



*The Search for
the Historical Ramprasad*

The Scarcity of Historical Detail

Historians of Indian religion know a great deal about the life of the great sixteenth-century religious reformer and founder of Gauriya Vaisnavism, Sri Caitanya (1486–1533 AD). This is largely due to the amount of biographical material left to us by his contemporaries and followers. S.K. De has said,

There is no dearth of materials for a study of Caitanya's life and personality. A fairly large number of lives in Sanskrit and Bengali came into existence not many years after his death, and they supply valuable materials . . . regarding the details of his career . . .¹

On the other hand much less is known of the much later (eighteenth century) and equally important figure Ramprasad, who did for Bengal Saktism what Caitanya had done for Bengal Vaisnavism.

Ramprasad is mentioned only briefly in Thompson and Spencer's *Bengali Religious Lyrics*, Sakta, E.A. Payne's *The Saktas*, R.C. Dutt's *Cultural Heritage of Bengal*, D. Zbavitel's *Bengali Literature*, and J. Sinha's *Rama Prasada's Devotional Songs*.² Sinha, while giving a slightly fuller account of his life, is uncritical and gives almost no indication of sources. At best these give the probable

date of his birth (1718–1720) and death (1775–1781), refer briefly to his principal works (the *Bidyāsundar*, *Kālikīrttan*, *Kṛṣṇakīrttan* and his songs, the *padābalī*), and acknowledge his status as an important Sakta poet. Thompson and Spencer and Sinha also recount a few legends associated with his life.

The contrast with the situation in Bengal could hardly be greater. There in the land of his birth Ramprasad is well-known to scholar and simple devotee alike and there are many books of his songs, and about his life and faith—some of a popular and others of a scholarly nature.³ Stories about his life are almost universally known and readily recounted. These are stories such as his meeting with the Mughal nawab Siraj-ad-daulah who heard Ramprasad singing while passing by on the river and was so spellbound that he ordered his boat to the bank so that he might listen further to the enchanting songs—which were addressed of course to the goddess Kali. What is the reason for this disparity? Is it that the material available in Bengali is so legendary as to be unreliable? Is what seems unlikely on the surface, as in the story just related, true—that a Muslim nawab would interrupt a journey to listen to hymns to Kali. Nathan and Seeley, in a recently published small collection of Ramprasad songs say, “We know almost nothing about his life except that he was born and flourished in the Bengal of the 18th century . . .” and “Direct information about Ramprasad is almost nonexistent or is compromised by doubt.”⁴

The other question to be asked is whether Ramprasad warrants more attention in the West, and this I think can be answered unequivocally. Janhabikumar Chakrabarti⁵ says that he is the greatest composer of Sakta verse (*padābalī*) and places him among the greatest rishis of India. Satyanarayan Bhattacharya⁶ calls him a superior *sādhaka*, foremost creator of Sakta *padābalī* and most beloved of Bengali poets. His contribution to the development of Saktism in Bengal is immense, and he was a major influence on the nineteenth century mystic and religious leader more familiar to the West, Ramakrishna. Unless Bengal Saktism is considered unimportant, Ramprasad warrants more attention.

One of the reasons for the comparative neglect of a poet like Ramprasad, and the skepticism of scholars like Nathan and Seeley, probably lies in the fact that in Ramprasad’s case the biographical material we have is scarce and late. There is, however, some biographical material available, such as the short biography published by Isvarachandra Gupta as early as 1853. It is the intention of this chapter to make a critical assessment of this life of Ramprasad.⁷

The First Biography of Ramprasad

Isvarachandra Gupta was a Bengali poet who in 1831 at the age of 20, began to edit and publish his own literary magazine, the *Saṅbādprabhākar*. The magazine was given to preserving literary works of the past as well as disseminating contemporary work, and in 1833 it carried Ramprasad's *Kālikīrtan* with a brief introduction by the editor. From this introduction we learn that Gupta shared Ramprasad's own Sakta faith at the time and that he seems to have developed a particular passion for the life and work of Ramprasad. As a result he devoted himself, from the age of seventeen, to the collecting and preserving of Ramprasad's work and to researching the facts of his life. He had been raised in a village near Ramprasad's and the material he assembled was based on his own childhood memories and of those of other people who lived there during his childhood. Since he was born thirty years after the death of Ramprasad, according to his own calculations, he would have come into contact with people who were personally acquainted with him.

By the time he published his biography of Ramprasad in the *Saṅbād prabhākar* in 1853 he had already spent twenty-five years diligently collecting and researching Ramprasad's songs:

Twenty-five years have now passed during which I have been engaged in collecting Ramprasad songs, and until now however hard I have tried I have had little success. Some I have even been able to see only with the greatest difficulty. Some have been eaten by insects, some have been inadvertently copied incorrectly and there is an awful risk in trying to establish the substance of these. Because of this I modestly request those people for whom this is now an important concern not to keep these things to themselves but allow us to have them printed. Then there will be an inexpressible gratitude felt throughout the country and great joy at their being made available in this way. I have been able with great difficulty to secure some songs, and I hope that as more are found I will be able by mutual agreement to remove people's doubts about publishing them.⁸

And he concluded:

Though this account of the life of Ramprasad has now come to an end the task is not completed for much research remains

to be done. . . . However, in the spirit of 'do or die' let us see what happens. I will certainly do what I can, whatever the cost and whatever the shortcomings in what I have been able to achieve. This task has taken on the nature of a crusade, so I am appealing to the general public for help in this matter. We will acknowledge a life-long debt of gratitude to any who assist us in this way, and it is not only we who will benefit but the whole country, so we ask you to be generous with such assistance, whether there is any reward in it or not. However that may be, if the task can be completed I will be satisfied.⁹

As a result of this call for assistance from others in his research, Gupta received and published in the following issue of the *Saṅbādprabhākar* a letter from one respondent who claimed to be a native of Ramprasad's village, giving further information about Ramprasad.¹⁰

The Problem of Corroboration

The first problem concerning Gupta's biography is the absence of any corroborating mention of Ramprasad in some notable early works on the religious life of eighteenth-century Bengal. This is strange if he was as well-known in his day as he is reputed to have been, especially as he is said to have been associated with the court of Raja Krishnachandra of Krishnanagore, from whom he supposedly received his title "Kabiranjān" (one who delights with his verse):

At the court of Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray Bahadur there resided many men learned in the scriptures, many poets such as Bharatchandra Ray Gunakar and many men highly qualified in other matters. But even in the company of such eminent men the people were greatly pleased to listen to the work of that descendent of a *boidya* family from Kumarhatt, Ramprasad Sen, the *Kālikīrtan*, *Kṛṣṇakīrtan* and *Bidyāsundar*, and thought him the greatest poet of them all. . . . The Navadvip ruler wanted Ramprasad to remain with him in his service but this was not to be as by this time Ramprasad had no concern at all for worldly desires. What Ramprasad wanted, and what the Maharaja agreed to, was that from time to time he would come to Halisahore and set up his court in Ramprasad's house for a few days in order to listen to his

songs. Everyone was so delighted by what they heard that the Maharaja gave him the title 'Kabiranjana'. Ramprasad then composed his *Bidyāsundar* in response to the royal favour of the granting of the title. In this matter there is clear proof that the Maharaja, after seeing Ramprasad's *Bidyāsundar*, gave orders to Bharatchandra to compose one too. This he did and became famous everywhere because of the beauty of his work.¹¹

Ramprasad is said to have lived in the village of Kumarhatt, also known as Halisahore, on the bank of the Ganges a short distance north of Calcutta, in the heartland of Bengal. It is surprising then to find no mention of him in the first edition of Ward's *A View of the History, Literature & Mythology of the Hindoos*, published at Serampore in 1818.¹² Ward gathered the material for his work with the help of local brahmin pundits and is considered very reliable on social and religious matters. It is noteworthy that he mentions Ramprasad's near contemporary the poet Bharatchandra Ray. In a later edition, published in London in 1822, Ward does refer to Ramprasad (to a "Kalee Keerthunn by Ramprasad a Shoodra"), but the omission from the first edition is remarkable even if Ward's informants were brahmin pundits (Ramprasad's popularity was certainly greatest among the less orthodox Saktas) as Ramprasad was from a high caste, the *boidyā* (physician) caste, and we can tell from his work that he was educated in Sanskrit and Persian as well as Bengali.¹³

Then, in 1768–1769 the brother of the dewan of the then Governor of Bengal, Harry Verelst, made a pilgrimage along the Ganges from Calcutta to Gaya, Varanasi, and Allahabad and back, an account of which was published by his companion and physician Vijayram Sen in his *Tirthamañala*.¹⁴ Though Vijayram was a Sakta and his patron (Krishnachandra Ghosal) a well-known *bhakta*, and though Kumarhatt and Halisahore are mentioned in the book, there is no mention of Ramprasad. Krishnachandra Ghosal is even said to have tied up his boat at the Kumarhatt ghat and it is quite astonishing that there is no mention of the famous Sakta *sādhaka* and poet who is supposed to have been living there at the time.

Another traveller in the area who wrote of his experiences was Bholanath Chandra whose *The Travels of a Hindu* (1896) shows a particular interest in religious matters both historical and contemporary. His account of the river journey from Calcutta to Krishnanagore mentions neither Kumarhatt nor Halisahore, and there is no reference to Ramprasad.¹⁵

It is certainly surprising that Ramprasad, who was supposed to have been a well-known and loved religious poet, as well as a court poet of some repute and favor, was so little-known to travellers and researchers in Bengal. A later biographer, Dayalchandra Ghosh, says in his *Prasādprasaṅga*, written in Dacca in 1875, that after three years of time-consuming research all he could discover about the composer of the songs, which had so much interested him when he heard them, was that Ramprasad was a *boidya* and a contemporary of Maharaja Krishnachandra, that he was a prominent Sakta *sādhaka*, and that he lived in Kumarhatt.¹⁶

However, that Ramprasad Sen did live at about the time Gupta suggests may be confirmed from other sources such as some contemporary land records, from contemporary *boidya* "clan" chronicles (*kulaśāstra*) and from the works of Ramprasad himself. With respect to the latter we should mention that Ramprasad is generally accepted to have composed a *Kālikīrttan*, a *Kṛṣṇakīrttan*, a *Bidyāsundar* and many songs collected as the *padābali*, and here we must give credit to Gupta whose work in collecting, publishing, and preserving the work of Ramprasad is more important than his biography.

At the end of the *Bidyāsundar*¹⁷ Ramprasad refers to his own family and line (*gōtra*) mentioning first his father Ramram and grandfather Ramesvar, his two sisters, Bhabani and Ambika, his brother Visvanath and his stepbrother Nidhiram. From this we can see that his father had married twice, the first marriage producing Ambika, Bhabani, Ramprasad and Visvanath, and the second Nidhiram. Ramprasad also mentions that Bhabani, whom he mentions with great affection, was married to a Calcuttan named Lakshminarayan Das. It is possible that, consistent with the report that when he left Kumarhatt he went to work in Calcutta, he stayed with her at the time.

However that may be, we are fortunate that the facts related here may be checked against the contemporary *boidya* clan chronicles, the *Candraprabhā* and *Ratnaprabhā* by Bharat Mallick. These contain details of the Sen family line which confirm the details given by Ramprasad and trace the line back to Krittibas. From them we also learn that the family had declined into "misfortune and poverty." Recently *kulaśāstras* like the *Candraprabhā* and *Ratnaprabhā* have come under some criticism regarding their reliability as historical sources; R.C. Mazumdar and Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyay¹⁸ have pointed out that the writers of these chronicles included much non-factual information with the factual

material in their books, some of it quite supernatural and unbelievable. This was because they had no modern historical outlook and the recording of hearsay evidence was the custom of the times, and because their main concern was, after all, to glorify the clan (*kula*) whose history they were recording. Mazumdar has pointed out that the earlier the period under discussion the more unreliable the material, as most of the *śāstras* were not written till the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries at the earliest.¹⁹ But Mukhopadhyay has argued that the *boidya* chronicles, the *Candraprabhā* and *Ratnaprabhā*, are much more reliable than the brahmin *kulaśāstras* with which Mazumdar was chiefly concerned.²⁰

It is fortunate for us that the chronicles with which we are concerned are the most reliable, and were written about the period we are interested in.²¹ They are therefore likely to be fairly reliable sources for confirming the existence of Ramprasad Sen in the eighteenth century and giving information concerning his family.

In both the *Bidyāsundar* and the *padābali*²² Ramprasad refers to Kumarhatt as his home and mentions its importance as a center for Tantric *sādhana*, and the records confirm that his branch of the family had settled in that area. It is also possible, as the chronicles continue beyond Ramprasad himself, by counting back through his successors, to determine approximately when it was that Ramprasad lived in the eighteenth century.²³ It would seem then that when Ramprasad refers in his work to these facts of his life there is no reason to doubt him.

Gupta says in his biography that in 1759 Maharaja Krishnachandra gave fourteen bighas of tax-free land to Ramprasad, land which was "uncultivated jungle land... for the occupation and enjoyment of your sons and grandsons:"

In the Bengali year 1165 [1759 AD] Maharaja Krishnachandra gave Ramprasad Sen 14 bighas of land tax-free, land described in the deed as 'uncultivated jungle land for your sons and grandsons to occupy and enjoy'. The land is very close to Kumarhatt and the name and seal of the raja are found on the deed.²⁴

Dineshchandra Bhattacharya²⁵ thinks Gupta had not actually seen this deed but reported from hearsay. This is confirmed by the deed itself which does refer to "rent-free uncultivated jungle land" but not in the words cited by Gupta.²⁶ Nor is the amount of land mentioned in the deed, a total of thirty-one bighas, the same as Gupta says it was.

This deed also confirms the connection of Ramprasad with the court of Raja Krishnachandra because his name is found on the deed. But perhaps more importantly, Ramprasad's title "Kabiranjan" is not used. This makes it very unlikely that it was Krishnachandra who conferred the title on Ramprasad because if he had he would almost certainly have used it, especially as in a similar deed granting land to Bharatchandra Ray at about the same time Krishnachandra does use his title, "Gunakar," which he had conferred on him.²⁷ There are also other deeds showing that Ramprasad received land from other patrons before the gift by Krishnachandra, and it is more likely that it was one of these patrons who gave him the title "Kabiranjan."²⁸

While the deeds throw light in this way on the patronage Ramprasad received from the local zamindars, it also yet again undermines the reliability of Gupta's biography. He has reported the gift of land from hearsay, misrepresented the contents of the deed, and drawn an invalid reference from it with regard to Ramprasad's title (and incidentally to the whole related problem of when Ramprasad composed his *Bidyāsundar*, and for whom).

Which Came First, the Songs or the Stories?

A further problem pertains to the style of Gupta's biography. Time and time again he relates some incident in the life of Ramprasad and then, with words such as "the evidence for it is found in one of his songs" gives one of the songs in full. No other evidence than the song is adduced in support:

There is also a rumour that the Kabiranjan composed 100,000 songs, but there is no proof of this, the only evidence for it is found in one of his songs:

I have heard that Mother Shyama's court is very difficult,
 The clerk calls the plaintiff but none appears. What defense
 can I offer in a court where Siva is petitioner,
 O Mother you have appointed yourself as dewan, how can I
 trust your words?
 I have briefed 100,000 lawyers, what more can I do? I call you
 by your name Tara (the Deliverer), but you don't listen.
 So I abuse you and you become Kali (dark) at the indignity.
 Ramprasad says, You have ruined my life.

It is certainly not impossible that Ramprasad wrote 100,000 songs, and it is in many respects likely, because he never ceased composing them from his youth to the day of his death. Whatever came to his mind he turned into poetry.²⁹

Ramprasad Sen started out as a clerk for an accountant in some famous wealthy household in or near Calcutta, but as he was not able to apply his mind closely to such wordly affairs he had no liking for such work. So he would neglect his work, entirely oblivious of the fact of his master's dissatisfaction, and every day he would take up his place at his desk, open his account book and fill whole pages with nothing but the name "Durga, Durga." Finally one day he sat and wrote this song:

Make me your accounts clerk, O Mother,
I will never betray your trust.
Everyone else plunders the treasury of your feet, and I can't
bear it.
You have left it in the charge of the forgetful Siva.
He is fickle and gives away your property, yet still you trust
him.
He receives half your body as a grant, as well as a good wage,
While I work without any wages, wanting only the dust from
your feet.
If you remain with your father, then I am lost,
If you stay with my father Siva then I will receive my due,
Mother.
Prasad says, Let me die at those feet of yours which dispel all
misfortunes,
In that position I will be safe from all dangers.

When the accounts clerk saw this poem on the last pages of the book he was very angry and said to his master, "Sir, this mad or drunk fellow who at first inspired faith through his work has now ruined everything! See, he has completely spoiled this beautiful new book, there isn't a single figure in it, only this lunacy . . ." On hearing that his master looked at all the pages of the book, and as he read again and again the poem "Make me your accounts clerk, O Mother", a strange mood came over him. He was so moved by it that tears came to his eyes and he said to the cashier, "Who are you accusing

of being mad or drunk? This fellow hasn't spoiled a good book, you are so drunk with the wine of worldliness that you haven't been able to grasp the true sentiment of this song. Ramprasad is no ordinary man, he is a holy man, an incarnate son of the Goddess." Then he addressed the Kabiranjani with words of devotion and said, "Ramprasad, as long as you remain on the path you have set out on nothing but trouble will befall you. So as long as you wander in the forests of this world I will give you 30 rupees per month stipend, there is no need for you to stay here any longer, go now to your house and keep up your good work."³⁰

The question to be settled here is to what extent Ramprasad's poetical work was autobiographical. Did Ramprasad compose songs directly out of the experiences of his own life (as the tradition undoubtedly has it)? Or did he merely use as subject-matter for his songs the everyday experiences of the villagers who were the audience for them, experiences which then became attached to him in legend on the assumption that he must have composed songs directly out of his own experience? Take for example the story of Ramprasad's doodling in his account book and subsequent discovery by his employer. Here the song is taken as support of the story. But does it prove that he worked as an accounts clerk? Is it not at least as likely that Ramprasad thought that the venality of accountants provided a nice conceit with which to begin a song to the Mother which he personalized, putting himself as a devotee into the song in the process?

It is not possible to answer this question conclusively, but the constant repetition in Gupta's biography of the formula, story-proof clause-song, would certainly give pause to anyone familiar with literary form-criticism, and raises further doubts about the reliability of Gupta's evidence. If the legends are based on the songs, then the letter Gupta published (referred to above) shows at least that the process took place before Gupta's time during the fifty years between Ramprasad's death and the commencement of his research, and he accurately reports what was currently believed by his time. Gupta reliably reports the traditions, but are the traditions reliable?

It is also difficult to give much credence to stories like that of the Goddess Annapurna building his fence, or of the Muslim ruler, Siraj-ad-daulah taking time off to listen to Hindu devotional songs:

With regard to his Sakta devotionalism everyone referred to him as Kali's heroic son, they used to say that Annapurna used to come from Kashi every day and inspire his speech and he would compel her to listen to his songs. With respect to this, one astonishing miracle is talked about all over the country—'One day, in order to repair the fence round his house, he gathered together all the materials and went in search of a builder. When he returned with the builder a few moments later, the materials had gone and the fence was all fixed. Immediately there was an uproar among the neighbouring villagers who said, "Annapurna herself has come from Kashi and fixed up Ramprasad Sen's fence".' So many wonderful happenings like this are reported that if they were to be described they could not be contained in a single book. But Ramprasad never made any such claim himself, lest it detract from reference to his compositions.³¹

Once the magnanimous governor of Navadvip, Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray Bahadur, went by boat, accompanied by Sen, to Murshidabad where they stayed for a few days in the boat. Ramprasad spent the whole time singing songs to the glory of God. One day the nawab Siraj-ad-daulah passing in his boat as he enjoyed the evening breeze heard Sen singing, and being captivated by it asked whose boat it was and who the singer was. Later when he had established his identity and summoned Sen over to his boat and commanded him to sing, the Kabiranjan sang a *kheyāl* and *gajal* for the nawab's entertainment. But the nawab was displeased and said, 'I have no desire to hear your *kheyāl* and such', and told him to sing the hymns to Kali which he had previously been singing. At the nawab's command he began to sing one of his own songs filled with devotion to Shyama, and even such a hard-hearted man as Siraj-ad-daulah was powerless to prevent tears coming to his eyes. When the song had ended the nawab applauded him and said, "Ramprasad, you have received divine favour, if you accept my patronage I will give you high rank," but Ramprasad had no desire for worldly wealth as a result of accepting such patronage. Let the reader judge what kind of man Ramprasad was and what a hardhearted atheist Siraj-ad-daulah was.³²

This kind of legend makes a theological point which may have been of interest to Gupta and to his readers as Sakta devotees,

something considered further in chapter 3. Although it is of no use at all to the contemporary historian constructing a biography of Ramprasad, there is an important principle at work here. Dimock points out that in India where ideas of time and hence history are different from our own, those who recorded these traditions were not interested in historical detail but in the kind of meaning that the lives had for devotees, and which only true devotees could comprehend.³³ That this was true in Ramprasad's case is seen in the fact that most of Gupta's biography is concerned with Ramprasad as a devotee of Kali, and illustrates the great depth of faith and devotion he possessed.

Isvarachandra Gupta as an Historian

There are grounds also for calling into question Gupta's methods of research. From what he himself says, and from the tone of the letter he published, it seems certain that Gupta had not himself actually visited Ramprasad's village in order to question the old people who had known him:

It is a matter of some regret that I have not been able to write more. I had intended to record the biographies of the poets of the past who have become famous in this country, but because of the difficulty of collecting material this has not been an easy task to complete. Today none of their contemporaries are alive, and those old people who are are not especially informed. A few of them know a little but regrettably I have not been able to meet any of them.³⁴

And from the letter:

... The Kabiranjan's spirituality and scholarship have never before received the serious attention that you have given them, and we can vouch for the accuracy of your account because Ramprasad was a native of our village and we were well acquainted with him. And when what you had written was read to the wise and knowledgeable old people of the village they unhesitatingly agreed, after hearing it, with what was written...³⁵

Gupta does admit the hearsay nature of his material and on occasions recounts two conflicting traditions he has heard without

attempting to resolve which was the correct one, as for example the identity of the person for whom Ramprasad worked as a clerk:

Here there are two traditions, some say Ramprasad used to work as a clerk for Gokulchandra Ghosal, dewan of Kidderpur, others say he worked in Calcutta for Durgacharan Mitra's family.³⁶

As a source of religious history, Gupta's work is very rich. The songs and poems provide a tremendous amount of information about Ramprasad's Sakta faith and the biography shows how Ramprasad had come to be regarded by the early nineteenth century. Because of Ramprasad's dominant place in the revival of Saktism in the eighteenth century this is invaluable.

Gupta's antiquarian interest in recording details of the lives of ancient poets shows that he had the interests of the modern historian at heart. His work coincides with the earlier stages of a change in Indian scholarship away from the traditionally Indian towards Western notions of historiography.³⁷ This is what motivated his quest. But we can see from the style of his biography and the fact that he himself never undertook to visit Ramprasad's village to collect data, and never actually sighted the land deed from which he "quotes," in short, that he was still very much under the influence of more traditional ideas.

We may be grateful to Gupta for collecting what he has about Ramprasad, but he has also left us with considerable difficulties. His reliance on older methods of historiography has led to his recording much legendary material, while his reputation as a "modern" historian has resulted in much of it being regarded as historical ever since.

But Gupta's biography does make a valuable contribution to our knowledge of Ramprasad; it is the earliest such record and summarizes the received tradition as it stood in 1853. Here the letter also published by Gupta is valuable; it supports what Gupta said in his biography, coming as it does from someone who was a native of Ramprasad's village. But we must always bear in mind that all this took place some time after Ramprasad's death, and that it is based on hearsay and must be constantly checked and evaluated before too much weight is put on it. At times it also can be shown to be probably in error.

What we can take with certainty from all this is a good picture of Ramprasad's Sakta faith, and it is this after all for which he

is principally renowned. So altogether a reasonable portrait of this much-loved *sādhaka*-poet emerges, one which I think lends color to an assessment of his contribution to the development of Saktism in Bengal.



Glimpses of the historical Ramprasad Sen are there for the keen observer. He may be seen at the court of Raja Krishnachandra of Krishnanagore, or back at Halisahore on the banks of the Ganges, or farming his block of rent-free land. But these glimpses are almost obscured by the shadows. Where exactly was that piece of land, at Nadia or Halisahore? What was he doing in Krishnanagore, debating the aesthetics of erotic poetry with Bharatchandra, or religion with Aju Goswami? Did he leave Halisahore to work as a clerk in Calcutta, or was it somewhere else? Was he a brahmin or a *boiḍya*? And was he ever to be seen boating along the rivers and streams of East Bengal?

It is obvious that these glimpses are hidden by the shadows of time, and of other real or mythical Ramprasads. In spite of this it was not long before interest in Ramprasad began to grow; the first biography had been written, his songs were being collected and published in literary journals, and he had been enobled with the epithet *Kabirañjan* because the hearers received such delight from them. Unfortunately it was already too late to distinguish between the various images of these Ramprasads, or biographers no longer had the desire to do so. A great many songs were lost forever. The Ramprasad who emerges into this new light is a figure of legend more than history, but of glorious and compelling legend.

In the process the focus shifted. Those who were interested in him were interested not so much in the literary figure of the Krishnanagore court as in the Sakta *sādhaka*, the devotee of the Goddess. And it is this Ramprasad and this devotion which is the subject of this book.