

Review Article

## The Rise of Shyama Sangeet in Bengal: Domestication of the Ferocious Kali through Songs

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I will be focusing on *Ramprasadi Shyama Sangeet* - how Ramprasad's songs were beyond his subject, bringing in several contexts that emphasized the portrayal of his subject, *Kali*. Ramprasad Sen (1718-1775) wrote and composed almost 300 *Shakta* songs in Bengali dedicated to *Maa Kali*. Other poets like Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, Mahendranath Bhattacharya were other notable poets who followed Ramprasad Sen. Their written poems were sung and performed in the villages and they later found their way to the cities. Shyama Sangeet is one of the most integral parts of Bengali culture. This experience has found a continuous representation in all his songs. He wrote songs for farmers, businessmen mirroring the social crises, debts that a common man has. These brought in the social and economic aspects of the Bengal province of Colonial India. The rise of these songs took place in an extremely volatile political state. On one level, it was used as a tool for creating an anti-Mughal attitude on the other level it created an anti-colonial mindset by grasping the roots of power and motherhood of the nation. The juxtaposition of motherhood, everyday philosophy, socio-economic and political conditions created an enriched text in the Bengali culture that was addressed to many social classes. This paper attempts to explore. How did Kali attain the centre of Goddess worshipping from the periphery? What role does Shyama Sangeet play in the process? How was the ferocious Kali portrayed as an ignorant mother? How did the mother figure of the Kali influence nationalistic movements in Bengal?

**Keywords:** Ramprasad Sen, Shyama Sangeet, songs of Colonial Bengal, Feminism, mythology, culture of 18th century colonial Bengal.

### INTRODUCTION

Bengali culture has a deep-seated devotion for Mother Goddesses. Durga and Kali are the major goddesses that are worshipped in Bengal. The pujas have formed an identification of the culture. The major reason behind the proliferation of Shakti worship is the Shakta poetry that was initiated in the 17th and 18th century Bengal. Among the Shakta Poets, Ramprasad Sen ((1718-1785) was the most prominent. He wrote more than 300 Shakta lyrical poems that are sung even today. He wrote these songs under the patronage of Raja Krishnachandra Roy of Nadia. Durga and Kali were the prime subjects of his poetry. In his poems, Durga was not seen as the annihilator of *Mahisasura* but as Uma. She was seen as an ideal daughter and wife. These songs or poems are known as Uma Sangeet. There are two types of Uma Sangeet - *Agamoni* (joyous songs before the arrival of Uma and *Bijoya* (grieving about Uma going back to Himalaya). His poems are written from the perspective and compassion of Uma's mother.

Songs or poems that are written for Kali are more famous than *Uma Sangeet*. These are known as *Shyama Sangeet*. The tune of all the songs are similar, it is called *Ramprasadi Sur*. Ramprasad was the first Shakta poet to write songs about Kali who was seen as grotesque, wearing a belt of amputated arms, blood dripping from her fresh *Mundamala* (garland of severed heads).

Ramprasad's songs were mostly about *Dakshina Kali* or *Shyama*. It is said the Ramprasad is the new Valmiki who rescued Kali from the dacoits for the Bhaktas."(McDermott, 2001, p. 3) She was dressed in beautiful sarees,

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bejewelled, charming, soft, and cosmic but also the mother of all. Ramprasad's songs for the first time tied *Bhakta* (devotee) and *Sadhak* (tantric practitioner) together. Ramprasad himself was a *Sadhak* who was trapped in the materiality and the illusion of the world with duties and responsibilities. The quest of attaining peace with the inner self and the desire to unite with the cosmic is predominant in all his songs. As Lex Hixon said, "The radical freedom of the Goddess does not tempt the poet-saint to lead the chaotic life of a libertine. He continues to hold his family responsibility and to perform his traditional worship, regarding both as Mother Reality fully manifest" (Hixon, 2004).

*I came here to this marketplace  
And, sold out, wait at the landing  
Mother, the sun is dying. I need a boat,  
And this boatman takes only those who can pay.  
He demands money  
But where will a poor man get it?*

- Ramprasad Sen

Ramprasad's love for Kali and her domestication became more prominent with the popularity of Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886) and the establishment of Dakshineswar Temple by Rani Rashmoni in the year 1855. Ramkrishna did something that *tantric Sadhak* like Bamakhepa - the mad saint (1837-1911, Birbhum, Tara Temple) could not do. Ramkrishna showed the people of the urban Bengal that Kali is the mother of all.

This paper will try to explore: why such a Goddess was domesticated as a mother in Shakta poetry? If it was for the sake of Bhaktism there was already Vaishnav Padavali from pre-1400 A.D in Bengal. And why she was seen as a self-absorbed mother who was surrounded by her demanding children? She was praised and seen as a corrupted mother figure simultaneously in each song. What was the reason for the Shakta poets to desire to be mothered by such a Mother in a time of turmoil and famine?

#### **Relationship between Shakta Padavali and Vaishnav Padavali**

Vaishnav Padavali had gained its position in Bengal from the 15th century with the padas written by Maithili poet *Vidyapati* (1352-1448) (Chattopadhyay, 1928) who is said to be the first poet to write poems in the then Bangla Bhasha (Mukhopadhyay, 2018). And then with Bengali Vaishnava poet, Chandi Das (1370-1433) who wrote more than 1000 poems on the love of Radha-Krishna. (Chattopadhyay, 1928) The language that these poets followed was different from the 17th or 18th-century literary texts. These texts were written in middle Bengali in the *Pre-Chaitanya era* language i.e *Apabramsha* or *Abahatta* (Mukhopadhyay, 2018) which is a vernacularised Sanskrit. It was in the *post-Chaitanya era* where the Bengali language started taking shape.

Vaishnav Padavali influenced the initiation of the Shakta Padavali. There is a strong connection between both. The structure and the formulae are very similar. Both of them highlight the relationship and the myriad of emotions between the divine and humans. Krishna is the prime subject of the Vaishnav Padavali. The poems tended to stimulate *Radhabhav* or *Sakhibhav* (Mukhopadhyay, 2018) among the devotees through the depiction of *Leela* of *Radha* and *Krishna*. In Shakta Padavali the characters are the poet and the Goddess. Kali became *Shyama* (Krishna - Shyam). She was frivolous, beautiful, charming like Krishna in Vaishnav Padavali. She was given the charm and strength of Krishna and the poise of Radha by the Shakta poets.

Chandi Das was one of the early Vaishnava poets who used their names at the end of the poem as their signature. This practice was known as *Bhanita*. He used *Boru Chandi Das* - 'Boru' was the title he gained.

*I placed a piece of wool to his nose,  
Then only I perceived that he breathed,  
There is breath, but there remains no life,  
Delay not, my happiness depends on it!  
Chandi Das saith (it is) the anguish of separation  
In his heart, the only medicine is Radha.*

Even Shakta poets like Ramprasad and Kamalakanta used their names at the end of their poems. This emphasized their personal relationship with the Goddess at the same time made themselves a major subject of the poems.

*Ramprasad says with amazement:  
Grace and mercy in Her wild hair -  
Think of that  
And all good things are yours.*

Ramprasad Sen, *Why should I go to Kashi?* <https://youtu.be/s-1o8GYUu6A>

Ramprasad had passive fights with another poet called Aju Goshanji who followed him ardently. Every time Ramprasad wrote something new, Aju would write a reply back to him wittily. He used the same form and tune that Ramprasad used (Chattopadhyay, 1928).

### Depiction of Kali in Mangalkavya

The image of *Dakshina* Kali emerges from the 11th century *Mahabhagwat Purana* in *Devibhagavat Purana*. Before that, she is *Ambika* in *Devi-Mahatmya* a part of *Markandeya Purana* in the 6th century. And then in the 13th century as *Parvati* in *Brahmadharma Purana*. (McDermott and Kripal, 2003) Mangalkavya was written in Bengali between the 13th and 18th centuries that emphasised many Hindu mother goddesses. But it was only in the 18th century Kali finds her position in the Mangalkavya. Annadamangal wrote in 1752 by Bharatchandra Ray that made Kali a part of the Goddess clan along with Sitala (goddess of pox and other epidemics), Manasa (Serpent Goddess) and Sashti (the one who protects children). The book has 3 parts *Shivayan-Annadamangal*, *Vidyasundor-Kalikamangal* and *Mansingha-Annepurnamangal*.

The story of *Vidyasundar* as *Kalikamangal* was primarily written in the medieval period by poet Pranaram Chakraborty. But no one knows who funded him to write it. The reason it wasn't popular among the common is that it was written imitating the Sanskrit texts. When the King of Nadia Raja Krishnachandra crystalised the title of '*Kaviranjan*' before the name Ramprasad Sen. Ramprasad wrote the story of *Vidyasundar* as a token of gratitude and gifted it to Krishnachandra Roy (Chattopadhyay, 1928).

It is *Kalikamangal* that depicts the merciful and was domesticated for the first time. Kali who was usually seen naked, grotesque and was always associated with the Tantric context was seen helping saving lives. The story of *Vidyasundar* is part of *Kalikamangal*: Sundar a prince who is a devotee of Kali seeks her help and impresses the princess, Vidya. He sends flowers, letters, paintings through a messenger in the palace. Sundar enters her room through a tunnel to confess his love. Later the king, Vidya's father came to know that she is pregnant he charged Sundar with the death penalty. Sundar, a devotee of Kali seeks her favour and saves himself and marries Vidya. (Bhattacharya, 1989). This essence of Kali is portrayed through Ramprasad's *Shyama Sangeet*.

But if Mangalkavya already depicted the merciful and charming Kali then what was the need of *Shyama Sangeet* or *Shakta* poetry? The language of the Mangalkavya is different from the daily dialect of the people of Bengal. The narratives in all the Mangalkavya's were restricted to a certain class - in *Manasamangal* the story is about Manasa's quest to be worshipped by Chand Saodagar and how she used Lakhinder and Behula to attain her goal. In *Chandimangal* Ma Chandi blesses Dhanapati Saodagar's family. These stories were extremely relevant given the political scenario of Bengal with the rise of Mughals and Marathi invaders. They were always accentuating the lives of *Baniks* (traders) and *Saodagars* (merchants), kings and princes marginalizing the farmers and lower castes. The Mangalkavya slowly became *sabha Sahitya* or literature of the court. (Chatterjee, 2013) Here the emergence of Ramprasad's poetry found its effectiveness. Ramprasad used his poetry to talk about the broad population. Their struggles with daily life and financial crises. The classic trends of *Matsyanyay* started being emphasized. The interrelation of humans and the material world became prominent and how worshipping the cosmic being is an arduous task - started to resonate with the people from all social strata with the use of colloquial language:

*Oh Mind, you don't know how to farm;  
your human field has fallen fallow.  
Cultivate it, and the crops you'll grow will gleam like gold.  
Fence it round with Kali's name  
so your harvest won't be harmed.*

- Ramprasad Sen, *O Mind, You Don't Know How To Farm* <https://youtu.be/8T4tAcrhmK0>

The use of metaphors like farming, flying kites, eating neem leaves made these songs closer to the listeners that made them feel like Kali is a part of their family.

*Ma Neem khawale chini bole kothae kore chhale  
O Ma mithar lobhe titomukhe saradinta gelo  
(Mother, you fed me neem - saying its sugar  
O mother, the greed of sugar has made my mouth bitter, all day long)*

- Ramprasad Sen

Ramprasad uses metaphors like sugar, neem - sugar here becomes the destination for each *Sadhak* and devotee. The bitterness from neem is the hardship one faces in the process of getting to that destination.

*Prasad says: the kite is going to take ff  
In the southern breeze,  
And on the other shore  
Of this ocean of lives  
It will dive fast to its freedom*

- Ramprasad Sen

Kite here is a metaphorical version of soul and the southern breeze is death. The ocean here is an afterlife.

*Shri Ramprasad says: He is a rich man  
In whose house the Mother lives,  
And, saying this he lays Her down  
In Her small bed, fast asleep.*

- Ramprasad Sen

The small bed is a small house; this proves that Ramprasad is not financially strong. But he is rich because he has Mother Kali in his house.

### **The Socio-political context of Bengal in the 18th century and the relevance of Shyama Sangeet**

The sociopolitical problem of Bengal at that time was also expressed in Mangalkavyas. With the rise of the Mughals, the face of Bengal started to change. Though the Bengal was not having a direct influence from the emperor. The climate of the delta was very different from that of the north - the northerners felt alien. The Mughals also transferred their governors from one place to another for imperial services thus there was never a permanent settlement that could create a strong connection between the two (Eaton, 2019). Even Bengal's agricultural boom coincided with the Mughal reign that made the imperial so interested in the province. Bengal was so rich in farming that trading proliferated here that finds its way in Mangalkavya. The merchants used to go to 'Brahmadesh, Malay, Sumatra, Java, Indochina, Indonesia.' (Choudhury, 2018, p. 580)

In 1700 during Aurangzeb's tenure, Nawab Murshid Quli Khan (1717-1727) was appointed the governor of Bengal who wanted to free himself from the imperial influence. (McDermott, 2001) He created a robust zamindari system based on the 6 most influential zamindars of Birbhum, Bishnupur, Burdwan, Dinajpur, Nadia and Natore. (McDermott, 2001) The zamindars are the ones responsible for the social, economic and even religious proliferation of Bengal. The zamindari system was emphasized during the reign of Akbar where the rich traders, moneylenders and merchants were given a chance to gain more fortune by making them zamindars. They had to collect the revenue or *Khajna* from the farmers and the common people. But during Murshid Quli Khan's tenure, the framers were always taken care of. It was seen that none of them was exploited by the zamindars. If crops were destroyed by natural causes the farmers were reimbursed by Murshid Quli Khan. But one cannot say how much it helped the farmers or the common people (Choudhury, 2018). Strong importance of money among the people. That has been always portrayed through Ramprasad's poems. Aurangzeb's campaign against Hinduism provoked the idea of worshipping Mother Goddesses.

This gave rise to a Hindu 'capitalist' chain that derived its power from the Mughals and Nawabs. But that does not necessarily mean they had a good relationship with them. (McDermott, 2010) The Maratha invasion created a huge turmoil in Bengal. The Marathas did not come during the monsoon so the farmers could grow their crop at that time but soon after that, they were looted by the Marathas. It has been clearly painted in texts like *Tarikh-e-Mohabbat Jung* and *Muzzafarnama* by historian Yusuf Ali. (Choudhury, 2018) Many of the rich and affluent families fled from Bengal. Raja Krishnachandra himself had to leave his residency.

Bengal also became the permanent settlement for the British East India Company. Nawab Ali Wardi Khan like Murshid Quli Khan understood the danger of the foreign traders. He tried controlling them for a long time. But at the time of the Maratha invasion, Ali Wardi took 4 lakhs from the British to help defeat the Marathas for which he had to withdraw all forces from the East India Company. (Choudhury, 2018) After the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the Nawabs and their allies were defeated. Even the Zamindars had to face a considerable amount of problems as the East India Company started interfering in state affairs. In 1760 a few Zamindars were humiliated and robbed by the Company. Krishnachandra Roy could not fulfil his revenue payment and had to sign a treaty to avoid being disposed of his 'honour and land'. (McDermott, 2001) "Under the Mughal rule, peasants were required to pay a tribute of 10-15 per cent of their cash harvest. This ensured a comfortable treasury for the rulers and a wide net of safety for the peasants in case the weather did not hold for future harvests. In 1765, the Treaty of Allahabad was signed and the East India Company took over the task of collecting the tributes from the then Mughal emperor Shah Alam II. Overnight the tributes, the British insisted on calling them tributes and not taxes for reasons of suppressing the rebellion, increased to 50 per cent. The

peasants were not even aware that the money had changed hands. They paid, still believing that it went to the Emperor.” (Chakraborty, 2019).

In the 1770s the Famine hit Bengal that was known as the ‘Famine of 76’ or *Chiattorer Monnntor*. Even the famine did not ease up the restrictions on the revenue. Almost 10 million people were killed in the famine. Later it was found that the Krishnachandra’s grandson and great-grandson were left with only a few hundred acres of land. Raja Krishnachandra Roy of Nadia, who patronaged Shakta poets like Ramprasad Sen and Kamalakanta. The time when Ramprasad wrote his songs and was immersed in Kali-prem was not at all period of peace and well-being. People struggled for daily meals. Even the zamindar who patronized the poets was struggling. Then how and why did he continue supporting the Shakta poets?

The way Radha-Krishna were portrayed were too unrealistic and ethereal for the political scenario. Love and pleasure were delusional for the people at that time period. The *Mangalkavyas* recited in particular pujas to create awareness among the people about the Mughals, Turks or Afghans. But complex kavya could not be included in the daily lives of the commoner. There was a need for easy lyrical poems that everyone can find accessible. With the rise of power of Mughals and British - Kali was seen as an extremely powerful figure, whose ferocity could tame the forces from outside.

### **The portrayal of Kali in Shyama Sangeet: The Ignorant Mother**

The image of Mother is the primordial image, which one worships and identifies with the supreme force of the world. It is both a personal as well as a transcendental image. But Mother is also a very complex character. She is deemed a grandiose form of a terrible mother. Kali being a marginal deity at some point in historical time does not detract from her position of being the most powerful in the Tantric cult. Ramprasad’s Mother was adored for what she was - retaining her terrifying and fearful appearance. At first, Kali was only worshipped by dacoits in Bengal and a ghastly presence in *Shamshans*. Kali’s image was put in a social-personal place where the modern and the traditional merge and form a new character.

The sentimentalism of separation finds its way into the Padavalis of Shakta poets like Ramprasad. In Ramprasad’s songs, Kali’s ferocity has been subjected to an elaborate taming process to incorporate her into the mainstream Mother Goddess cult.

The personal relationship with the Goddess has been well explored by Ramprasad. He becomes a devotee, a son who needs his mother to save him from this world. For Ramprasad, Kali is the deity who responds to personal devotion, who can grant both worldly wishes and spiritual liberation. According to Ramprasad devotion is the key to alter the ferocity of the Goddess.

Devotion juxtaposed with the Tantric aspect of Kali creates an oscillation in the poems or songs from soothing to fearsome.

The Shyama Sangeet or the Padavalis that were used under the *Bhakter Ankuti* division emphasizes the importance to be united with the divine and blessed by her. The poet here is needy, demanding, and childlike. But the lack of women poets of the community also reflects the condition of the art and literature that was so male-dominated. Kali was a cosmic figure who was called Prakriti or Nature by the poets at times to deem her as all-powerful. But did she really have the power? The poet had the power to alter the Goddess - making her mother also made her so ignorant and self-absorbing. The poet being the child even questions his mother’s way of being:

*Kali why are you naked again?  
Good grief, haven't you any shame?  
Mother, don't you have clothes?  
Where is the pride of a king's daughter?*

- Ramprasad Sen, *Kali why are you naked*

On the other hand, praises her for her praises her for being untamed, strong and charming:

*Mother, incomparably arrayed,  
Hair flying, stripped-down,  
You battle on Shiva's heart,  
A garland of heads that bounce off  
Your heavy hips, chopped-off hands  
For a belt, the bodies of infants  
For earrings and the lips  
The teeth, like jasmine, the face  
A lotus blossomed, the laugh*

*And the dark body boiling up and out  
Like a storm cloud, and those feet  
Whose beauty is only deepened by blood?  
So Prasad cries: My name is dancing!  
Can I take much more? Can I bear  
An impossible beauty?*

- Ramprasad Sen

Even, through his childishness, Ramprasad being the creator of the poetry tried to propagate an altered version of Kali that somehow merges with the notion of *Uma*. But does not coincide. She is not seen as the ideal mother that society wants. She is termed as stone, cold-hearted, Ramprasad even wrote a song where he said he won't ever call Kali a mother. Those who cry for freedom seek the dark Goddess. To this, Vrinda Dalmiya said, "Praying to Kali becomes a relentless litany of her faults and misdemeanours, and these are harped upon in the very act of seeking redemption through her! So not only is Kali paradoxical herself but so also is the love of Kali." (Dalmiya, 2000) in one of his poems, Ramprasad writes

*Ek bar khule de ma chokher thuli, dekhi sripad moner moto  
Kuputra aneke hoye ma, Kumata noye kokhono toh//  
Just for once open my eyes, let me see myself  
There are many bad sons mother, no bad mother ever.*

-Ramprasad Sen

Again in another, he writes, *Dosh karo noye go ma, ami shokhad sholile dube mori Shyama* (Mother it's no one's fault, it's mine. I drown in my own waters Shyama) Ramprasad also holds himself accountable for his own destruction in the name of Goddess. This creates a dynamic contradiction in his poems or songs.

The social and political context - all the yearnings, the materiality of the physical world is categorized as nothing compared to Kali's feet. The role of a true devotee is played by gaining the position at Kali's feet and everything that is happening in the world will gradually lead to that if one worships her. The genre that is most highlighted is *Bhakter Akuti* that depicts the anguish and desires to seek the motherly love of the Goddess.

Through the poems one can read the twofold manifestation of Kali - one where she is 'self-asserting' femininity not afraid to be the ferocious being, she is. On the other hand, she is the embodiment of fear being aware of her sexuality and at the same time serving 'patriarchal purposes.' (Dalmiya, 2000) The posture of Kali standing on Shiva can be seen as feminine liberation and overcoming the oppression of the patriarchy. But the way Kali was seen through the lens of devotion well fits in the patriarchal motives. Ramprasad only tried breaking the canonical representation of the Goddess and tried to bring her among her devotees by manipulating her and taming her. But a powerful figure like Kali was much needed in the era of destruction and chaos. Attaining the blessings of such a powerful mother became a thing of rather a fascination to the Bengali culture.

A goddess who was feared by those who had no idea of who she is. Kali has been used as a figure to evoke nationalism repeatedly. In the 19th century, she became *Desh-mata* in the songs written by Kaji Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore. She became an embodiment of femininity and the highest reality in poems by Sarojini Naidu but all of them depicted Kali as a mother. Someone whom they can personalize and relate to their current social structure. That could not be done with Vaishnava Padavali or in Mangalkavya. Ramprasad rather saw it as an urgency to call Kali a mother with the invasion of the Marathas and the interference of the British. To be linked with such a fierce and ferocious Goddess gave the common people the strength to hold on to themselves and fight against all adversities.

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