

# A Study of the Life, Work and Associates of Keshab Chandra Sen

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**Abstract – Keshab Chandra Sen is one of the most prominent and influential social reformers & religious leaders in Bengal in the 19th century. Keshab Chandra Sen joined Brahmo Samaj in 1857 and became a successful professional in 1859. He was a brilliant writer, and his tremendous ability to clarify Brahmo's ideology to everyday people quickly rendered him very popular among Brahmo Samaj's more youthful individuals. so, in this paper we will discuss about his life work and associates.**

**Keywords: Life, Work, Associates, Social Reform**

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## INTRODUCTION

Keshab Chandra Sen is one of the most prominent & powerful social reformers and religious pioneers in Bengal in the nineteenth century. He was envisioned in 1838 by the much-respected Vaishnavite people of the Baidya Station, who had been educated in English throughout his childhood. He used it for the Bank of Bengal in his early adulthood. Keshab Chandra Sen is considered to be responsible for participating in the development of Brahmo Samaj in Bengal. He was also responsible for bringing Brahmo Samaj activities to a few urban communities in South India.

In his work, the hypothesis of Keshab Chandra Sen has undergone a few turns of events and has focused on different subjects on different events. More attention was paid to social problems all the time, and then he thought extensively on social change. Throughout the last 50 percent of his life, Keshab Chandra played the role of a religious Guru & gave his own perception of faith. He had an exceptionally magnetic air, and the religious line he sought could be described as another Vaishnavism. While he was blamed for some of the inconsistencies in Brahmo Samaj, with the separation of ideology, he was indisputably one of the most talked-about & prominent social reformers in Bengal during the British era. Since the beginning of socio-religious revolutions in India, he has consistently developed as a key democratic leader.

## HIS LIFE

Keshab Chandra Sen is regarded as the third great leader of the Brahmo movement. He transformed the

Brahmo Theism into a universal and cosmopolitan religion and brought out a series of far-reaching social reforms. But at the same time, his image had remained consistently controversial among Brahmos as his personality was of multiple identities.

Keshab Chandra Sen was born on November 19, 1838 in Calcutta. He was the grandson of Dewan Ram Kama! Sen and was brought up in a strict religious atmosphere. His father, Pyarimohan Sen was a devout follower of Vaishnava cult and died at the early age of the thirty four when Keshab was only ten years of age. It was his mother; a devotional and excellent woman was A responsible for making the character of his son.

Keshab Chandra Sen received his earliest education first at home and then went to Hindu College. He was a mediocre student and did not like mathematics but his intelligence was great and he was marked out strict morals. From a very early age, he showed considerable dislike for ceremonies. He did not finish his college education and devoted himself mainly to the study of philosophy and Unitarian theology which helped him immensely in his career as an orator and religious leader. He came in contact with some Christian missionaries and studied the Bible with the Rev. T.H. Burne and the works of Reid, Hamilton, Theodone, Parker, Milton, Emerson and others and imbibed ideas and feelings which made a lasting impression on his mind. At the age of seventeen, he had established 'Colutola Evening School' for young men of Neighborhoods. In 1856, at the age of eighteen, he got married to a nine years old girl. Then about at the age of nineteen, he started the "Goodwill Fraternity", a purely religious society where he gave discourses on religious matter.

During one of his discourse, came Debendranath Tagore. "The attraction between Keshab and Debendranath, which appears to have been instantaneous, was impart that of a son in search of a father. Keshab who was twenty at that time, while Debendranath was forty, had lost his own father when he was ten. There was also Debendranath's attraction to the young man, who had a brilliant oratorical gift, was an effective organizer, had Unitarian theological convictions, and perhaps most important was a confirmed 'theist like himself.'"

## WORKS

### Metaphysics, Religion and Morality:

Rammohan Roy by his study of Koran, Bible and Hindu scriptures, planted the doctrine of theism. He taught a pure theism which he claimed to rest upon the Vedas, the Upanisads and the Brahma-Sutras. Under Debendranath Tagore, the followers of Brahma Samaj up their faith in the Vedas as the authority for the theistic doctrines but still they continued to cling to the "sacred scriptures. They abandoned idolatry, abolished caste and thread ceremony and many other customs but still they adhered as closely as possible to the rules and customs of Hinduism. According to them, the Brahma movement was within the pale of Hinduism. But with Keshab Chandra Sen, new principles of thought and actions were brought into the Samaj remodelled all the rites and ceremonies of Hindus according to Brahma doctrines and took only reason and conscience as his guide.

Between 1876 to 1878, Keshab Chandra Sen changed remarkably. He withdrew himself totally from the Unitarian inspired social gospel of Christ and the social reform aspect of the Brahma reformation practically ended after 1878. But both "J.K. Coar and Sati Chatterjee argued otherwise. Keshab had learned from the Saints that social improvement was impossible without moral transformation, and morality was useless without spiritual illumination. Each saint taught Keshab his own system or path of moral transformation."

After Keshab Chandra Sen's joining in the Brahma Samaj, a new life emerged into the movement which became more dynamic than ever before and drew numerous young men into the movement. Keshab Chandra Sen organized the young men of the Samaj under the Sanghat Sabha. Like Rammohan Roy's Atmiya Sabha, the members of the Sanghat Sabha met every week and decided to give up caste, to discard the sacred Brahmanical thread, to accept no invitation to any idolatrous festivals, to give no countenance to the dancing of public women, to practice temperance, to give their wives and sisters the advantages of the light they had themselves received, and to be strictly truthful, honest and just in all their dealings with the fellow men, "Keshab Chandra Sen carried his rationalistic principles to a still further degree and founded some Brahma rites from which everything idolatrous was eliminated. The Brahmos

who use them were known as 'Anusthani Brahmos'. The marriage of Sukumary, the second daughter of Devendranath Tagore was performed according to the reformed rites of the Brahma Samaj. Then the appointment of Keshab chandra Sen a non-brahmin as the Pradhan Acharya of the Samaj, a post which had always been reserved for a Brahmin from the time of Rammohan Roy was a very important step in the history of the Samaj for it gave practical proof as their disbelief in caste.

## MISSIONARY ACTIVITY: THE MADRAS AND BOMBAY SAMAJs

One of the most marked and healthy features of Brahmas is its Missionary zeal. This arose, as we have seen, in the Adi Samaj; but it was left for Chandra Sen to introduce a regular Mission Agency. Earnest and self-denying men, many of whom left comfortable positions, were trained and sent forth, on the barest maintenance, to propagate the faith; and several branch Samajes were established in Northern India.

In 1863, a Samaj was established in Lahore, mainly through the zeal and ability of Navina Chandra Eai. In 1865, Mr. Sen visited East Bengal, and the Brahmist ' Eastern Church has ever since been an important branch of the Society. In 1864 and 1867, theistic churches were organized in Madras and Bombay; the former was called the Veda Samaj, and the latter the Pradhan or Prayer Samaj.

It is worthy of notice that meetings for Prayer invariably form the nucleus of a new Samaj. The more devout and earnest of the people agree to "offer their prayers together" ; and this ( small beginning may continue for some time before the little band feels strong and bold enough to organize By the year 1850, Provincial Samajes were commencing at Midnapur, Krishnagar, and Dacca, a distinctly theistic Society. When developed, a Brahmist church devotes itself to religion, education, and philanthropy in general. Where the Samajes are strong, they have a Sangat Sabhd or class for devotional culture, something between a Sunday School and an Experience Meeting.'

The Madras Veda Samaj. — In February, 1864, Chandra Sen visited Madras, and awakened considerable interest by the delivery of several lectures. In April, 1864, the Veda Samaj was established, which held weekly meetings for prayer, and started a monthly journal. But a strange fatality seems to have attended the beginnings of Brahmism in South India; and, one after another, its leading members died, thereby seriously affecting the fortunes of the Samaj but in 1868, both of them was removed by death. Another leader, and author of some Tamil books, and popular satires on Hindu superstitions, one of which, Ddmbachdri Vildsdm, is very popular, was Kasi Visvanatha Madelia, a retired judge, of good family; but he lapsed into pantheism, and died in 1871.

In the meantime, Providence was preparing a more worthy guide in the person of K. Sridharalu Nayadu, a native of Cuddler, a young man of great promise, possessing an enthusiastic piety and great practical sagacity. Even before Chandra Sen's visit to the South, he appears to have been deeply interested in the accounts that reached him of the Brahma Samaj in Bengal: and he resolved to go thither and study the movement for himself. He had no friends in the North, neither did he understand its languages; and being very poor, he had to dispose of some of his property in order to pay his passage. But he spent eight months in Calcutta, endearing himself to the Brahmos; and having learned what their faith was, he returned to his home to devote himself to the same cause among his countrymen. In 1869, or thereabouts, he was appointed secretary to the Madras Samaj. Being dissatisfied with the constitution and € covenant of the Veda Samaj, whose name seemed to imply that the Vedas alone were regarded as an infallible guide to salvation, it was converted, through his instrumentality, on June 18th, 1871, into "The Brahma Samaj of Southern India." The old rules were revised, and new, bolder, and more spiritual confession of faith took the place of the former f covenant,' which was much trammelled by concessions to prevailing customs and superstitions. Both of these documents appear to have been based on Debendra Nith Tagore's Brahmic covenant.

His successor did not long survive him; and a few years later, a split took place in the Samaj, resulting from differences of opinion respecting the Tiews advanced by Chandra Sen's Missionaries, on the one hand, and those of the Sadaran Samaj, on the other; which led to the formation of a new branch of the latter party on June 17th, 1882. A monthly English paper, the Brahma Frakdsika, is now issued; and a large house has been purchased in Madras, which is shortly to be set apart as a Mandir, towards which nearly Es. 5,000 have been subscribed. Besides Mr. Sen himself, Babus P. C. Mozumdar and Amrita Lai Bose, and Pandit Sivanath Sastri, m.a., have been actively engaged at different times in missionary work in the South of India, and have revived the spirit of Brahminism.

Samajes exist in ten other towns in the Madras Presidency, including the Province of Mysore; the oldest and most vigorous being those at Bangalore, and Mangalore. TheBombay Prdrthand Samaj. — Mr. Sen visited Bombay for the first-time 1864, and again in 1868. The Prathama (Prayer) Samaj was organized in March, 1867, mainly through the exertions of' a physician of the city, Dr. Atmaram Pandurang. Several other Samajes exist in the Presidency, the most important of which is probably at Poon&. The theism of Western India does not appear to have been of so progressive a type as that which has characterized the North and the South; and the Prarthana Samaj has adhered more to the old Hindu elements of social and religious life; but both in Bombay and in Madras, and

elsewhere in the South and West, the Samajes have had an independent organisation, and hold no official relation to the parent Societies in Calcutta. For many of the above particulars we are indebted to an study in the Modern Review, January, 1884, by Miss Collet. Also see Report of the S. I. B. Samaj, from 1864 to 1881. Madras.

## **KESHAB CHANDRA AND HIS ASSOCIATES**

The first meeting of the Association was held on 7<sup>th</sup> November. The Association was opened to non-Brahmos and religion did not play a major role in it; so, it appealed to a large section of people. The work of this Association was divided in five sections (1) Charity (2) Women's education (3) Mass education (4) Temperance (5) Cheap literature.

Most of the girls left school due to marriage and thus cut off from all means of further improvement. "..... so, it was necessary to provide a system of education for adult ladies in their own homes. For this reason, the Reform Association established a Normal School in Calcutta..... The grant of two hundred rupees per month for a year was promised by Miss Mary Carpenter on behalf of the National Indian Association of England. Earnest efforts were made to raise funds from amongst educated gentlemen in different parts of the country. Public meetings were held at Allahabad, Kanpur, Lucknow, Etwa and Agra, and appeals for fund were issued. The sum of rupees 1500 was thus raised in aid of this great object.

His scheme for Primary Education included the following

- (a) "A competent Indian should be appointed Inspector-General of Vernacular Schools;
- (b) A large number of Night Schools for agricultural and working classes should be opened;
- (c) The masses should be instructed in useful subjects such as Elementary Science etc.,
- (d) Grants-in-aid rules should be relaxed in favor of the schools for the lower classes of people;
- (e) Itinerant teachers should give popular lectures in village schools;
- (f) Cheap newspapers which were approved and subsidized by Government should be freely distributed in villages;

- (g) Landholders should encourage and help in the establishment of schools for mass education in the villages;

For organizing an effective system of Primary Education, Keshab recommended that the really wealthy of all classes, European and Indian Officials - landlords, merchants, traders, bankers, submit to a small educational tax on their income." Thus, it is seen that Keshab Chandra wished to involve everyone into the scheme of educating the people.

"It was decided to open a workshop to meet the increasing expenses of the school. The articles produced by the students and the teachers were sold and orders were executed to a very large extent." This branch of the work steadily flourished and proved profitable. By this means while the work of training was effectively carried on the cost incurred was fully defrayed. "The number of pupils in the two institutions from February to December 1871 would appear from the following table:

Month	Working Man's Institute	Industrial School	Total
February	22	13	35
March	35	12	47
April	44	12	56
May	57	-	57
June	67	6	73
July	80	43	123
August	89	76	165
September	83	53	136
October	73	37	110
November	55	33	88
December	41	30	71

The Committee was well aware that Workingmen's Institute and Industrial Schools were not much appreciated by the classes for whom they were intended. This kind of education was foreign to the Indian tradition and to keep it going was very difficult. The number of students always fluctuated. Out of the six departments of the Industrial School, Carpentry, Tailoring, Clock and Watch Repairing, Printing, Lithography and Engraving - the latter three were closed down within first years because of low attendance. In the Annual Report of Indian Reform Association, it was said that "The Working Men's Institution and Industrial Schools are not much appreciated by the classes for whom they are intended and that a considerable length of time must elapse before they elicit sufficient public interest and take root in this country. The Committee must, therefore, learn to labor and to wait, and patiently persevere in their work till the full measure of success is achieved."

## THE LAST DAYS AND OBSEQUIES OF KESHAB CHANDRA SEN

For some time, previous to his death, Mr. Sen's health had been failing. Early in 1882, he began to suffer from diabetes, and the disease gradually undermined his system. In January- 1883, he appeared in the Town Hall, Calcutta, and the subject of his last lecture was "Asia's Message to Europe." Subsequently, he spent over five months at Simla, where at first his health much improved; but the rainy season brought on a relapse, and by the beginning of September, when he left the hills, he was completely prostrate.

As though anticipating a speedy end to his labors, he devoted himself assiduously, in spite of shattered health, to the instruction of his followers; and it was at Simla that he drew up "The New Samhita," or "Sacred Laws of the Aryans of the New Dispensation," containing rules and regulations for the domestic and social guidance of ordinary Indian life. Religious and minute instructions are furnished relating to the household, the sanctuary, meals, business, amusements, studies, charities, domestic relationships, ceremonies, and vows. The work first appeared as a series of articles in The New Dispensation, during the latter part of 1883, and has since been reprinted in the form of a little book. It is not as complete as the author desired, for death prevented a last revision; and before it could be formally given to his church, the rites prescribed therein were for the first time carried out in his own case, and at his own funeral.

From his Himalayan retreat he also contributed some remarkable papers to the New York Independent, which have since been reprinted under the title of "Yoga: or Communion with God;" this his last work — selections from which will be found in the Appendix — was published on the day he died. The work is divided into three parts: Communion with God in Nature; Communion with God in the Soul; and Communion with God in History. It is published by the Brahmo Tract Society, Calcutta. It is a common saying in India that there is no power equal to the Yoga' system of Hinduism, founded by Patanjali, and regarded as a branch of the Sankhya school of philosophy. This power lies in its contemplative and ascetic character which has so strong a charm for the Hindu, and which took an undue possession of Chandra Sen's nature in his later days. When carried out completely, the Yoga system, which aims, through mental contemplation and suppression of all action, at the fusion of the individual with the universal spirit, tends to the paralysis of mind and body — an ill-nourished and neglected body necessarily resulting in a feeble and disordered brain.

We have thus been denied his last thoughts on the relation of the Christ of History to the ancient prophets and to God. But his last days were not all given to study. Acting on medical advice, he took to carpentry at Shimla, as an in-door recreation, and



set to work as though c he had been a carpenter all his life.' Specimens of his skill are treasured at his Calcutta residence, Lily Cottage. The Secretary of the Himalayan Brahma Samaj has given some interesting details of this Simla visit:—

For a period of five months, he says, there were daily prayers at his residence, ' Tara View, 1 in the morning, and religious conversation in the evening till about 11 o'clock. The morning services on Sundays used to be attended by outsiders also. Never on the summit of the glorious Himalayas, for centuries backwards, were uttered prayers so sweet, so sincere, so soul-stirring, as those breathed by the minister in his morning devotions.

Returning to Calcutta in September, he passed the rest of his days often in severest sufferings. One of his followers writes: — in our minister's death, we get the solution of the burning problem of human suffering. How could men get through suffering P By making pain lose the character of pain; by making it sweet? How could this be done P By actual enjoyment of the sweetest object of the world, by actually seeing and communing with the Divine Mother? The greater the illness, the acuter the suffering, the nearer is the approach to the Holy Being and the greater the enjoyment and repose.... Enter into that yoga, he said, and the hardest realities of life become comprehensible and enjoyable. Alas! His disciples were too slow to understand him; they were too dull to fathom his meaning. The gulf became at last inseparable between him and them.

Notwithstanding great pain and weakness, lie was devoted to his work up to the last, and insisted, on New Year's Day, on being carried to the new little Sanctuary adjoining his house, where he offered from the pulpit a brief dedicatory prayer, addressed to the ' Supreme Mother,' and delivered a short address to his disciples. This thought of the Divine Motherhood seems to have grown on him at the close of his life. When the end was drawing near, and he was enduring intense pain, his aged mother observed:—

"Dear Keshab, why this painful bodily suffering P is it a punishment from Heaven for my and your sins"? "No, mother dear," he replied, "that punishment is quite of a different nature. My present suffering is only a source of joy to me. I see my Heavenly Mother is playing with me."

All through his life he was most devoted to and proud of his mother. It was a supreme pleasure to him whenever she was present at his public

The Neio Dispensation, January 13th, 1884. Services On one occasion during his last illness, we are told:—

The venerable lady lamented that she— poor sinner should be left behind, while the dearest jewel of her heart was being plucked away from her. 'Don't say so,

dear mother,' he replied, ' where can there be another mother like you have inherited your virtues ; all that I call my own is yours/ So saying, he took the dust of her feet and put it upon his head. On Sunday, January 6th, when his disease took a serious turn, someone near requested him to speak to the ladies of his household, who were weeping. "What shall I say," he observed; " if I speak to them anything, I can only tell them words about vajikantha (heaven), which will make them weep the more' When the disease advanced to its last stage, says the writer quoted above, he was in a state of stupor; but all throughout he was in yoga; the eternal Mother was before him, and he forgot his suffering. So that from an early stage of the last attack, he had ceased to belong to us. The extent of the suffering may be realized from the fact that it deprived him of the power of speech, and made him dead to the world long before death came. That he was not unconscious was apparent, for, to the last, he retained his tremendous will force. At midnight, on the Monday, when relief from pain seemed impossible, the c Singing Apostle' was called; and the last hymn which he sang, and which soothed the sufferer, related to Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. The following is a translation :< —

"If possible, O Beloved, remove this cup. But not my, but Thy will be done in this dire distress. Body, mind, and life are Thine.

Do Thou with them as Thou wilt.

Only, with clasped hands, I ask for this blessing — grant unto me peace, patience, and strength.

The next morning, January 8th, he passed away. The body was cremated the same evening at the Nimtollah Ghat, in the presence of an immense concourse of mourners and spectators."

The following details of the obsequies are mainly taken from The East, January 12th, 1884:—

The body bathed, anointed, and robed in white silk, with a agaric' passing across the breast, was brought at about 2 p. m. from the upper story to the portico down-stairs, where a new cot, decorated with flower garlands, was prepared, the metallic flag of the New Dispensation being held over the head by a friend. Amid the loud lamentations of friends and relatives, the cot was carried to the new Sanctuary, and laid before the ' Veda for altar, where the 'Upadhyaya/ kneeling, conducted a short Divine service the prayer offered being to the purport that, although the occasion was one for great bewailing and lamentations, yet considering that the spirit of the dear departed was imbibed by us, that his blood was our blood, that his flesh was our flesh, and that he was at the very core of our life, we could not lament for his departure in the way we might have liked. The only tribute, therefore, that we could offer to the revered memory of the departed, was to ask

God to enable us to act in the spirit, in which, if living, he would advise us to do. A heart-rending prayer was then offered by Babu Kanti Chandra Mitra, which made everybody present cry most loudly... A procession was then formed, consisting of two lines of the visitors, amounting to something like 500 persons, from the sanctuary to the gate. Through the space between the lines, the cot with the body was carried by the nearest relatives and friends of the deceased. On coming to the streets, the procession was joined by other friends, who numbered about 2,000, or more, by the time the procession reached the Nimtollah Ghat.... The crowd of visitors assembled at the Ghat was so great that it was with some difficulty that we could get access. A spot having been selected, and the pile arranged, the remains of the great Reformer were laid on it, covered with the flag of the New Dispensation, while friends and visitors strewed flowers over the body.... The Upadhyaya' and the assembled visitors then chanted a hymn, the ceremony being concluded by the former offering up a short and appropriate prayer.

According to the custom of the country, the eldest son of the deceased — Karuna Chandra Sen — held a torch in his right hand, and, applying it to the pyre, said: — 'In the name of God I apply this holy fire to the last remains of the deceased. The mortal shall burn away and perish, but the immortal lives. O Lord! The departed soul is rejoicing in Thy blissful Abode. As the body began to burn, the mourners in one voice cried out: — Jai Sat-Chit- Ananda Hari— Glory is unto the Redeemer who is Truth, Wisdom, and Joy; God's grace only availed; Shanti, Shanti, Shanti — Peace, Peace, and Peace. The cremation of the body took five hours; after which the ashes were collected in an urn and taken to Lily Cottage by the chief mourners and the Apostles of the New Dispensation.

## CONCLUSION

All editorials generated a consistent, unbiased & scientific analysis of the entire social strata, respectively European & Indian, and spared no one. Eventually, it was identified that "Pure theology would never at last gratify a serious and inquisitive mind." however these views, so openly expressed, stirred a hornet's nest among thoughtful individuals of Bombay.

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