These unorganized developments took collective form after 1870. In this sub-period one section of the Bengali Scholars, who were indulged in historiography, were acquainted with Sanskrit genealogical study. Though the academic study they came closer to western method of historiography. They were strongly influenced by European style of historiography of eighteenth and nineteenth century. However, though a few were aware of the limitations of the English historiography and syllabus, Bengali historiography was completely restricted within the English imperialist historiography. So whatever was discussed about Ancient Bengal or Ancient India in relation to history, in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, was basically the effort of the foreign scholars. There was no awakening of nationalism, it was purely a scholastic study of the matters. As a matter of fact, these were published in English. Hence, the foreign inspired Bengali scholars also accepted English as the medium of publication of their thesis.

In that scenario, appeared BankimchandraChattopadhyay whose historiography marked a new phase in Bengali historical research. Bankimchandra shattered the Bengali's obsession with English. He was also the person who took up the task of inspire the Bengalees to wake up with his untiring exhortations. From then onwards, it could be said that, the proper exploration of Bengal's history was first initiated. Because almost every historian be it the contemporary ones or those who came afterwards got more or less inspired by the theory of history of Bankimchandra. One such history-writer who wrote in 'Bangadarshan', a journal founded by Bankimchandra, was Ramdas Sen.

## 4.2 A Review of Historical Writings of RamdasSen

RamdasSen showed close-inclination towards Bengali literature. Besides the literacy practice he had shown great interest in discovering the past glory of his own country. His profound interest in the discussion of ancient past was quite noticable. Moreover, RamdasSen also collected books on ancient Indian history and read them attentively. From the month of April, 1872 when 'Bangadarshan' was being published under the editorship of Bankimchandra, RamdasSen shifted his attention from the literary practice to the practice of history and also wrote a number of essays on ancient history for 'Bangadarshan'. These essays were warmly welcomed in Bangadarshan and they give a clear idea about Ramdas' sense of ancient history.

These essays 'AitihasyaRahasya' (Volume – I, 1874, Volume – II, 1876, Volume – III, 1879), 'RatnaRahasya' (1884) and 'BharataRahasya' (1885) were respectively published in form of books. It should be mentioned here that apart from Bangadarshan, some essays of 'RatnaRahasya' were also published in AryaDarshanmagazine. Moreover, RamdasSen wrote some essays for a number of magazines like 'RahasyaSandarbhya', 'Gyanankur O

Pratibimbo', 'Bandhab', "Bharati",'Nabya Bharat', 'PakkhikSamalochana' and 'Nabajiban' which give us an impression of his knowledge in ancient history. After the death of RamdasSen in 1887 his son MonimohanSen published the books of his father between 1902 and 1915 in three phases. Some sporadic and unpublished writings were also compiled in those books. The writings include 'Buddhadeb' (biography and religious life) – 12<sup>th</sup> August, 1891, 'Hasyarnava', 'On Chand's mention of SriHarsha', 'GaudiyaDesa of the Ancients', 'The Firearms of the Hindus', 'On the Modern Buddhistic Researches' and these give us the evidence of the research work done by Ramdas into the ancient history of India.

RamdasSen in his 'AitihaskaRahasya' (Vol. – I) wrote an essay 'BharatbarsherPurabrittoSamalochana' where he wrote – The ancient writers addressed even a common 'Khatriya' King as 'God of the Earth'. If Bedabyas were alive at this time, I wonder how he would have described empress Victoria and English Colonisers. In that essay he also said that Hindus are fond of poetry and which is why they have introduced imagination to describe real fact. He also thought that because the Hindus did not know how to write history, there exists no real history of ancient India. So he has tried to explain the absence of ancient Indian history. He has also discussed how 'Ved' and 'Manusanhita' should be used to know the civilization of ancient India. His historical mystery brought much praise and honour from different places of India, Europe and America. On the other hand, on the introductory part of 'BharataRahasya' RamdasSen said-by giving the name BharataRahasya I have tried to reveal to common people the past knowledge, religion, rituals and customs, behaviour, military arts, weapons, food and dress habits of ancient India. What method of war did they follow and how were the weapons and tools of war? The answers of these questions have remained virtually unknown to common people. So the name of the book that gives the people these unknown information has been discretely chosen 'Rahasya' (mystery). Moreover the introduction of the book also shows Ramdas' sense of the past – when the fathers and grandfathers pass away, their sons and grandsons inherit their wealth, honour, glory and status etc. This is the usual custom of this country and this endless custom has kept the continuous flow of caste, religion, lineage and class intact rather than hybridizing them. We do not know when sage Kashyapa was born; yet we claim ourselves to be descendants of Kashyapa... I doubt whether there is any country where there is this sense of inheritance and even if there is one, people's commitment there towards keeping it is doubtful.

In the investigation of Ramdas the life of Buddha got fresh importance. Apart from 'Bangadarshan', he wrote many essays on Buddha in Bharati magazine. These essays prove his knowledge on Buddha. The Book named 'Buddhadeb' is the best result of his research on Buddha. PanditKalibarBedantabagish (1842 – 1911) gave an introduction to the above mentioned book. There he wrote – No doubt Buddha's doctrines were so holy and pure and this belief in the mind of late RamdasSen made him collect various old books on Buddhism and investigate into the life and religion of Buddha. This book is no translation of English books and was not written on hearsay. It was rather written after thorough reading of many old books on Buddha. That's why this book is more loveable than any other books to us. The contemporary readers indeed got much pleasure by reading this book. 'TatwabodhiniPatrika'

commented – it was a good experience to read this book because unlike other biographies of Buddha, it is not written in imitation of foreign writers. In ‘SadhanaPatrika’ it was probably Rabindranath who commented “In ancient time there was no history in that sense, so it was very difficult to know accurately about ancient great people. Many times we try to judge the views of them on the basis of the records which are exaggerated or false information. So Ramdasbabu published very nice biography after considering the proofs available. The speciality of his writing is that nowhere has he established his point forcefully. He has only presented the facts and stories to the readers for free thinking” (Sen, 5-7). This is the greatness of the book.

On the other hand what ‘Calcutta Review’ (1884) wrote about RamdasSen deserves commendation: “An as earnest and indefatigable student of Indian antiquities, he has no equal in this country, with the single exception of Dr. RajendraLalaMitra. But he is, in one respect, a greater benefactor to his country than even Dr. Mitra. Dr. Mitra’s antiquarian writings are a sealed book to those who know not English; Dr. RamdasSen’s Antiquarian writings are open to those who know only Benglai, as well as those who know English” (Charitmala, 14-15). Moreover, Ramdas had profound knowledge in Sanskrit literature. He had a collection of many valuable Sanskrit books. These are preserved in National Library (Kolkata). His practice of Sanskrit got international recognition – RamdasSen, whose essays on some of the principal poets of India have excited great interest among Sanskrit Scholars, has just published a second volume, called Historical essays (AitihāsikaRahasya) .... An English translation of the essays or a selection from them, would be welcomed by all friends of oriental literature.

– The Academy (London) Feb. 24, 1877

RamdasSen indeed had unquestionable grip over all branches of ancient history. He also acquired much applause of the intellectual community for his antiquarian researches. It was quite evident when Florentino Academy (Itali) conferred ‘doctorate’ on him in recognition of his work. In this context, it is worth mentioning that he was the first person to received ‘dectorate’ in the Murshidabad district. Ramdashad relation with European intellectuals having interest in Sanskrit through exchange of letters. He used to collect opinions regarding the ancient India from such experts of linguistics like Maxmuller and Buller through letters. Once Maxmuller wrote to him – “Take all what is good from Europe only, do not try to become Europeans, but remain what you are, sons of Manu, children of a bountiful soil, seekers after truth, worshippers 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” (Charitmala, 16). So if we concentrate on his ideals of life, we would not be able to separate above statement made by Maxmuller from his ideals of life.

## Conclusion

In the end, if we concentrate on the historical writings and research of RamdasSen, we will discover that RamdasSen played a major role in ancient Indian history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century among Bengalis. Despite being a son of opulent father he did not get carried away by western

tradition like many others. Whereas RajendralalMitra who got Government assistance in terms of financial help and patronage and got influenced by the western tradition. On the other hand, though the predecessors of Rajendralal were much acquainted with various branches of research methods of western history, they never involved themselves in systematic explanations of ancient history. They were busy in compiling and translating from English history books. But it was completely different in case of RamdasSen who acquired fame and recognition standing completely on Indian platform. It is so difficult to perceive how great the achievement was for Ramdas at that time. So it could be said, RamdasSen left a rich legacy for the succeeding historians by enriching the treasury of knowledge of his mother tongue with his discovery and perception truth.

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