

Conflicts and Contestations at sustaining a ‘Feminine Space’ at Dakshineswar Kali Temple, Kolkata.

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ABSTRACT

The Kali temple at Dakshineswar was patronized (construction period circa 1848-1855) by Rani Rashmoni (circa 1793-1861), a propertied widow in colonial Bengal despite opposition from Vedic Brahmins who declared temple patronage by a Sudra widow inauspicious. The temple gained popularity when Ramakrishna (Gadhadhar Chattopadhyay), the second Brahmin priest of the temple achieved the status of a prophet. Rani Rashmoni prepared the Deed for making Debottar Endowment a day before she died in circa 1861. Her daughters were temple administrators (circa 1861-1871) after she died but they were removed from their responsibilities by her grandsons. Sevayits are descendants of the patron. No written rule exists yet women sevayits are not allowed to file nomination and contest election to be a trustee so they are not associated with temple administration now. A trustee board comprising of three male descendents of Rani Rashmoni has the responsibility of temple administration at Dakshineswar, West Bengal. A qualitative research method has been used to collect data through semi structured interviews from sevayits and non sevayits to explore the nature of feminine space in this temple by employing a gender lens.

KEYWORDS: Feminine Space, Rani Rashmoni, Kali Temple at Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna, Sevayits, Gender.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Rani Rashmoni Dassi (hereby only Rashmoni) is the first woman in colonial Bengal to patronize a temple for goddess Kali. She was ordained at a time when as Mohini Datta-Ray (2008) observed *zamindari*¹ culture in Bengal had close relationship to worship of Mother-goddess Kali. *Zamindars* in Bengal patronized Sakta –Tantric temple to express their belief in women power (McDermott 2001). Kali promotes post patriarchal attitude writes Gupta (1999) and Dalmia (2000) describes Kali ‘more than the feminine.’ Prior to Rashmoni women of Chola dynasty highlighted their agency since circa 908 through temple patronage. These temples patronized after marriage retained style followed in temple architecture by their respective natal families (Venkataraman.B 1976).

Temple patronage for the worship of an idol is considered meritorious from religious point of view (Mukherjee 1952). *Agnipuranam*, the book on Hindu temple informs a temple represents the builder’s intention to secure position in heaven. It is difficult to understand Rashmoni’s intentions because she initiated humanitarian interests behind any move. Newspapers like *The Bengal Spectator* (Calcutta May 1842), *Sambad Sagar* (Calcutta 1840) reported her philanthropic and religious activities (Samanta 2007). Her patronage of temple does not limit her to religious intentions only. Born at Halisahar in circa 1793 Rashmoni moved to Kolkata after her marriage to Babu Rajchandra Das (circa 1804). He constructed rest houses for the less privileged to fulfill her desires to help the needy. Rajchandra died in circa 1836 thus Rashmoni² inherited his property. From circa 1838 she started to organize religious festivals the first being *Rathyatra*.³ At her Janbazar residence in Kolkata she also held annual religious festivals of Vedic women deities like *Annapurna*, *Basanti*, *Jagatdhatri* and *Kumari*. To build a Kali temple Rashmoni started to search for land at Halisahar, her natal place, from circa 1847 but finally selected the present place at Dakshineswar. Vedic Brahmins resisted purchase of land at a place of her choice. To fortify their objections they referred to *Shastras*⁴ to declare temple patronage by a propertied Sudra widow with Kaivartya⁵ affiliation as inauspicious. *Zamindar* Ramratan Roy of Narail and Prananath Choudhury of Satkhira filed sixteen suits against Rashmoni to stop her from constructing a Kali temple even after the land was purchased because she was a Sudra widow (Samanta 2007). Prior to Rashmoni, women temple-builders married to *zamindars* did not face resistance as her.⁶ Such objections Rashmoni encountered in nineteenth century India when women issues gained priority during Renaissance⁷ in various discussions and policies (Chatterjee 1999). At the same time Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) and others made efforts to create social space for women.⁸ Through a notice in the

newspaper *Sambad Prabhakar*⁹ in circa 1851, May 8 'Sreemutty Rausmoney Dossee'¹⁰ communicated purchase of land from John Hastie at Dakshineswar (Samanta 2007). Thus began a new journey for her: creating a space of her own based on her choices and decisions. Space is a symbol of prestige (Tuan 1977). Foucault (1984) noted space is fundamental in any exercise of power. A conservative, traditional society like in Bengal in the colonial times had perhaps dreaded the idea of a woman of low caste to build a temple or a place of worship therefore creating a space of grandeur and memory for future generations. Rashmoni surged through the tough hurdles set by Brahminical patriarchy in her pursuit to create a space.

Tantric Brahmins since ninth century started to create awareness on *Saktisadhana* which considered women irrespective of caste and class superior to men (Sastri 1989). *Tantra* emphasizes to awaken *Bamasakti*, the feminine power, which conquers and wins over *Dakshinasakti*, the male power whereby the difference between *purush* (male) and *shakti* (female) no longer exists (Das 2010).

II. METHODOLOGY

The gender lens study required opinion of members of the trustee board and *sewayits* on their role in the functioning of the temple which was gathered through semi structured interview method. Qualitative methodology facilitated to analyze how the nature of networking that has been created and recreated impact sustenance of the feminine space. *Sewayits* are members of the same family.¹¹ Male *sewayits* are elected as trustees. The study aims to locate if change in family relationships affect one's position as a *sewayit*. Are all *sewayits* active participant of temple administration? Who decides their nature of involvement? Answer to such questions was relevant to identify 'spaces that are open to men and women and their relations to that space' (Pollock 1988). Face to face individual interaction with men *sewayits* and women *sewayits* was the route employed to seek answers to the question -: Are they custodian of a feminine space or serve only as *sewayits* of a Kali temple? Twelve men and six women *sewayits* shared their perception on patriarchy, gender relations and agency.

III. DISCUSSION

Rashmoni exhibited her prowess to control her own life by building a temple in the land she purchased. Lefebvre (1991) stated religious buildings symbolize power and wisdom thereby facilitates space creation. Space, a symbol of prestige to Tuan (1977) is fundamental in any exercise of power noted Foucault (1984). In colonial Bengal the first Kali temple patronized by a woman could not be consecrated till circa 1855 even though the temple construction was complete in circa 1854. A temple to William (2006) is 'an original feminine space'¹². Rashmoni did not find a priest for the temple she patronized because Brahmins of Rarhiya¹³ class refused to accept letter of employment¹⁴ from a Sudra women. The feminine space thus witnessed crisis. To solve the crisis Rashmoni was advised in circa 1855 by Ramkumar Chattopadhyay¹⁵, the first priest of the Kali temple to initiate the temple in the name of her guru Ramsundar Chakraborty. Massey (1994) noted gendering of spaces and places impacts the way gender is constructed in societies. Stating example of a visit to art gallery with men she noted the gallery was a place to her and space to men because of the way each looked at naked visuals of women. It thus appears in this Kali temple which is a feminine space Rashmoni, the patron had to accept suggestions of the priest so that conditions are created in her favour to cook *bhog*¹⁶ for *Dakshinakali*¹⁷ (Roy 1993). Veracity of this incident is in doubt because a day before she died in circa 1861, February 18 Rashmoni prepared the 'Deed for making Debottar¹⁸ Endowment'. This Deed proves the temple was not initiated in the name of her *guru*.¹⁹ If a formal gift of the temple property is ever made the property owner (the patron in this case) loses the right on the property (Samanta 2007). Rashmoni arranged for a space by not gifting it to her Guru as advised. Leading newspapers of the time *The Bengal Spectator*, *Samachar Darpan*, *Sambad Prabhakar* reported the event of initiation of the temple on May 31, circa 1855 (Bagchi 2015). Rashmoni repositioned feminine space in the temple which is not situated within the premises of her house thus it is out of the domain of private space. This is a change from what Ruskin mentioned in the speech delivered at Manchester Town Hall in 1864 on spaces appropriate for men and women. Rose (2014) referred to Ruskin who noted women prefer feminine space while men being more active are seen at public spaces. Millet (1969) objected observation of Ruskin that women prefer private feminine space like gardens because to Millet (1969) private space is like a prison. Rose (1993) noted spatial hierarchies consider domestic sphere as feminine and public place as masculine this distinction between public and private space reflects oppressive attitude which is recreated and contested by patriarchy every day. The feminine space created by Rashmoni was distinctly unique. She accomplished both spiritual freedom and feminine reconstruction of the physical space. The path towards the creation of feminine space begins with the guidance of others or through self-exploration. Eventually, she becomes more aware and conscious of the private and corporeal space. Ma (2014) noted the desire to create feminine space develops confidence and a strong sense of identity among women characters. A joint system of temple management²⁰ finds mentions in the Deed whereby responsibility of temple administration was equally distributed among her two daughters and seven grandsons. In doing so she created a

protective armor with no scope for gender inequality to make inroads. Pawloski (2008) noted gender equality leads towards creation of feminine space. Sreedhar (2014) noted male intrusion into the feminine space cannot be avoided.²¹ From circa 1781, the temple ceased to have any woman administrators. *Sevayit* Puddomoni (eldest daughter of Rashmoni) and *sevayit* Jagadamba (youngest daughter) were removed from temple administration²² by Rashmoni's grandsons. Beauvoir (1949) studied if power concentrates in the hands of men women are treated as 'other' Trustee Dipen Hazra (78) said no written rules exist not to include women *sevayits* yet only men *sevayits* become trustees. *Sevayits* of Bhabatarini Kali temple are family members of Rashmoni. Temple administrators are trustee, they are elected for a tenure of three years. Family Okin (1989) writes stands on the way of equal opportunity. Discrimination against women is prevalent in all cultures, their freedom too are controlled²³ (Kymlicka 1989). Discrimination, according to Young (1990) is denial of opportunity which creates powerlessness, even more harmful is marginalization which leads to injustice²⁴ because it is a form of oppression. Menon (2002) noted scholarship on Hindu women represents them as passive victims of patriarchy. Das and Babu (2021) writes male hegemony unfurls new pattern of supremacy to sustain its continuity. Te Ma (2014) referred to Nelson and Seager (2005) who observed in patriarchal society women were marginalized (during urbanization) and excluded from working in places and public lives. In a family where three women patronized temples²⁵ women *sevayits* do not have any role as temple administrators now. Jun (2015) noted only through equality of status of both men and women feminine space can sustain.

IV. FINDINGS

Trustee Dipen made obvious this Kali temple is not discussed and referred to as a feminine space any more. It is now a symbol of grandeur created for religious purpose which is controlled by male trustees. This observation raised the desire to take up a gender lens to locate situations that raised a veil to keep feminine space out of vision. Descendents of four daughters of Rashmoni are entitled to be *sevayits*. There are five hundred *sevayits* now. Each *sevayit* is entitled to an identity card. The system of transfer or inheritance of *sevayitship* is matrilineal. Following the demise of existing *sevayits* the successor(s) has to apply for *sevayitship* with proof of relationship and death certificate. All respondents except Parul Rani Hazra (aged 92 in 2019) are graduates. Men and women *sevayits* with few exceptions are self employed. Descendents of Puddomoni and Kumari mention their names as they start the process of introduction while descendents of Jagadamba introduce themselves as descendent of Mathuramohan Biswas (son in law). Hardly a mention of Karunamoyee (third daughter of Rashmoni) is made since her husband (Mathuramohan) remarried her younger sister Jagadamba. Responses have been arranged in three separate sub headings. Opinion of the oldest appear first to trace if perception has changed with time.

The Kali temple at Dakshineswar at present: Association, Responsibility, Systems and Procedures *Descendents of Puddomoni and Ramchandra Atta*

Puddomoni resisted the *danpatra*²⁶ stated in the Deed instead insisted introduction of *pala*²⁷ system. Prohlad Chandra Das born in circa 1929 bears memories of pain experienced in childhood. Relatives addressed him as descendent of greedy Puddomoni whose avarice led to chaos in the temple. He retorted women are misfit as temple administrators. One woman patronized the temple, two women created chaos said trustee Gokul Das (86). He apprehends image of the temple will be adversely affected if women *sevayits* have same privilege as male *sevayits*. Their priority, he said, will not be welfare of the temple but wish fulfillment like Puddomoni and Jagadamba. These two *sevayits* are unable to talk of change without referring to bitter past. Their nephew Ajoy Das (72), during his tenure (circa 1986-1989) as a trustee, proposed inclusion of women *sevayits* as trustees. Ajoy, a printing technologist had efficient women colleagues who worked with him at London and Dusseldorf. He believes men and women possess same capabilities. His proposal to allow women *sevayits* contest election for the post of a trustee was turned down by other *sevayits*. Ajoy referred me to his cousin Kalpana Biswas (72), the first woman *sevayit* who expressed her wish to be a trustee. Ardener (1981) mentioned the way an individual think of space reflects the world view one has. This affects understanding and creation of surrounding environment. In the Janbazar residence where Kalpana stayed before her marriage there were (men) trustees. They had a separate office room in the temple premise, at home family members obeyed their decisions. Desire to achieve similar status took birth because she was told to draft letters addressed to government officials. Members of the family who admired her eloquence and appreciated her competence in English disappointed her. (Okin 1989) observed disparity exists within the family. She was told temple administration is not for women. I could read her anguish from her face when she said it is 'crude patriarchy' that dictates what a woman should do. Her version of patriarchy reflects observation of Pateman (1988) on patriarchal framework in domestic sphere recorded in *The Sexual Contract*. *Sevayit* Shyamali Das (68), a lawyer promenaded in the verandah of her house when she shared her (bitter) experience. She mentioned of continuous struggle to combat unending pressure. *Sevayits* and family members who want women *sevayits* to become trustees do not support her. They consider her an 'outsider', a *sevayit* through marriage. Oppressive disapproval has made her strong. She refuses

to succumb despite denial and devaluation. This is not the natal family of Rashmoni and Giribala Dassi either, both patronized temples, she argues. She sounded determined to recover the lost space. Massey (1994) noted space is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. *Sevayits* Aniruddha Nath Das (30) and his brother Anirban Das (32) would be happy if women *sevayits* join temple administration because this would create opportunity for their daughters. They have not deliberated till now on the issue of women inclusion because absence of women has not directly affected them.

Severity of resistance not to include women *sevayits* as trustee is not same among men *sevayits* of three generations with whom I interacted. *Sevayit* Prohlad(90) and Gokul (86) are not ready to include this issue in the agenda though other *sevayits* are ready for discussion. Marriage outside the family gave Kalpana, a *sevayit* by birth the courage to express her desire to contest election. She had the support of her cousin Ajoy but failed to garner support from other *sevayits*. Despite resistance from all *sevayits* Shyamali will continue to pursue her demand to contest election, Kalpana has not reiterated her demand.

Descendents of Kumari and Pyari Mohan Choudhury

Kushol Choudhury (65), the present Secretary Trustee of the temple is their descendant. *Sevayit* Debiprasad Choudhury (75) a retired professor tutored students on gender equality yet failed to coordinate change(s) in favour of women *sevayits*. He explained the gap by mentioning of powerful interests in society hostile to equality for women. Trustees have a conservative approach to introduce changes because temple is a public place.²⁸ Sentiments of devotees and visitors are taken into consideration. Equal attention to temple administration and business development will be tough *sevayits* warned Maitrayee Sarkar (72). She was denied the permission to file nomination instead encouraged to concentrate on business development. "Only if male trustees and *sevayits* assure democracy in election process, I can file nomination to contest election", said *sevayit* Indrani Sarkar (68). She mentioned how selection in the name of election is practiced. Trustees dictate *sevayits* on whom to vote. She sounded agitated and skeptic as we both walked in the temple courtyard. This reflects how women are made vulnerable to dependency.

Sevayit Snehangshu Choudhury (66) and author Sisutosh Samanta has started to compile court proceedings related to the temple. He elaborated his plans to collate facts to change existing notion on Puddomoni and Jagadammba. They are held responsible for the crisis that led to the introduction of a Receiver²⁹ in circa 1905. It is injustice to rest the blame on them, he said. Such notion stems from the report of Macpherson dated 21 December circa 1874 where of two sisters it is written "these two persons are constantly and ceaselessly engaged in litigation" (Samanta 2007, 99, part 4). They may have been in constant feud but it is Jadunath Choudhury, son of Kumari and Pyari Mohan who proposed for the appointment of a receiver (Samanta 2007, 101, part 4). He will analyze many such details to prove all *sevayits* whose names are mentioned in the Deed are (also) responsible for the crisis. Puddomoni is remembered as the initiator of transgression who demanded amendment of the Deed. *Pala* system is not practiced in this temple now. It was not mentioned in the Deed either. Snehangshu is in possession of contents to prove Puddomoni proposed introduction of *pala* which had support of Jadunath Choudhury, Bhupal Biswas, Trailokyanath Biswas, grandsons of Rashmoni (Samanta 2007, 100 part 4). Snehangshu has recovered papers related to "the scheme for the performance of the worship" dated March 19, 1912³⁰ where eight '*palas*' and turns of worship has been detailed.

Kushol was the Secretary in circa 1985 when Ajoy as a trustee proposed inclusion of women *sevayits*. Kushol says he creates awareness on women power as the publisher of the magazine, *Matrisakti*³¹. He takes credit for involving women *sevayits* in hospitality services on occasions like birthday celebration of Rashmoni and annual Kali *puja*. Women *sevayits* however consider them as tokenized involvement. Several changes³² have been introduced by this first Secretary Trustee³³ yet inclusion of women *sevayits* as trustees has not happened. Image of the temple before implementing a change is borne in mind, he said. The man who claims to keep himself abreast of developments in the academic field on gender studies refuses to admit associating women *sevayits* in daily administrative work is essential. Kushol identifies and dictates candidates to contest election. He is hesitant to allow women *sevayits* contest the election. This stems from his apprehension of (another) crisis that is likely to erupt if both women *sevayits*, Indrani and Shyamali win election for the post of trustees.

Three men *sevayits* claim their concern but none possess the attitude (courage) to include Indrani and Maitrayee as temple administrators so women *sevayits* find it hard to consider their approach genuine. Indrani apprehends Kushol can disgrace her if she files nomination to contest election. This reflects roots of mistrust have travelled deep.

Descendents of Jagadamba and Mathur Nath Biswas

Jagadamba³⁴ succeeded her mother as a *sevayit*. Parul is the oldest surviving *sevayit* aged 92 (in 2019). She was agitated when she mentioned of sudden disappearance and reappearance of jewelry from the *garva griha* of the temple. he said it is not divine action but should be located in vices associated with the power structure. This was her first statement to express her disapproval to induct women in temple administration. As

the wife and mother of trustee(s) she narrated how tensed both had been during their tenure. Her concern concentrates on security issues since crisis in the temple is not related to administration only, they (can) occur at any time which makes it difficult for women *sewayits* to travel to the spot. She has memories of crisis created by priests, devotees, visitors since her marriage at the age of fourteen. Temple, she said is also a sensitive zone for miscreants so an outpost of Barrackpore Police Commissionerate exists there. She thus dissuades her daughters and other women *sewayits* from contesting trustee election. Her son Dipankar (74) reflected apprehensions of the mother. He dissuades his sisters because temple administration is not restricted to making arrangements for worship of deities. It involves policy making for priests, management of donations and networking to keep security threats at bay. Asrukana Dasgupta (73), Ajay Biswas (72) and Amit Kumar Biswas (70) are *sewayits* of the Kali temple at Dakshineswar and Annapurna temple at Barrackpore. Asrukana mentioned she has to take prior permission from her younger brothers to visit temples with her acquaintances who are not *sewayits*. They do not allow their sister to take independent decision because she has a son. This son, they said will be a *sewayit* after Asrukana's death. Ajay is married and childless whereas Amit is a bachelor. They do not want their sister to gain privilege equal to them because her son will enjoy privileges once the mother dies. Their parochial attitude has never been resisted by other *sewayits*. As a resident of Dakshineswar since marriage *sewayit* Chaiti (68) has seen efforts of Kushol to reposition the temple as a popular site of visit. She appreciates his good work yet critical of his dominating attitude. Chaiti, a widow now resides at Janbazar, her natal house. It is her inner conflict that stops her from confronting Kushol³⁵ to allow her contest the election. Women of the family are socialized not to harbor hope to be associated with temple related activities said *sewayit* Subir Hazra (65). They are encouraged to take independent decisions regarding their education and domestic activities. He mentioned this to prove his non oppressive attitude but made obvious his belief in spatial hierarchies (Pain 2015). Parul has two daughters Purnima Choudhury (60) and Manisa Mondal (55). They feel presence of a brother at home has made their struggle tough. Dipankar dissuaded his eloquent sisters from 'inviting burden'. Purnima spoke in a tranquil but firm voice to explain patriarchal power makes the presence felt without making noise (through words and actions). he said relevant papers of meetings are sent to their houses; they are told to read and sign the same. Women thus cannot claim that meetings are conducted without their knowledge.³⁶ Purnima, a teacher desires to be a trustee to continue the tradition. Her father and brother were trustees. Jagadama, the first women temple administrator in the post Rashmoni era is her ancestor. She is aghast that in a temple that had women administrators since circa 1855 debar women in circa 2019. Manisha (55) was vocal about discrimination practiced in Kali temples. She was labeled a Sudra when both she and I had entered the Kalighat Kali temple at Kolkata. Despite popularity of Rashmoni her descendant this woman *sewayit* encounters such (ill) treatment in other temples for being born in a low caste. *Sewayit* Prasun Hazra (54) has started preparations to induct Mitul Tarafdar³⁷ (35) join as the Secretary of Dakshineswar Debottar Trust.

Women *sewayits* expressed their dissatisfaction to stay within the perimeter drawn by men *sewayits* in the name of protection. While women *sewayits* (descendants) of other two families have expressed desire to contest election no women descendants of Jagadamba, has done so. Kushol has married a women *sewayit* of this family. He thus influences *sewayits* of this family too. These interactions revealed few men *sewayits* do not approve involvement of women *sewayits* so 'subtle coercion' is exerted to sustain inequality.

The Kali temple has turned into a virtual playground of the power-play of the *sewayits*. New players have entered the field, new techniques have been adopted. *Sewayits* whose name appears in the Deed have witnessed the agency of Rashmoni. But her descendants lack the vision and the initiative to think beyond personal agenda. They failed to enlarge their optics to appreciate the temple as a feminine space. This space is now crippled with patriarchal notions of care, security where transgressions are feared and thus creating and maintaining an edifice of grandeur and sheer profit. Here feminine comes to be defined in the context of the masculine but never subsume self in the other to set an equal non-binary organic wholeness. The Hindu motif of the *Ardhanariswar*³⁸ remains unfulfilled in a temple where only a goddess is worshipped.

Rashmoni had created a space as a part of a process of creating other objects. Her agency more than once had created a space for herself an identity she cherished. The process was subject to a complex process of critical appraisal increasingly drawing out of the relations that emerged between her creations and herself. She had built this space consciously on the basis of her experiences of time. Sometimes her creations were repetitive, cyclical, circulating the conception of time and space. But this space was more imaginary than spatial. It was lived forming both past and present as an organic whole. It even compressed time suggesting trajectories, boundaries and transgressions. It engulfed sensations giving it a multi-layered symbolic experience of interior and exterior reality.

Bhabatarini Kali temple has gained immense popularity despite not being a *sati peetha*.³⁹ Family members treasure their identity as *sewayits* of this temple. They claim since *pala* system has been discontinued by Kushol after circa 1986 so they do not derive monetary benefit as *sewayits* of this temple. Respondents bear grudge against Kushol because his popularity has eclipsed identity of *sewayits*. Kushol has repositioned this temple as a popular site of visit thus his name has become synonymous with the temple. *Sewayits*⁴⁰ want Indrani Sarkar to replace Kushol Chowdhury.⁴¹ They think she has right mix of business⁴² capabilities to bring an end to

the oppressive, authoritarian culture introduced by the present Secretary Trustee. *Sevayits* assume transition of power from Kushol to Indrani will generate less friction because Kushol and Indrani are descendants of Kumari and Pyari Mohan Choudhury thus subtle politics is detected when Indrani is encouraged to join temple administration. On earlier occasion *sevayits* Kalpana and Maitrayee who married outside the family were not allowed to file nominations.⁴³ *Sevayit* Prasun has partnered with his cousin Mitul (non *sevayit*), a lawyer by profession⁴⁴ to control aggressive attitude of Kushol. Indrani and Chaiti are fence sitters, they want to acquire responsibility through democratic process to ensure absence of resistance from Kushol after they join as trustee. Indrani is not ready to compromise the social status she achieved as a business woman. *Sevayit* Shyamali Das confronts Kushol to allow her contest the election to be a trustee. Ajoy who wanted women *sevayits* to content election was perturbed when Kalpana was denied consent to file nomination but he refuses to endorse Shyamali now. *Sevayits* encourage Indrani and non -*sevayit* Mitul to be persistent in their pursuit to be a trustee and secretary but insists Shyamali not to join temple administration. Kalpana, Maitrayee, Indrani, Mitul, Chaiti are descendants of Rashmoni by birth while Shyamali is married to a descendent. A woman who is a *sevayit* by birth and a woman who is a *sevayit* through marriage are not treated as equals. The exercise to end the marginalization of women *sevayits* actually ends up in more conflicts of interests and more so discrimination is practiced between women *sevayits* through birth (WSB) and a woman *sevayit* through marriage (WSM) dividing women more.

In the existing scenario gender inequality is conspicuous. *Sevayit* Prohlab (90) and Gokul (86) often heard elders in the family use bitter and unpleasant phrases to describe avarice of Puddomoni and Jugadamba. *Sevayit* Parul (92) also heard the same after her marriage. These discussions affected men and women *sevayits* differently. Men *sevayits* have (developed) an in-built resistance which forces them to believe women *sevayits* should not be trustees. Frequent use of the word 'but' by them before and after words like 'self centered women', 'greedy' proved their inner conflict and lack of courage.⁴⁵ Parul (92) has no doubt about the efficiency of women *sevayits* but advises women *sevayits* to stay out of the cobweb of unholy nexus that brews between *sevayits*, priests and moneyed devotees.

Women *sevayits* are not allowed to attend *sevayit* meetings so they are unable to build network with voters (*sevayits*). To contest in the election to be a trustee constant liaison with five hundred (500) *sevayits* is essential. Women *sevayits* said men *sevayits* have the propensity to yield to dictates of Kushol. They have never initiated united effort to demand inclusion of women *sevayits* as temple administrators hence it remains a doubt if men *sevayits* are authentic and genuine when they speak of inclusion of women *sevayits* in temple administration.

¹ Zamindari system was introduced by Cornwallis in 1793 through Permanent Settlement Act. Zamindars were recognized as owner of the lands who could collect rent from peasants.

² Dayabhaga school of law prevalent in Bengal recognized women as coparceners. She managed the property inherited; protested unjust (mis)behavior of British when it contradicted human interest of her people (Samanta, 2007).

³ A festival to symbolize importance of journey; People come out of their houses to witness the chariot (*ratha*) travel with Lord Jagannath and his siblings Balaram and Subhadra to their relatives place.

⁴ Hindu scripture.

⁵ Individuals, Hindu by birth in Indian society are divided into four castes often based on their profession. Brahmin enjoying the highest status and Sudra the lowest, the hierarchy ensued power, prestige and status. Brahmins considered Sudras to be sinners and Kaivartyas were despised because they killed fish. Kaivartya is the term used to denote the fishing community. Brahmins believed women were responsible for evils in the society thus they were called "*pataner hetu*"(cause of sin) who initiated entry to hell; "*nari naraker dvar*"(gateway to hell) (Bhattacharjee 1967).

⁶ History has no record of resistance faced by women temple patrons before Rashmoni. Rani Shankari, widow of Nirsinghadev, a *zamindar* at Bansberia. In circa 1814 she completed temple construction of Hamseshwari (a gentle form of Kali). Brajakishori Devi of Burdwan, built in circa 1731 a Lakshmi mandir (temple for goddess

of wealth, Lakshmi). Rani Prabhavabati in Tripura patronized temple in tenth century in honour of goddess Shibani (a form of Kali) (Ghosh, 2016). In sixteen century at Singur in Hooghly a farmer of low caste patronized the *dakat* Kali temple.⁶ Residents of the locality, devotees associated with the temple cannot recall any history of objections encountered by the male patron because of low caste (Roy, 2013). Ramratan Roy of Narail and Pranath Choudhury of Satkhira⁶ both *zamindars*⁶ filed sixteen suits against Rashmoni to stop her from constructing a Kali temple even after the land was purchased on the east side of Ganges (Samanta 2007).

⁷ Renaissance in Bengal is a period when (educated)people in Kolkata created reawakening through new thoughts on many issues thus people started to think from new perspectives.

⁸ Several reformist measures were taken. *Sati* (married women were forced to die with their husband) was abolished in circa 1829 by social reformer Rammohan Roy, Mahesh Chandra Deb through his article *A Sketch on the condition of Hindoo Women* written in January 1839 highlighted absence of efficient project to ameliorate the condition of Hindoo women whose lives were doomed in misery. The process to legalize widow remarriage started by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar led to Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 (Sen 2009).

⁹ Ishwar Chandra Gupta was the editor of this newspaper.

¹⁰ Spelling as appeared in the newspaper notice.

¹¹ Marriage between descendents of three daughters is the practice prevalent. A man born into the family of Biswas can be son-in-law of the family of Chowdhurys similarly a girl born in the family of Das gets married into the family of Biswas. This is however not mandatory, marriage outside the family also happens.

¹² in Greece nearly fifty years after the completion of the temple for goddess Hera at Samos, gendered masculine space made its first appearance.

¹³ They are Temple ritual specialists who inhabited the land from Tamluk to Murshidabad, west of Ganga. They are Vedic Brahmins. (Samanta 2007).

¹⁴ She wanted priests as employed staff who should reside within the temple premises.

¹⁵ A learned priest who had a centre of learning in Jhamapukur of Kolkata.

¹⁶ *Bhog* is cooked rice. Brahmin priests do not allow non Brahmins to cook *bhog*.

¹⁷ A benign Kali is Dakshina Kali. She is different from the fearful Kali seen in cremation ground.

¹⁸ A legal procedure whereby property, movable and immovable goods are in the name of the deity where the idol is a juridical entity. Rashmoni organized uninterrupted flow of funds for regular religious services to Sri Sri Jagadiswari Kali Thakurani and others deities within the temple premises for this she purchased 'three lots of zemindaries'¹⁸ in the district of Dinajpur by a bill of sale on August 29, circa 1855¹⁸, few months after consecration.

¹⁹ In the book *Lokmata Rani Rashmoni* (Pp 122-124), Jana (2010) writes according to documents of court proceedings circa 1992-extra ordinary suit 27 the trustee board of Dakshineswar temple committee informed Calcutta High Court that Rani Rashmoni has never made a gift deed of the temple property and deity to any Brahmin.

²⁰ The Deed has details of temple management. Rashmoni and Raj Chandra Das had four daughters, Puddomoney, the eldest, Juggodumba, the youngest. Karunamoyee, the second daughter and Kumari, the third daughter died before the Deed was prepared. Her descendents included ward of her four daughters who shall be appointed as '*shebait*s' and shall do all *sheba* and other works arranged and recorded.' Those who serve the deity are called *sevayit*. The spelling *shebait*s written in the Deed (1861).

²¹ the festival venue of Attukal pongala in Kerala is never kept free for women only despite repeated announcements through loud speaker that this festival is exclusively for women

²² Puddomoni died in circa 1874 and Jagadamba died in circa 1880. Grandsons as *sewayits* took the opportunity to alienate her daughters when they were requested to settle a crisis that erupted between two sisters.

²³ Will Kymlicka (1989) *Liberalism, Community and Culture* has been cited by Okin in J.Cohen, M. Howard and M. Nussbaum (eds) *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (1999). The article is included in the chapter Feminist Jurisprudence of the book *Lloyd's Introduction to Jurisprudence* (2008).

²⁴ cited by Freeman (2008, pg 620) in the chapter Theories of Feminism and Justice

²⁵ Besides Rashmoni, Jagadamba Dassi daughter of Rashmoni patronized the temple for Annapurna at Barrackpore. Giribala patronized a temple for Radha Gobindo Jew in Agarpura. She is the grand daughter in law of Rashmoni's eldest daughter Puddomoni.

²⁶ Gift Deed of the temple. Rashmoni prepared it before she died as a safeguard to protect the temple property from being sold.

²⁷ *Pala* is an allotment of a day to serve the deity. All earning of the temple on the day of *pala* belongs to the *sewayit* concerned. *Pala* was not mentioned in the original Deed. There is mention of *pala* in the amendment to the Deed prepared in circa 1929. There is no *pala* system now.

²⁸ Public implies that it can be used by a more or less unspecified and undifferentiated collectivity of people.

²⁹ Notion harbored by *sewayits* and recorded in various books on Rani Rashmoni and Dakshineswar Kali temple. The court appointed a Receiver to supervise temple administration because there was absence of competent *sewayits* to do the needful after the death of *sewayit* Trailokyanath Biswas in circa 1905.

³⁰ Annexure B: Report of the Assistant Referee in Suit No. 308 of 1872. All legal proceedings till date related to this temple bears this Suit No.

³¹ *Matrisakti* is a Bengali monthly magazine published from Kolkata. Kushol Choudhury is the editor.

³² Hegemony of priests especially of Rahriya Brahmins have been controlled There are non Rahriya Brahmins priests too, now. Priests resented but accepted end of '*pala*' system. Priests and *sewayits* earned substantial amount of money through '*pala*' system. Animal sacrifice is not practiced anymore. Entry time to temple has been regulated.

³³ This post of combined responsibility was created by him and it continues.

³⁴ Despite "consent decree" signed as *Razinama* and *Safinama* in circa 1868, May 29 Jagadamba in connivance with male *sewayits* made (futile) attempts to marginalize Puddomoni so that she cannot get involved in temple administration. She married Mathur Nath Biswas after her sister Karunamoyee died in circa 1832. Karunamoyee and Mathur Nath Biswas had a son Bhupal Chandra Biswas. Bhupal had two sons, Dwariknath Biswas and Trailokyanath Biswas who took charge as temple administrators replacing daughters of Rashmoni.

³⁵ Kushol as the change maker decides the nature and extent of involvement of *sewayits* and trustees.

³⁶ 'No Entry' board is not visible yet women *sewayits* are not invited to attend meetings pertaining to policy decisions.

³⁷ She is not a *sevayit* because her father trustee Dipan Hazra is alive. Prasun wants her to join as secretary. Till Kushol created the new post of Secretary Trustee, secretary post was reserved for non *sevayits*.

³⁸ The deity possessing male and female qualities conjoined. This signifies psychic totality. One cannot attain spiritual escalation by neglecting either of these elements.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST

This is a self funded project undertaken by the author.

³⁹ *Peetha* means *asana* or seat. A place that is considered to be a seat of goddess, Sati is called *peetha*. Tantric ritual of union is called *asana*.

⁴⁰ Descendants of all three daughters of the temple patron with whom I spoke.

⁴¹ He carefully chooses his co trustees who never protest his decisions. This benevolent despot is not liked by *sewayits* and members of the family. He actively extends cooperation to relieve distress of *sewayits* and members of this family. He lacks philanthropic attitude instead demands service and allegiance from those who receive support from him. Beneficiaries cannot question him and disobey his orders.

⁴² She is the administrative head of the market complex Jadubabur bazaar at Bhawanipore It is named after Jadunath Choudhury. Rani Rashmoni made the arrangement for her grandson to make him reliant. She has an old age home at Uttarpara.

⁴³ Women *sewayits* who got married outside the family are prone to initiate change.

⁴⁴ Prasun wants to amend the Deed amended by Kushol to create the new post of Secretary Trustee. There is mention of an independent Secretary in the original Deed.

⁴⁵ They fear repetition of bitter struggles.