

Framing History Through Biography: Chronicling the Contribution of Ramananda Chattopadhyay

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Abstract: This paper explores the life and contributions of Ramananda Chattopadhyay, a pioneering figure in Bengali journalism and social reform, through the lens of *Bharat Muktisadhak Ramananda Chattopadhyay O Ordhosatabdir Bangla*, a biographical work by his daughter, Shanta Devi. The study examines how Chattopadhyay's engagement with Brahma ideals, commitment to philanthropy, and editorial ventures like *Prabasi* and *Dasi* reflected and shaped the socio-political and cultural transformations of colonial Bengal between the 1890s and 1940s. It particularly investigates his efforts in promoting humanitarian values, supporting marginalized groups such as leprosy patients, sex workers, and the visually impaired, and advocating for inclusive education. The paper also reflects on the challenges of using biographical narratives as historical sources, given their inherent subjectivity. Nevertheless, Shanta Devi's account—enriched by personal memory and documentary evidence—offers valuable insights into the reformist spirit and evolving public discourse of the period.

Keywords: Biography, Journalism, Philanthropic activities, social reform

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Biographies provide a detailed and personal view of history, connecting individual experiences with larger social changes. *Bharat Muktisadhak Ramananda Chattopadhyay O Ordhosatabdir Bangla*, a biography written by his daughter, Shanta Devi, sheds light on the intellectual and reform movements in colonial Bengal. The biographical writing tells the story of Ramananda Chattopadhyay's life while also exploring the history of colonial Bengal from the 1890s to the 1940s. The title suggests that the author has not only shared Chattopadhyay's personal journey; but also connects his life to the major social, political, and cultural changes happening in Bengal during that time. This paper focuses on two major questions: first, how Ramananda Chattopadhyay's contributions to journalism, philanthropy, and social reform influenced the socio-political landscape of colonial Bengal; and second, how his work reflected the evolving ideas of his time. Shanta Devi's biography of her father highlights the difficulties of using personal narratives as historical sources. She acknowledges that her admiration for her father may have led to some exaggeration, while her modesty might have made her understate his achievements. However, by including multiple firsthand accounts, the biography goes beyond personal memory and offers valuable insights into the social and cultural context of the time.¹

Ramananda Chattopadhyay was born into a middle-class Hindu Brahmin family on May 29, 1865, in a village called Pathakpara in the Bankura district of Bengal. At the time, the Brahma Samaj was an influential movement in Bengal. Dismayed by the conservative attitude of Brahmins toward other castes, the young Chattopadhyay became a member of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj. After adopting Brahma Dharma, he renounced the sacred thread (*Upavita*) worn by Brahmins. This decision led to significant opposition from his family and society. His daughter, Shanta Devi, described the humiliation he faced. When he visited his ancestral home with his wife after giving up the sacred thread, they were made to stay in the Baithakkhana (guest room) instead of inside the house. Some relatives and neighbours even suggested to his mother that she disinherit him.² Sivnath Sastri faced a similar experience. In his autobiography *Sivnath Sastri Atmacharit*, he has described that when he renounced the sacred thread, his father placed him under house arrest for a month. Failing to change his son's decision, his father ultimately severed all ties with him. He forbade Sivnath from entering the family home and even appointed men to prevent him from secretly meeting his mother. For a considerable period, his father refused to acknowledge his presence.³

Ramananda Chattopadhyay was deeply influenced by the Brahma Dharma's emphasis on the welfare of the distressed, as well as by the leadership of Brahma Stalwart Sivnath Sastri. Sastri's autobiography serves as valuable evidence of the social activities of the Brahma Samaj. The biographer of Madhusudan Dutta, Yogendranath Bose, along with Rajnarayan Bose and Girija Nandan Datta Ojha, established an ashram for leprosy patients with financial assistance from Dr. Mahendralal Sircar. Ramananda Chattopadhyay was closely involved in this philanthropic initiative. In the first issue of the second year of *Dasi*, a monthly journal published by

Ramananda, he wrote about the charitable work of Kate Marsden, a Russian woman dedicated to helping leprosy patients. It is evident that Chatterjee was concerned for these patients, and he also wanted to raise awareness among the readers of *Dasi* about this issue. He actively contributed to raising funds to support this cause, as evidenced by an advertisement published in *Indian Messenger*, a journal of the Brahma Samaj, in September, October, and November of 1891, which called for financial support for the initiative.

"Donations in money and clothes etc. in aid of the Baidyanath Leper Asylum can be sent to the "Sanjibani" Office, 4, College Square, and to me at the City College or at my lodgings, 28/1, Jhamapukur Lane, Calcutta. Ramananda Chatterjee."⁴

On June 27, 1891, the Dashashram was established in Jalalpur village (Basirhat Subdivision) through the efforts of a group of young men who took in sick and dying individuals from the streets and sheltered them in their homes. Ramananda Chattopadhyay joined this initiative, and it started work in Calcutta. When the Dashashram Committee was later formed, he became its president. The volunteers of Dashashram referred to themselves as *Das* and *Dasi*. Initially, the ashram covered its expenses through donations. This association worked for the welfare of distressed people, irrespective of caste, gender, or religion. Using the collected funds, a dispensary named Dashashram Medical Hall was established, where Dr. Pran Krishna Acharya served as a physician. The ashram then sought to sustain itself through the income generated by the dispensary.

In addition to promoting the philanthropic activities of the Dashashram, Ramananda Chatterjee edited a magazine titled *Dasi*. The magazine was started in the Bengali month of Asarh, 1299, with the aim of fostering a humanitarian outlook among Bengalis and encouraging active participation in the upliftment of the distressed sections of society through awareness and voluntary service. The primary objective of this publication was to present the activities of the Dashashram to the public and to highlight the lives of the deprived and distressed people of Bengal. By doing so, it aimed to awaken a spirit of service and compassion among its readers. In contrast to many contemporary journals that concentrated on political, social, or economic affairs, Ramananda Chatterjee sought to go beyond the mere reportage of such issues.⁵ He was deeply inspired by the work of various philanthropic organizations in Europe and aimed to motivate his readers in Bengal to engage in similar service-oriented endeavours.

In Calcutta, Dashashram initially took up the responsibility of rescuing the daughters of prostitutes. They aimed to shelter and educate these girls, preparing them for a respectable life in society. However, due to legal constraints, they were unable to rescue many. In response, Ramananda Chattopadhyay wrote several editorials in *Dasi* magazine, including 'Patita Ramanir Durdasha Mochon' and 'Stree Jatir Dukkho Bimochon: Naitik Durgati', advocating for the protection and rehabilitation of these women. He wrote in *Dasi* that girls kept by prostitutes could be rescued more effectively with the help of the court. He extensively quoted legal provisions to advocate for the protection of women. He argued for the need for a law requiring every prostitute to prove that the girls living with her were her biological daughters. If they failed to do so, they should not be allowed to keep the girls. Instead, the government should rescue these girls, and if any society or individual was willing to take responsibility for them, custody should be granted accordingly.⁶

The Dashashrams provided shelter and medical care to distressed and ill individuals in need. Their work was not limited to Kolkata alone; they established charity hospitals in seven locations, including Surupnagar in Bankura, Naldha, Koramara, Cherapunji, Naogaon, and Jalalpur. Both *Dasi* and Dashashram earned considerable respect in Calcutta, and several prominent figures were associated with the organization, including Mahendralal Sarkar, Kalicharan Bandyopadhyay, Rasbihari Ghosh, Gurudas Bandyopadhyay, Dr. Neelratan Sarkar, and Shri Dwarkanath Gangopadhyay. Later when Ramananda Chattopadhyay moved to Allahabad, he was unable to devote time to *Dasi*. However, Ramananda moved from Calcutta to Allahabad in 1895 to take up the position of Principal at Kayastha Pathsala (College). After a year, in October 1896, he had to discontinue *Dasi*.

Ramananda Chattopadhyay strongly supported that all men and women have the right to education. He was deeply concerned about the education of individuals with physical disabilities. In *Dasi*, he wrote about the struggles faced by the blind and the deaf, advocating for their rights and support. Notably, he played a crucial role in developing Braille in Bengali for the visually impaired. In an essay, Ramananda Chattopadhyay mentions that in almost every country of the world, there is a considerable number of blind individuals. In Bengal alone, out of a total population of about seven crores, there are approximately 70,000 blind people. He points out that in Europe and America, there are established systems for providing both academic and vocational education to the blind. In addition, several organizations exist to alleviate their poverty and protect them from other exploitation. However, in Bengal, there is no such organization dedicated to supporting blind individuals, which he considers a grave necessity. Chattopadhyay notes that in contemporary times, the Braille system is the most widely used method for blind education. He provides a brief description of how writing and reading is done using the Braille system. Furthermore, he demonstrates how the Bengali alphabet can be written in Braille.⁷

Ramananda Chattopadhyay played a pivotal role in professionalizing journalism in India, establishing vital platforms for discussions on nationalism, culture, social reform, women's emancipation, and other contemporary issues. The Brahma Samaj initially spread its ideology through *Brahmo Public Opinion*, but the publication ceased in 1883. As a consequence, Sivnath Sastri launched a new mouthpiece for the Brahma Samaj,

The Indian Messenger, to continue promoting its ideals. During his student years, Ramananda Chattopadhyay became an assistant editor for *The Indian Messenger*. He also contributed editorial commentary to *The Indian Mirror* and wrote regularly for Krishna Kumar Mitra's *Sanjeevani*. In 1890, he officially became the editor of *Dharma Bandhu*, another magazine aimed at promoting the ideology of the Brahma Samaj. In this publication, he not only emphasized religious discussions but also covered a range of topics, including the *Jatiya Maha Samiti*, various social reformation organization, biographies of notable figures, and book critiques. He was closely associated with *Mukul*, a pictorial monthly for children. Recognizing children's love for colorful illustrations while teaching his own children, he took the initiative to publish a children's picture magazine, with the encouragement of Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose *Mukul* was published in 1895.

In December 1897, he became the editor of *Pradip*, a newly established magazine published by Baikuntha Nath Das. In the first issue, Chattopadhyay wrote an editorial introducing the magazine, addressing skepticism about the growing number of Bengali monthly publications. He explained that the goal of *Pradip* was to bring something innovative to Bengali journalism. *Pradip* would focus on a wide range of subjects, including history, economics, politics, social policy, philosophy, science, geography, Indian civilization and its global influence, linguistics, mysteries, critiques, student issues, women's progress, and biographies of great personalities.⁸ As a pictorial magazine, *Pradip* aimed to instill pride in the Bengali nation by highlighting its achievements. Chattopadhyay believed that by presenting the accomplishments of Bengalis to their own people, he could inspire them to pursue greater aspirations. His editorial vision sought not only to inform but also to motivate the Bengali to contribute meaningfully to society.

If the editor of a publication is not its owner, he often faces many challenges. He does not always have the freedom to make independent decisions. Having experienced these difficulties while running *Pradip* magazine, he shifted his focus to editing and publishing *Prabasi* magazine. *Prabasi* (which literally means a Bengali living outside Bengal), first published in April-May 1901 the made its first appearance from Allahabad. Unlike many other journals of the time, *Prabasi* did not explicitly state its objectives in the preface. Instead, it chose to let its purpose unfold gradually through its content.

In the name of the Almighty, the Bestower of all success, we are publishing *Prabasi*. This is the first attempt to bring out a monthly magazine of this kind from outside Bengal... It is better to judge a work by its outcome rather than just its beginning. For this reason, we have remained silent about our hopes and objectives... It is quite difficult to make the first issue of any publication exactly as one envisions. We hope that no one will make a final judgment about our magazine solely on the basis of this inaugural issue. Gradually, we shall present a variety of informative, thought-provoking, and aesthetically pleasing essays, stories, poems, and discussions on various topics.⁹

Inspired by Tagore's ideal of universalism, *Prabasi* emerged with the vision that distinctions between the homeland, foreign lands, and the diaspora are essentially meaningless.¹⁰ From its very first issue Rabindranath Tagore appeared as one of the main contributors. Along with this, the editor successfully enlisted the artists and intellectuals of the time as his frequent contributors. They included, to mention only a few, scientists J.C. Bose and P.C. Ray, historian Jadunath Sarkar, artist Abanindranath Tagore, scholars like Jogesh Chandra Ray, Mahes Chandra Ghosh and Vidhu Sekhar Sastri. Ramananda Chatterjee had his own preferences when choosing writers to publish. He never published any work by the famous author Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in *Prabasi*. At that time, the ideas of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda had a strong impact on society, but *Prabasi* did not mention their philosophy.¹¹ Nevertheless, *Prabasi* became a valuable source of information on the social, political, economic, literary, scientific thoughts trends of that time. With spread of western thoughts emancipation of women became a major issue of Bengali society. Many magazines were published at the time to support women's emancipation and provide a platform for women to express their thoughts. *Prabasi* became a strong voice for women, featuring articles on women in every issue.

Ramananda accomplished Indian journalism as professional. It was very hard to publish Bengali magazine from outside. It was a pictorial magazine. In its first issue of first month the magazine was of forty pages out of it there were sixteen pictures. It was so well accepted by its readers that second edition was required to publish. Chattopadhyay was not willing to publish just any piece of writing to sustain his magazine; he carefully assessed the quality of each work and refined it when necessary to ensure it met high editorial standards. He placed great importance on maintaining the quality of the publication.

Before *Prabasi*, most monthly periodicals in Bengal were not published consistently, and even *Prabasi* itself faced irregular publication in its first two years. However, from the month of Magh in 1310 (Bengali calendar), Chattopadhyay implemented a strict rule that *Prabasi* would be published every thirty-one days, a commitment that was upheld throughout his lifetime. He was the first to emphasize the significance of regular publication in magazine editing, setting a new standard for Bengali journalism. Chattopadhyay also transformed literary publishing into a financially viable model through *Prabasi*. Dr. Manmohan Ghosh remarked that *Prabasi*'s greatest achievement was bridging the gap between Laxmi (wealth) and Saraswati (wisdom). To support writers, Chattopadhyay introduced a system of regular honorariums for contributors, a pioneering initiative in the history of Bengali literature.¹²

Ramananda Chatterjee strongly believed that if authors were not paid their due honorariums, editors would struggle to collect suitable articles for the magazine. At that time, no newspaper paid writers regularly. *Bharati* would occasionally offer a small payment or a pen to a select few renowned writers. Ramananda Chatterjee was the first to introduce the practice of paying writers consistently. According to Shanta Devi's writings, she lost one and a half thousand rupees in the first year while paying the writers. But as he included diverse and comprehensive essays in his magazine it gained popularity soon. Dr. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar wrote:

Ramananda Chattopadhyay was the teacher of common people. He used to extract various gems from the knowledge store of the world and present them in front of us. We used to get education with his help. In those days, schools, colleges or universities did not have any opportunities or facilities for that open education. Literature, Economics, Social Policy, Modernization of Developing Nations, New Scientific Discoveries, etc. All the various information that I have conveyed and learned through this magazine would not have been possible in any other way. Ramananda Babu is the teacher of our youth.¹³

However, in popularizing his magazine, he never compromised on the quality of writing, strictly avoiding works that could lead to obscene or objectionable advertisements.

During the 1890s, inspired by patriotic feelings, a trend developed among educated youths to avoid working for the British government that ruled the country. Ramananda was one of them. Following the ideology of Sivnath Sastri, he refused the State Scholarship for higher studies in England and the assured career it promised. Instead, he chose to support himself and his dependents in Bankura by taking up a lecturer's position at City College, Calcutta, with a modest salary of Rs. 100. During this period, a movement emerged in India to awaken the masses through patriotic writings and portrayals of great heroes. Ramananda Chattopadhyay could not tolerate the defamation of Bengalis as effeminate and sought to inspire them by publishing essays highlighting the achievements of distinguished Bengalis.

Ramananda consistently promoted indigenous industries. In 1895, when a group of youths in Allahabad opened a shop selling indigenous cloth to protest an excise duty imposed by the government, he and his wife committed to wearing only indigenous clothing. They also furnished their home with locally made furniture. However, this did not mean that Ramananda was a blind supporter of *swadeshi*. When the Swadeshi movement gained momentum in Bengal, its influence reached Allahabad as well. In 1313, *Prabasi* encouraged people to use indigenous goods. However, Ramananda never supported the blind rejection of foreign products. That same year, he argued:

Aversion to Western dress is merely a sign of narrow-mindedness. We must adopt all that is good from abroad and be prepared to relinquish it if necessary. It is our duty to prioritize the welfare of the country and the nation, even if it means replacing homegrown goods with foreign ones when beneficial.¹⁴

He explained his concept of *Swadeshi* in *Prabasi Patrika* in the month of Bhadra, 1313. He stated that if someone were to ask what the most significant *Swadeshi* event of the year was, the answer would not be the breaking of bangles, the burning of *Bilati* (foreign) cloth, the defeat of the East Bengal government in its litigation against the National Party, or even the establishment of the National University. Instead, Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose's book *Udvider Sara (Plant Response)* was the most significant *Swadeshi* phenomenon. He also explained that if we keep believing that our intelligence is lower than that of the English, we will fall behind even more. But if we become independent in knowledge and thinking, we will have less dependence on others. So, he believed that any achievement proving the intelligence of an Indian should be seen as an important *Swadeshi* event.¹⁵

Ramananda Chattopadhyay was deeply committed to promoting *Swadeshi* artists. He regularly published their paintings in his magazine and provided *Dakshina* (honorarium) to them. This encouraged many emerging artists to showcase their work, and several gained national recognition. His two edited magazines, which featured multiple full-page color and black-and-white images in each issue, maintained a broad artistic vision without being narrowly confined to Bengal-centric themes. Even during a period of widespread rejection of foreign influences, Ramananda continued to reproduce world-famous works by European artists such as Raphael, Bison, and Hoffman. In response to criticism, he firmly stated that he held no national or ethnic bias in artistic representation. Additionally, *Prabasi* did not hesitate to publish paintings of Kali and Saraswati by Raja Ravi Varma, as well as works by artists like Ganapat Kashinath Kshirsagar, Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar, Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore, and even Japanese artists Taikan Yokoyama and Hishida Shunso.

In 1907, Chatterjee launched the English-language journal *The Modern Review*. Many leading figures of the time, like Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose and Lala Lajpat Rai, wrote for *The Modern Review* regularly. *The Modern Review* was a platform for a diverse range of writers and contributors. After launching *Modern Review*, Ramananda had the opportunity to spread his support for nationalism and self-governance across the country. He took to highlight the injustices of the government in this journal. As a result, he fell out of favor with the British government. In 1908, the British authorities ordered that *Modern Review* be shut down or that the editor leave Allahabad within a specified time. Later, *Prabasi Press* published Sunderland's book *India in Bondage*, which led to government action. The authorities seized copies of the book and its earnings,

and they arrested the publisher, Sajnikant Das, along with *Prabasi* office owner Ramananda Chattopadhyay. In 1928, Chatterjee introduced a Hindi-language journal named *Vishal Bharat*, designed for readers who did not speak English or Bengali. *Vishal Bharat*, launched in 1927 under the editorship of Banarasidas Chaturvedi, re-established Ramananda Chatterjee's connection with North India and Hindi-speaking audiences. While *Prabasi* was his earliest venture and *Vishal Bharat* the most recent, it was the *Modern Review* that consistently remained his primary concern. This dedication is clearly reflected in his own statement published in *Prabasi* in 1903—four years prior to the founding of *Modern Review*—where he wrote in Bengali: "*In truth, we are Indians first and Bengalis next.*" Sister Nivedita, one of his most valued collaborators during the early years, perhaps expressed it best when she said: "He (Ramananda) belonged to Bengal; he belonged to India; he belonged to universal humanity."¹⁶

The study of Ramananda Chattopadhyay's life through *Bharat Muktisadhak Ramananda Chattopadhyay O Ordhosatabdir Bangla* illustrates how biography can serve as a crucial tool for historical inquiry. His contributions to journalism, social reform, and philanthropy provide a deeper understanding of the socio-political landscape of colonial Bengal. While personal narratives pose methodological challenges, they remain a valuable resource for historians seeking to explore historical perspectives through individual experiences.

Notes and References:

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² *Ibid.* pp. 76-77

³ Sastri, Shri Sivnath, *Sivnath Sastrir Atmcharit* edited by Chakrabarty, Shri Satishchandra, 2nd edition, published from Prabasi Karyalaya, Calcutta, 1920, pp 161-164

⁴ Devi, Sri Shanta, *op.cit.*, p. 83

⁵ 'Prastabana (Preface)', *Dasi, Asarh*, 1299

⁶ 'Stree Jatir Dukkho Bimochon: Naitik Durgati', *Dasi, Magh*, 1299

⁷ "Andher Vidya Shiksha" (Education of the Blind), *Dasi, Asarh*, 1299

⁸ 'Suchona (Introduction)', *Pradip*, Pous, 1304

⁹ *Prabasi, Baisakh*, 1308

¹⁰ Roy, Bharati, *Prabasi Nari 1901-1947*, Ananda, Calcutta, 2016, p.7

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.10

¹² Devi, Sri Shanta, *op.cit.*, p. 178

¹³ Devi, Sri Shanta, *op.cit.*, p.180

¹⁴ Devi, Sri Shanta, *op.cit.*, p. 149

¹⁵ *Prabasi, Bhadra*, 1313

¹⁶ Halder, Gopal, 'Ramananda Chatterjee : A Great Editor' Source: Indian Literature, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1965), pp. 5-11 Published by: Sahitya Akademi Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23329127>