

# **An Assimilation of Ramprasad and his time in Subrata Mukhopadhyay's Selected Novel and Short Stories**

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## **Abstract**

Subrata Mukhopadhyay is considered one of the most prominent writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the 1970s. He has written on various themes/subjects for almost half a century. One of his most prominent subjects is Ramprasad and his time. He has presented his stories with a sense of humor reflecting the tumultuous time that Bengal and India witnessed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This essay seeks to investigate the representation of Ramprasad's life and the contemporary situation of Bengal in the fiction of Subrata Mukhopadhyay.

Subrata Mukhopadhyay first emerged as a short story writer in the 1970s and then as a novelist in the 1980s.

His oeuvre of literature includes different types of short stories and novels. One of the subjects he has dealt with is Ramprasad and his time. Ramprasad Sen (1721-1781) is a notable poet and devotee/ worshiper of Goddess Kali. It should be noted that in that time of turmoil and change, Ramprasad had created different poems and songs, as part of his own self development and without any royal patronage. The contemporary socio-political turmoil and Ramprasad's life forms the context of Subrata Mukhopadhyay's fictive writings, namely two short stories- 'Je Deshete Rojoni Nai' and '1757', and one novel – *Aye Mon Berate Jabi*, are prime examples.

In the beginning of the short story 'Je Deshete Rojoni Nai', the writer introduces us to a special time- "agarosho chiyattor bongabder grissokaler ak brahmamuhurta".[1] It is clear that the writer is referring to the Bengal famine of 1770(1176 of Bengali calender). In this story Subrata Mukhopadhyay has represented the contemporary socio-economic condition of Bengal through the conversations of Ramprasad and Ayodhyanath. After the battle of Plassey(1765), the East India company had started exploiting the common masses through the Dewani system of tax collection. The farmers of Bengal were under extremely bad conditions. Crop failure and the monopoly system had contributed to the worsening of the situation. The lack of rain and Company's exploitation led to the great famine. Historian William Hunter has described the terrible situation: "All through the stifling summer of 1770 the people went on dying.

The husband-men sold their cattle; they sold their implement of agriculture; they devoured their seed-grain; they sold their sons and daughters, till no buyer of children could be found;...in June 1770, the resident at the Durbar affirmed that the living were feeding on the dead.” [2] The short story represents this picture of the famine. The writer has mainly spoken about the people of Kumarhat- Halisahar. Insufficient crop cultivation during winter and lack of proper rainfall contributed immensely to such a catastrophic food crisis. The political landscape of the country had undergone immense change. British traders (‘Baniya’) of the company had now become political rulers of the land.[3] The writer particularly addresses the British traders as ‘Baniya’, and through this the writer expresses the economic and political character of the British. The story represents the tremendous political exploitation of the East India Company coupled with unfavorable weather resulted in a famine that devastated Bengal:

The famine was unable to contain itself after summer set in. An unprecedented death cycle has started. People in and around Kumarhat have died like insects. Fortunate people and fishermen while fleeing through the river often speak and inform the living on the shore that almost five to six hundred people are dying daily in the neighboring Murshidabad and nearby villages. They speak of the horror, as how men, out of sheer hunger and desperation, have turned to feeding on the dead.[4]

In the aforementioned story we get a picture of Ramprasad as a poet. He is a man who found music in his everyday work. However the writer apart from showing the economic plight of the people symbolised by the departure of Goddess Laxmi from household, has also portrayed the deplorable condition of Ramprasad's "Swarupini Devi", symbolised by Goddess Saraswati. The writer shows us that the tremendous famine has also affected Ramprasad's poetic faculty. He is quite afar from his creative self. Instead, Ramprasad sings of the death and massacre and of the many deserted villages of Halisahar.

Though the story gives us an insight into Ramprasad's talent as a poet, it repeatedly reminds us of the famine: the days of winter have passed and men the living creatures have noticed the coming and going away of spring. The song of the cuckoo has drowned in the hooting of the owl. The howling of the fox has accompanied the joyous vultures.[5] The writer by using phrases like the joyous vultures or the joy of the vultures wishes to indicate the coming of a terrible time. People in Bengal have been crying in hunger, pain and utter desperation. People became fearful and terrified, and all discipline of societal order broke down. The primal instinct of hunger led people to frantically search for food leaving everything else: people are searching everywhere for food, from villages to cities, everywhere. They are fleeing their homes to search for food in other homes, sometimes at day, sometimes in the darkness of night.[6] This

is a human catastrophe on an unprecedented level. The writer has portrayed the famine through caricature. The story also shows that dead bodies floating in the river Ganges like water hyacinths was quite a commonplace occurrence those days.

Subrata Mukhopadhyay has portrayed Ramprasad not only as a devotee but also as a human being. It is reflected through his many activities. Despite all the death and famine, he dreamt of a new life occasioned by the birth of his fourth son. He believed that this situation was not permanent and it would soon pass. When Ayodhyanath calls him a person who has lost his sanity to do such a thing, he defends himself by saying that he is also a human being like him. Ramprasad has reminded us here that even in the face of calamity humans have always sought family. In this regard, this story has taught us that the past translates into the present with its values.[7]

The other story named '1757', as the name itself suggests, takes its context from the battle of Plassey. The author has heaped special praise for Ramprasad's poetry in the story and mentioned that: when poetry possesses his body, and with the melody of music, he transcends even the king.[8] The author has portrayed the societal picture of 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal before the battle of Plassey. Ramprasad's poetry also focuses on war. His companion Bhojohari implores Ramprasad to set aside all other things and focus on the situation at hand, and that is Bengal is about to go to war.[9] The fighting between Nawab Sirajudwala and the British East India Company and the preparations for war and

how the fear of war and its anxieties engulfs the minds of the people of the villages, has been described in the story.

Ramprasad believed that the fight between the British and the Nawab over the control of Bengal was similar to foxes fighting over a piece of meat. Infact, Bhojohari reminds Ramprasad that without war there is no food, therefore war is food and war is life.[10] At this juncture Ramprasad also believes that life has life but death is also part of our existence, a person always fights to live in a war. Poetry also treads on the terrible battlegrounds. It is from here that he is inspired to write war poetry.

Subrata Mukhopadhyay's novel *Aye mon Berate Jabi* was published in January of 2010. The novel has a total of seventy four chapters. Apart from his personal life, the author has also narrated the artistic life of Ramprasad Sen and has drawn a sketch of contemporary Bengal. The narrative of the novel begins with the description of Ramprasad's life in Kumarhat-Halisahar and ends with the conclusion of the battle of Plassey. The narrative depicts the uncertain life and poetic artistry of Ramprasad along with the depiction of the contemporary political scenario of Bengal. Ramprasad was born into a poor Baidya family. At a very tender age he lost his father and the responsibility of the family fell on his shoulders. After this he started working as a clerk in Kolkata. It is surmised that it is from this time that his engagement with music had started. Apart from his poetic self, this novel also represents many moments that outline the achievements and

longings of his personal life. Through his poems Ramprasad represented the hardship of life:

Amar kopal go tara  
Bhalo noy ma, bhalo noy ma,  
Bhalo noy ma, kono kale.  
Sishukale pita molo  
Mago rajjyo nilo pore  
Ami oti alpomoti bhasale sagorer jole.[11]

He had created something unique through the union of poetry and devotion. His songs reflect a diverse picture of contemporary society and societal thinking. Apart from this the aspects of devotion, realism and poetic spirit are extremely important parts of his poetry. Self-contemplation and freedom of self-consciousness from the collective consciousness are salient features of his poetry.

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, after the demise of Aurangzeb, the ensuing lack of a proper heir marked the decline of the Mughal Empire. The Company capitalized on this and tried to grab political power in Bengal. While Alivardi Khan resisted the advances of the Company to a great extent, there was always the fear of the next Bargi attack. After the demise of Alivardi Khan, when Sirajudwala became the Nawab, an atmosphere of uncertainty prevailed in Bengal. Ramprasad belongs to this time period and he had witnessed such a time period of societal change in the history of Bengal.

The novelist has not singled out any particular historical event in this novel but has extensively used the time

period in the novel. Therefore his novel is set in the backdrop of the time before and during the battle of Plassey and its cultural impact on society. Ramprasad had witnessed the tumultuous time of 18<sup>th</sup> century wherein Bengal faced a political and cultural crisis. Like many other people Ramprasad was also worried about the future of Bengal. He had grown skeptical with the fact that what will be Bengal's future if Siraj Ud-daulah ascended the throne of Bengal. History tells us that this anxiety was pretty real in those times—“Alivardi died in 1756, nominating his grandson Siraj-ud-Daula his successor. But his succession was challenged by two other contenders for the throne, Shaukat Jung (Fajudar of Purnea) and Ghaseti Begum (Alivardi's daughter). This resulted in intense court factionalism, as the overmighty zamindars and commercial people felt threatened by an extremely ambitious and assertive young nawab. This destabilized the administration of Bengal, and the advantage was taken by the English East India Company.”[12] However, Ramprasad was staunchly against this sort of fighting and he had expressed it in his poetry.

On the other hand, this novel also depicts various aspects of the rule of Raja Krishnachandra. As a human being he was not only kind, caring and sympathetic but also very spiritual. However, he was also spendthrift and a slave of the senses. He was associated with many ventures that were against Sirajud-daulah. He had a very cordial relationship with the British. It should be noted here that Ramprasad had



composed the poem 'Vidyasundar' on the request of Raja Krishnachandra. In the novel the poet during his conversation with Bharatchandra had expressed his mental dilemma while creating this poem. This conversation in the context of narrative is not unrealistic.[13] Apart from this we also get an insight into the different avenues of consciousness and poetic self of Ramprasad from Bharatchandra mouth. He instantly composed his poems verbally without 'Dotkom' (ink and paper) and the subject matter of the songs could be anything that is happening in front of him. He composed songs for the masses and people like Lakhinarayan depended on his songs for their living. He implores Ramprasad for a song, and further adds that his song means food for him.[14]

In this novel Subrata Mukhopadhyay has mentioned his less analyzed but important song entitled 'Samar sangit'. In the history of Bengali literature we can see critical reviews on Ramprasad's poems and songs like 'Vidya Sundar', 'Shakti Geeti', 'Sita Bilap', 'Shiv Sangeet', but there is hardly any analysis on his songs on war.[15] According to the novelist, these songs are extremely important from the perspective of history. These songs provide important insight into the situation and the historical tumultuous time period of the 18th century. These songs show the destructive image of Goddess Kali, the terrible image of divinity, the impending defeat of Siraj Ud-Daulah etc. :

Hyungkare sangrame o ke biraje bama  
Kamrupi – Mohini o ke biraje bama.

Topon dohon sashi, trinoyoni o ruposi,  
Kubloydol- tonu shyama.  
Bibosona o toruni, kesh poriche dhoroni,  
Somor- nipuna gunodhama.  
Kohiche prosad sar, tarini sammukhe jar,  
Jomjoyi bajailo dama.[16]

Subrata Mukhopadhyay has tried to understand Ramprasad and the contemporary societal turmoil of his time in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He has skilfully written the aforementioned short stories and the novel in this regard. This could be seen as a new addition in the tradition of Bengali fiction. The author has used the historical narratives to create his narrative arc and characters. Taking the issues and elements from history, he has segregated his story from the shackles of the past. Consequently, although the battle of Plassey and its aftermath remain as the context of the story, still it exudes a sense of the contemporary and the timeless.

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