Monumentalizing Tantra:
The Multiple Identities of the Haṃseśvarī Devī Temple and the Bansberia Zamīndāri

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February 16, 2008

A thesis submitted to McGill University

in Partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

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Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-51369-9
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-51369-9

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Abstract

This thesis examines the complex interplay between colonial modernity and Śākta (goddess-centered) devotion in the context of an elite family of *zamīndārs* (landholders) in Bengal. One consequence of colonialism in Bengal was the efflorescence of overt Śākta religiosity among Bengal's elite. Religious practice, supposedly "protected" by the colonial order, became the site where indigenous elites expressed political will and, to an extent, resisted foreign domination. I argue that the *zamīndārs* of Bansberia in the Hugli district of Bengal were creative agents, engaging and resisting the various cultural ruptures represented by colonial rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Employing analyses of archival material, contemporary ethnography, and architectural style, this thesis is an ethnohistory of a modern *zamīndāri*-kingdom that locates its political voice in an emblematic Śākta-Tantric temple. It demonstrates the powerful relationship between religion and politics in colonial Bengal and discusses the implications of this strong association in the contemporary context.

Résumé

Cette thèse examine les enjeux complexes entre la modernité coloniale et la dévotion théiste Śākta — concentrée sur la déesse — dans le contexte d'une élite famille de propriétaires fonciers du Bengale, les *zamīndārs*. Une conséquence du colonialisme au Bengale était l'efflorescence de la religiosité Śākta qui se manifestait chez l'élite du Bengale. La pratique religieuse, soi-disant « protégée » de l'oppression du régime colonial, est devenue le milieu d'expression à la fois de la volonté politique des élites indigènes, et à un certain point, de la résistance contre la domination étrangère. Je propose dans ce mémoire que les *zamīndārs* de Bansberia, dans la région du Hugli au Bengale étaient des acteurs créatifs qui s'impliquaient à la résistance et à l'engagement contre les ruptures culturelles que représentaient le régime colonial des XVIII$^{\text{ième}}$ et XIX$^{\text{ième}}$ siècles. Les méthodes d'analyse employées incorporent les documents archivaux, l'ethnographie contemporaine, et un examen du style d'architecture; ceci est une étude ethno-historique d'un royaume *zamīndāri* dans lequel l'expression emblématique de la voix politique fut un temple tantrique. Ce mémoire est une démonstration du rapport percutant entre la religion et la vie politique au Bengale à l'époque coloniale; c'est aussi un exposé de comment ce même rapport se manifeste dans le contexte contemporain.

Note on Transliteration

For the most part, this thesis employs standard transliteration for Sanskrit and Bengali words.

I have chosen to retain common or official transliterations of personal names. Thus, Nrisinghadeb instead of Nṛsiṅghadeva, Rani Sankari instead of Rāṇī Śaṅkarī, Rameswar instead of Rāmeśvara. Similarly, family names and titles are rendered the same way – Debroy instead of Devarāya, and Ray-Mahasay instead of Rāya-Mahāsāya. Place names are usually rendered with modern spellings, with the exception of Calcutta for which I have used the anglicized (colonial) spelling throughout, and Banaras, which I do not refer to as Varanasi.

I have also retained the original spellings of certain terms that enter legal discourse, such as *debattar* (*debutter*), *sanad*, and *sebait*, which have obscure Sanskrit and Farsi etymologies. They are more easily recognizable with their colonial spellings, and these spellings are also used in contemporary Indian legal contexts.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of several very kind and generous people.

Firstly I would like to thank the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill and express my utter gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Davesh Soneji. His constant encouragement, unwavering patience and breadth of knowledge have been truly indispensable.

Thank you to members of the Debroy family, both in Bansberia and in Bangalore. They were willing to answer any question I posed of them, no matter how bizarre or how mundane, and spent hours of their valuable time sharing their memories and family records with me. I am humbled by your kindness, your hospitality and your love.

The priests of the Hamsesvari Devi *mandir* allowed me access to their beautiful temple and took precious time out of very busy days to help me navigate ritual life in Bansberia. Anil Thakur and Tapan Thakur especially granted me long and detailed interviews while Basan Thakur and Jesu were kind enough to always point out that which they knew I would find interesting.

My parents have always been cheerleaders for any project I have undertaken and this is no exception. I thank them for all the support they have given me and for their enthusiastic reading of especially painful early drafts. I thank my brother for his sense of humour and his encyclopedic memory; both have come in very handy during this process.

Samip Mallick has helped with this endeavour in more ways that I can list here. Thank you for always assuring me it can be done and then helping me figure out how it will be. This project is as much yours as it is mine.

Heartfelt thanks go out to Jordan Arseneault for providing me a French translation for the abstract and for always making me laugh.

And finally I would like to thank my constant inspiration, my grandmother Arati Debroy who traveled all the way to West Bengal so that we could be roommates and co-adventurers. She vowed to take care of her granddaughter and she did.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Alokendra Debroy who passed away on September 14, 2007. Although he was not able to see the final product, he was integral as both the inspiration for this project and as a primary informant. My childhood was filled with his fantastical tales of his childhood in an enchanted place called Bansberia and it urged me to go see for myself. Nothing I could write here can compare to the wit and the sparkle of his stories but I am grateful for the rare opportunity to delve into my family's long history. I will miss him always.

Introduction

Bansberia Temple

(John Alexander Chapman)[1]

One who had seen Bansberia *raj* cut down
By stronger neighbour, and had sought in vain
Justice at home, must forth to London town,
And seek it there, Cornwallis said. So pain
First was his lot; for how shall vast expense
(Only to tell a just man of one's plaint,
Only to speak ont that which common sense
May judge of – why only with so much taint
Of fees extortionate can that be done?)
Was he to meet? He knew. "Let me" he said,
"Go live at Kasi till the seventh year's sun
Ripens my paddy; let me make my bed
So long among the beggars; let seven years
Revenue be stored up." So forth he sailed
To holy Kasi: there abode; no tears
Dimming his eyes; no murmur, nothing wailed.

And then a wonder. Kasi sang to him
No song of earth sun-kissed at dawn, and dim
At evening; one of birth, and growth, and death,
And change, and fleeting as the mist that breath
Leaves on the glass but of a *tantra* true,
Ever-abiding. So his passion grew
Still for enlightenment – until it came.
Then what was gain worth? Let it feed the flame.
Let others plead and wrangle, pay their cash.
He had seen something greater – in a flash,
In flash on flash had the eternal been
Shown to his soul. Henceforth would truth be queen
Of all his steps. He cried: "Let what be done
Be worthy." And then set the seventh year's sun.

---

[1] John Alexander Chapman (1875-1957) was the longest serving librarian at the Imperial Library (now the National Library of India) in Calcutta (1911-1930). He was a literary critic and poet as well, with a particular interest in "Sakta and other esoteric Indian themes, unintelligible to the ordinary readers" (Nair, 2004)

What did he do? He built a temple. Still
It stands, and I have seen it; but too ill
Would words of mine describe it. Inside, out,
Silent on earth, in a pinnacled air a shout,
It doth reveal what to the initiate
Figures pure thought. So unto them a gate
Is opened to deliverance. I outside,
Alien but not unmoved, untouched, abide.

This sentimental poem, eulogizing the life of *zamīndār* (landholder) of Bansberia, Raja Nrisinghadeb Ray Mahasay (1741-1802), [Figure 1] was composed by noted colonial librarian and Tantra enthusiast, John Alexander Chapman. Chapman, clearly moved by the narrative of Raja Nrisinghadeb's life, expresses a good deal of sympathy for the *zamīndār* who, under the tumultuous politics of colonial domination, lost almost all of his traditional *zamīndāri* lands. This loss in itself is not all that remarkable, of course. With the transmogrification of Bengal under colonial rule, many of its landed elite (formally patronized by the Mughals) were divested of their economic and political power. What captured the colonial imagination about Raja Nrisinghadeb in particular, however was his decision not to petition the British government for the lands that he had lost through a land grab by his neighbours of Burdwan and Nadia. Equally impressive to colonial eyes was his intense religious devotion and his intellectual engagement with Śākta Tantra, culminating in his commissioning of the highly anomalous Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* in 1799 [Figures 2,3]. This singular gesture was particularly significant in the late nineteenth century. At once public and devotional, the temple was an explicit expression of a kind of "public" Śākta Tantra that was considered fashionable among elites in the region. Expressions of Śākta Tantra among elite Bengalis in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are, of course, steeped in the dynamics of colonial modernity, and the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple at Bansberia was clearly a product of elite interface with colonial power. In 1865, the Commissioner of the Burdwan Division, Charles Francis Montresor wrote a note to Raja Purnendudeb Ray Mahasay (c.1843-1896), a descendent of Raja Nrisinghadeb and Zamīndār of Bansberia:

> I have received with much satisfaction your note of this day's date and am much pleased to find that you have come to such a favourable determination regarding the road. The name of the Goddess "Hangseswari" tho' pleasing in application is difficult of

> pronunciation among the lower classes and especially by those not thoroughly acquainted with Hindu mythology. Perhaps she may have another name (which I am not aware of) more euphonious. (Charles F. Monresor [June 30, 1865] quoted in Dey 1908, 65).

Although the Commissioner's remarks reveal a fascination and apparent admiration for the temple, they simultaneously express authority over the naming of the goddess enshrined there [Figure 4]. This kind of negotiation was characteristic, in some senses, of elite interactions with colonial power in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Bengal.

This thesis investigates the multiple transformations of the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* in the Bansberia *zamīndāri* (in present-day Hugli district, West Bengal), from the time of its inception to the present. Although, in the public imagination, the temple exists as evidence of one man's religious devotion in the face of economic hardship and colonial dominance, this thesis analyzes the various historical, religious, and social registers that enabled this syncretic form of cultural expression. The Haṃseśvarī Devī temple – "Tantra monumentalized" – is also a monument to social change, to royal legitimacy, and to the evocative power of ritual. In this thesis I read the temple as a political sign located in the colonial modern that acknowledges both the social upheaval of its time *and* reflects a capacity for indigenous expression and creative agency. Homi Bhabha, exploring the possibility of the subject agent within the imbalance of the colonial power dynamic comments:

> My contention, elaborated in my writings on postcolonial discourse in terms of mimicry, hybridity, sly civility, is that this liminal moment of identification – eluding resemblance – produces a subversive strategy of subaltern agency that negotiates its own authority through a process of iterative 'unpicking' and incommensurable, insurgent relinking. It singularizes the 'totality' of authority by suggesting that agency requires a grounding, but it does not require a totalization of those grounds; it requires movement and manoeuvre, but it does not require a temporality or continuity or accumulation; it requires direction and contingent closure but no teleology and holism... The individuation of the agent occurs in a moment of displacement. (Bhabha 1994, 265)

Raja Nrisinghadeb expresses this "liminal moment of identification" in the iconography of his temple by engaging with a form that was familiar and popular in the context of the colonial modern while manipulating it an expression of his own subjectivity.

Raja Nrisinghadeb experienced a tremendous amount of material loss due to the land claims made by Burdwan and Nadia before his birth. The argument could be made that Tantra – with its efficacious system of harnessing power through supernatural *siddhis* – attracted this *zamīndār* as a system by which to potentially regain his political power through ritual. I would argue, however, that although Nrisinghadeb's interests in Tantra and esoteric ritual were certainly precipitated by economic and political losses, these interests seem to be born of an intellectual curiosity, shaped by his access to the emergent English "public sphere" on the one hand, and exposure to indigenous religious practices in places like Banaras on the other.

Within the ritual theatre of a *zamīndāri*, religious rites are inextricably linked to political drama. The Haṃseśvarī Devī temple stands as a symbol for a disrupted political world, and as such, becomes the anchor for the hybrid elite identity of the Bansberia *zamīndāri*. This thesis also examines the continued complicity between both the members of the *zamīndāri* family and the public-at-large to maintain ritual at the *zamīndāri*. For both the contemporary descendants of Raja Nrisinghadeb and the other residents of Bansberia, the temple's rituals are sites for remembering a disappearing past. Although, due to both colonial and post-Independence land laws, the *zamīndāri* has become progressively impoverished as a political and economic entity, the ritual life in the *zamīndāri* continues to thrive. Religious ritual in contemporary Bansberia still makes overt gestures in the direction of its royal legacy and ritual provides a space that compels the well-rehearsed performance of a not-so-distant past.

This thesis opens with a chapter briefly exploring the history of the Bansberia *zamīndāri*, constructed by using multiple sources. Nrisinghadeb's widow, Rani Sankari (d. 1852), left behind a will that I employ as a primary document in my discussions of Bansberia's legal and religious history. I have also used available fragments of archival material, Bengal Gazetteers, colonial genealogies, and regional historiographies that mention Bansberia. This has allowed me to piece together a patchwork narrative of sorts of a *zamīndāri* that unfortunately, preserves no formal records and very little material evidence.

In the second chapter, I afford considerable attention to both the unique iconography of Haṃseśvarī Devī and the architecture of her esoteric temple, examining

the textual, historical and social influences that inform these distinctive features. My discussions of Haṃseśvarī Devī situate her alongside emblematic Śākta goddesses of eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengal such Durgā and Kālī, whose popular public rituals are themselves constructs of *zamīndāri* culture. I also engage with the figure of Haṃseśvarī Devī as the embodiment of fairly complex esoteric Tantric principles. Teasing apart her iconographic programme reveals the multiple identities embodied by this singular figure: Kālī, Tripurasundarī and Kuṇḍalinī Śakti are all carefully represented in Haṃseśvarī. Like her patron, Raja Nrisinghadeb, Haṃseśvarī Devī wears many "faces" that speak to the multivalent and syncretic influences that constitute her divine nature. This iconographical bricolage is mirrored in the architecture of her *mandir* as well, which also bears the clear signs of multiple styles and motivations. The building itself reflects the shifting politics of its historical milieu, a trend that I argue, following the work of Pika Ghosh (2005), is repeated at various points in Bengali architectural history.

The final chapter of the thesis begins with an examination of the will left behind by Rani Sankari, the widow of Raja Nrisinghadeb. The figure of Rani Sankari as a colonial *bhadramahilā* and *zamīndāriṇī* has been memorialized in both the memories of the inhabitants of Bansberia and in the urban history of Calcutta where a street, Rani Sankari Lane, has been named after her. Legendary as an extremely capable *zamīndāriṇī* who was willing to litigate to save her lands from both the excesses of her son and the punitive colonial courts, her will legally consolidated all the land that was under her control into a ritual domain, making her descendents its ritual guardians in the eyes of the law. This at once divested them of political autonomy while making this ritual land inalienable from the royal family; a crucial provision in a time when *zamīndārs* who were in financial trouble found their lands usurped at an alarmingly fast rate. I argue that Rani Sankari's will is a tool used to crystallize ritual life in Bansberia, making it the organizational focus for the family in even in contemporary times. The thesis concludes with a contemporary ethnography of the descendants of Nrisinghadeb and Rani Sankari, who continue to follow the ritual injunctions laid out in Rani Sankari's will. Ritual in contemporary Bansberia ignites memories of a collective *zamīndāri* past shared and

experienced by both the members of the Bansberia *zamīndāri* family and the community-at-large.

Methods and Materials

This is an ethnohistorical work. As such, it relies both on textual information and analysis and on ethnographic data collected over four months in Bangalore, Calcutta and Bansberia from August to November 2006. I conducted my fieldwork during the time of both Durgā and Kālī *pūjās* in Bengal, allowing me direct access to many of the rituals that are characteristic of the Debroy family's continued popular status as patrons of these festivals. I spent time with the descendants of the Debroy family during these *pūjās* which incorporate their home, their land, and the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple. The temple priests, Tapan Thakur, Basan Thakur and their father Anil Thakur offered me an incredible amount of iconographical and architectural insight, helping me to "correctly read" the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple and the goddess herself. Anil Thakur also provided me with a wealth of information about Bansberia *zamīndāri*'s ritual past, and helped me map the changes that had occurred within the *zamīndāri* over the last few decades. Tapan Thakur and Anil Thakur themselves provided an interesting contrast; Tapan Thakur sought to do away with many of the more "Tantric" rituals in Bansberia for ones that were more in line with a middle-class, Vivekananda-inspired Neo-Vedānta. Anil Thakur in the meantime, bemoaned the decline in the number of goat sacrifices in recent years due to changing sensibilities and costs.

The elder members of the Debroy family also shared their memories of a childhood that was still very much informed by the culture of royal ritual and a *zamīndāri* lifestyle. "We used to collect taxes from the villages while riding in palanquins," reminisced Drubendra Debroy, the eldest of the surviving Debroys (Personal Communication with Drubendra Debroy November 5, 2006). Their memories have been an invaluable resource for this project.

I have also used both archival sources and secondary academic texts. Central to my investigation has been the will of Rani Sankari, dated October 8, 1852. Incredibly detailed, it documents her family's recent history, the ritual practices of Bansberia, the litigation she initiated against her adopted son, and her decision to transform the land in

her possession to *debattar*.[2] I have also used two colonial genealogies of the family by A.G. Bower (1896) and S.C. Dey (1908), and have consulted the *West Bengal Gazetteers* by O'Malley (1912), Banerji (1968) and Majumdar (1978) for regional and historical information on Bansberia.

I have also used the works of historians of Bengal such as Ratnalekha Ray (1974; 1975; 1987) and John McLane (1993) for overviews of *zamīndāri* history in Bengal. My understandings of religious history in Bengal come from the pathfinding work of Rachel McDermott (2001) and N.N. Bhattacharya (1992; 2002).

I look to both primary and secondary texts in order to unpack the iconography and architecture of the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*. The *Kaśīkhaṇḍa*, an eleventh-century text and one of seven *khaṇḍas* of the *Skanda Purāṇa*, the *Lalitā Sahasranāma* of the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, and John Woodroffe's commentary and translation of the *Śaṭ-Cakra-Nirūpaṇa* entitled *Serpent Power* (1918) all provide the textual framework for "reading" the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*. David Kinsley's (1997) suggestion that Haṃseśvarī Devī might in fact be a form of Tripurasundarī has allowed for a rich iconographic and philosophical discussion that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Pika Ghosh's (2006) work on temple architecture provides an important analytical lens through which I read the stylistic features of the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*.

I employ especially the works of Gunther Dietz-Sontheimer (2004) and Richard Davis (1999) in order to explore the impact of Rani Sankari's will on her descendents who become *sebaits*[3] under the law. These scholars complicate the meaning of both *sebait* and *debattar* as more than merely legal terms, allowing us to foreground their ritual significance.

As this thesis moves through its narrative of the Bansberia *zamīndāri*, the significance of its religious history comes to the forefront. The Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* has clearly been central to the identity of this family of *zamīndārs* since its appearance in the nineteenth century. Despite – or perhaps due to – its multivalence, the temple of Haṃseśvarī Devī forms the cultural and social axis around which the identity of the

[2] Detailed descriptions and analyses of *debattar* follow in chapters 1 and 4 of this thesis.
[3] See Chapter 1 and 4 of this thesis.

family continues to coalesce. Regardless of its changing fortunes, the temple continues to be a living artifact of a rich past and a vibrant present.

Chapter 1

Land and Legacy: Towards a History of the Bansberia Raj

Our study of the ritual life of Bansberia's *zamīndārs* begins with the genealogy of the Ray Mahasay family. Although the focus of this project revolves around the figure of Raja Nrisinghadeb Ray Mahasay and is concerned largely with Bansberia's colonial history, it is impossible to arrive at that juncture without understanding the historical figures and processes that led to Bansberia's divestment of power under British colonial rule. This chapter will outline what little is known about the Ray Mahasay family history, sketching its rise under the early Mughals and its eventual decline under the British. In fact, the period of rapid economic and political disenfranchisement in the eighteenth century is of particular interest to us; it is precisely the cultural and political ruptures that characterize the colonial presence that largely allowed for the conditions for Raja Nrisinghadeb's deep engagement with Śākta Tantra and his imaging of the idiosyncratic Haṃseśvarī Devī temple. It is futile to attempt to approach the temple without taking into consideration the subjectivity of Raja Nrisinghadeb. In order to engage with the rituals, the symbolism and the philosophy at the centre of the temple, we must first locate Raja Nrisinghadeb and the historical moment in which he lived. Local residents already do this – they consistently mention the *zamīndār* and his widow, Rani Sankari whenever they are asked about the temple. The reverse is also true; any questions about Raja Nrisinghadeb or Rani Sankari will always result in a spontaneous oral narrative about the history of the temple, so much so that some residents of Bansberia will even attest that Rani Sankari was an incarnation of Haṃseśvarī Devī herself. There are many and varied stories regarding the temple in Bansberia, some fairly factual and others that seem fantastical. Thus, by attempting to tease out a coherent genealogy of the Ray Mahasays and in discussing the origins of the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple, we add another narrative to the already complex din.

Before delving into the particulars of the Ray Mahasay family, we must briefly contextualize the history of Bansberia within the dynamics of the larger history of

zamīndāris in Bengal[1]. Although Bengali *zamīndāris* were, in many ways, independent political, ritual and economic entities, they were simultaneously knotted with the various social and political forces shaping their neighbours. Events in one *zamīndāri* could sometimes result in incredible fortune or total disaster in another. *Zamīndāris* functioned with the understanding that the figure of the *zamīndār* was at the centre of a particular type of ritual theatre. The ritual universe of the *zamīndāri*, with its many symbiotic relationships and culture of redistribution, was central to the administrative, social and cultural functions of the region as a whole. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this was, of course, simultaneously reenacted within the larger context of imperial theatre. We must therefore read the history of Bansberia with this mirrored dynamic in mind: between the microcosm of the *zamīndāri* and the macrocosm of empire.

Bengal's *zamīndārs* first came into existence under Emperor Akbar's (1542-1605) attempts to create administrative stability in the chaotic province. Bengal was a notoriously difficult area to bring under administrative control, and, although it was officially annexed by the Mughal empire in 1576 when Akbar defeated Da'ud Khan, the last ruler of the Karani sultanate, "the imposition of peace and orderly administration took almost half a century to realize, and meanwhile Bengal remained a scene of uprisings and anarchy" (McDermott 2001, 17). In this highly antagonistic environment, the role of the landed gentry or *zamīndārs* became critical to maintaining the Mughal presence in the region. *Zamīndārs* were responsible for preserving law and order, overseeing and maintaining the lands and rivers in their jurisdiction, advancing loans to their tenants and collecting revenue for their Mughal overlords. They existed at the top of a social and administrative pyramid (although subordinate to the Mughals) which was similar from district to district, but was never quite uniform from one place to another. This hierarchy consisted of a gradient of landholders with various land rights and power

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[1] The term *zamindār* is a fairly fluid concept that defies easy definition. In Bengal, the term is particularly multi-valent. In this context, Ratnalekha Ray (1975) notes:

> For the province of Bengal at any rate, the term *zamindar* was a Mughal revenue innovation introduced for the first time by Akbar to denote all categories of existing landholders... and in this sense as much a blanket term invented for administrative convenience as the British shorthand category of 'landlord' (Ray 1975, 2-3).

at the top with peasant farmers or *chasi* at the very bottom of the pyramid. On one hand there existed village landlords such as *jōṭedārs, ganṭidārs,* and *manḍals* actually occupied agricultural land, while on the other were "superior" landlords such as *tālukdārs, osat tālukdārs* and *zamīndārs* possessed hereditary revenue management rights. *Zamīndārs,* appointed by a remote imperial government, found legitimacy among their subordinates through their traditional social authority, their hereditary local influence, and by the paternal role envisioned by their subjects in the villages (Ray 1975, 9). These ties to traditional and local influence were key to the survival of *zamīndārs.*

The Myth of Origins of the Ray Mahasays of Bansberia

The Bansberia *zamīndāri* is located in the Hugli district of what is now West Bengal and, at its peak, spanned this entire district. There is, unfortunately, a paucity in the available textual data on the history of Bansberia. Already in decline by the mid-eighteenth century, it did not receive a great deal of attention in colonial administrative records, obliging us to rely on a fairly limited number of sources in an attempt to piece together the history of its *zamīndārs.* Both A.G. Bower's *The Family History of the Bansberia Raj* (1896) and Shumboo Chunder Dey's *The Bansberia Raj* (1908) are highly anecdotal accounts of the *zamīndāri.* They, along with the various editions of *West Bengal Gazetteers*, seem to rely on Rani Sankari Dasi's carefully detailed will (1852) for much of their information and content, especially with regard to the later history of Bansberia. Rani Sankari, a central figure in the construction of the Haṃseśvarī temple, has left the only surviving document authored by a member of the Bansberia Ray-Mahasay family. Due to the legal significance of this document, the will continues to be central to the identity of Bansberia today. In order to contextualize the events described in these various texts, they must be read against each other as well as against other material available on the region from this period.

The Bansberia *zamīndāri* was established comparatively early in the history of Bengali *zamīndāris.* Due to the lack of historical record, it is difficult to access pre-colonial Bengali history with any degree of accuracy. "Antiquity" is often highly romanticized by Bengali historians in the early twentieth century, resulting in a further

obfuscation of the distant past. According to Bengali historian S.C. Dey (1908), the earliest known ancestor of the Bansberia family is Devaditya Dutta, a landholder from Kanouj (near Agra). Devaditya allegedly lived during the time of the mythic eleventh century Bengali king (and founder of the Sena dynasty) Adisura. Both Dey and Bower claim that due to Adisura's favour, Devaditya rose to great wealth and power. This assertion reveals a particular identity politic at play in both narratives. Both accounts of the Bansberia family history are fairly sympathetic and, in Dey's case, even hyperbolic in style. The assertion that the dynasty may find its roots under the patronage of this legendary king is therefore perhaps somewhat of a heuristic move, possibly more so than the authors are even aware of. Dey begins by saying,

> In the good old days when the star of the Hindus was in the ascendant, when Northern India was for the most part ruled by Bijoy Sing and Bengal by Adisura, a person by the name of Devaditya Dutt...was found slowly wending his way towards the south-east (Dey 1908, 3).

In Bengali history-writing, the figure of Adisura signifies a certain trope that serves to exalt one's origins. Adisura is credited with famously bringing to Bengal its five Rāḍhi Kulin Brahmin families.[2] As revisionist historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyaya comments, "Kulinism is another form of rank distinction within the caste system. In collective memory it is an institution associated with the mythical king Adisura" (Bandyopadhyay 2001, 159). Evoking an association with Adisura has, therefore, immediate and legitimizing cultural associations. In Bengal, where the hierarchy between kings and Brahmins is often contentious, this myth is useful to validate the importance of Brahmins to the social order and assert the dominance of ritual specialists over political rulers. According to legend, Adisura was alarmed at the degenerate practices and lifestyle of the people of Bengal, and the inability of Bengal's 700 Brahmins to complete a *yajña* (fire sacrifice) he had initiated. As a result, he brought five of the most *dharmic* Brahmins (who then "introduced the Vedas to Bengal"), to restore *dharma* in the region, thereby forming the community Rāḍhi Brahmins.[3] The very telling

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[2] In the caste hierarchy of Bengal, Kulin Brahmins are positioned at the top of the social pyramid. Rāḍhi Brahmins are said to be located mainly in the lower Bengal delta.
[3] For more on Kulin Brahmins, see Inden and Nicholas (1977).

of this legend is an attempt to establish the dependence of kings on priests and to privilege high-caste social values. However, as John McLane (1993) notes, within high-caste politics, it is the kings, by virtue of their material power, who are in fact socially dominant.

> Power and wealth, rather than purity and impurity, are the chief bases for social hierarchy and...religious institutions are fundamental features of the political system. Kings derive much of their power from worship, and bestow their emblems and privileges in a cultural atmosphere that is permeated by the language and attitudes of worship (McLane 1993, 102).

Despite this, kings and *zamīndārs* must derive much of their authority from the legitimizing power of religion, which is of course, the provenance of Brahmins. This symbiotic relationship is reflected in Dey's account where this same myth is invoked to establish the ancient and authoritative "Hindu" identity of the Bansberia dynasty. Not only does Dey delineate the Ray Mahasays from their Muslim overlords[4], but he also asserts them as particularly anointed and exalted among Hindus by linking their lineage to the legendary Adisura.

The Bansberia dynasty proper seems to have begun in 1656 by the bestowal of a *sanad*[5] of "Chaudhuri" to *zamindār* Raghab Dutt Rai by Emperor Shah Jehan. At the time, the Dutt Rais were wealthy *zamīndārs* living in Patuli, Burdwan district. They had built their status under various kings and emperors, both Hindu and Muslim. Akbar had first bestowed the title of "Zamindar" by *sanad* to Sahsraksha, Raghab's great-grandfather in 1573, and they were gradually given further land and titles through the

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[4] Dey's ambivalence towards Muslim political domination is clear. In the introduction to his book he says with relation to the ancestors of the Ray Mahasays:

> The family fared well during Hindu supremacy, but when like a bolt from the blue the 'canny' Afghan dealt a death-blow to the Sen dynasty, it removed to a safer place and having lurked there in dim obscurity for centuries together again emerged into light with the dawn of Mogul rule (Dey 1908, 1).

[5] The *diwani sanad*, introduced by Akbar, were title-deeds granted by the finance ministry. Although they were given to all categories of landholders grouped under the umbrella term *zamīndār*, "the *sanad* was granted without an explicit mention of the right of transference and inheritance which was allowed but custom. [Rather] in the *sanad* [the

generations by various Mughal emperors rising from "Ray" to "Mazumdar" to "Chaudhuri". Raghab was one of the first great Bengali landowners under the *zamīndāri* system and was appointed *zamīndār* of 24 *parganas*[6], mostly located in a region called Sarkar Satagaon or Saptagram as it is alternately known. Satagaon was a flourishing port in the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries and was the site of the capital of Lower Bengal under Muslim rule. By the sixteenth century, however, the city slowly died out after the drying up of the local Sarasvati river (a tributary of the Bhagirathi) and the shifting course of the Hugli.

Raghab Dutt Rai Chaudhuri decided to move his headquarters from Patuli in order to be in closer proximity to his new property and settled on a land he named Bansabati or "bamboo place" on the right bank of the river Hugli. Before he could build his home there however, Raghab had to have the dense bamboo jungles cleared. He then "began to spend most part of the year there, paying occasional visits to his ancestral house at Patuli, especially at the time of Durga Puja" (Dey 1908, 16). According to Dey's sometimes colourful account, Bansabati's population at the time of Raghab's settlement consisted:

> mostly of the dregs and scum of society. It was largely covered with thick jungles in which the denizens of the forest held their solitary sway. Raghab reclaimed the jungles, and, in the place of the savages of the wood whom he had killed or cast out, settled human beings of different orders by making them grants of rent-free lands and helping them in various ways. Thus, what was a little obscure village, partly tenanted by savage beasts and partly by equally savage men, became in a few short years something like a town with a large sprinkling of peaceful citizens of all castes and creeds (Dey 1908, 17).

His overtly polemical language aside, both the *Bengal Gazetteers* and Bower are in agreement that Raghab and then his son Rameswar made a concerted effort to repopulate the area "with Brahmins, Kayasthas, Baidyas, and other *navaśākhā* castes belonging to various professions," (Banerji 1968, 659) thereby attempting to create a utopian society

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zamindars'] function was explicitly stated to be the *khidmat* or service of collecting the land revenue" (Ray 1975, 6).

[6] Ratnalekha Ray (1975) defines *parganas* as "fiscal units grouped together under *sarkars* or districts and comprising *mauzas* or villages" established by "the Mughal system, with its insistence on standardization of revenue arrangements through uniform appointment or confirmation of *zamindars* to the charge of regularly defined *parganas*" (Ray 1975, 3).

in this newly established town. The family continued to live in Patuli however, until Rameswar eventually moved the clan to Bansabati and made it their permanent home.

Rameswar and his younger brother Basudeb divided the land between them after Raghab's death[7], inaugerating the first of many partitions of the original Bansberia lands. Rameswar, being the elder, was entitled to the larger share of land as well as the hereditary titles of his father and made some important changes to Bansabati. He built a palace encircled by a deep moat (giving the royal residence the name of *gaḍhbaḍhi* or "moated-house") which extended for about a mile. He fortified this by erecting a "thick fence of bamboo groves from which the name Bansberia (bamboo-fenced) appears to have originated" (Banerji 1968, 659). He also built a fort to further protect the residence and positioned quite a few armed soldiers around it. According to Dey, these precautionary measures were mainly in response to both dacoit raids (*ḍakaiti*) and the Marāṭhā invaders (commonly known as *borgi* in Bengal) who had taken on an almost legendary status in their looting of wealthy *zamīndāris*. When there were signs of danger or aggression from invaders, the *gaḍhbaḍhi* became "an asylum for the neighbouring villagers to resort to… When the Marhatta horsemen, spreading ruin and desolation in their way, came near Tribeni, the people would flee thither for safety and protection" (Dey 1908, 23). However, a discrepancy in dates suggests that Dey's account may be inaccurate. The first Marāṭhā invasion of Bengal was not until 1741, long after Rameswar's death. The moat, bamboo fence and armed fort could not have, therefore, been intended for invading Marāṭhās. John McLane, however, addresses the issue of *ḍakaiti* in Bengal and says that in contrast to the situation in the nineteenth century, where *ḍakaiti* was a nuisance that afflicted wealthy homes all over Bengal, during the seventeenth century, it was "a common phenomenon only in frontier and jungly areas" (McLane 1993, 76). It is likely then, given Bansberia's location and landscape, the eponymous fence was built to protect it against local dacoits and other, avaricious, *zamīndārs*.

Rameswar furthered the vision of urban development he shared with his father and divided the town into *pārās* or neighbourhoods, with each section being allocated to a different caste. According to Dey, "along with the Hindus some Mahomedans were

also brought in and were allotted lands in the western portion of the town. These Pathans served as guards and soldiers to the House" (Dey 1908, 19). As a reward for ousting of neighboring *zamīndārs* who were defaulting on their payments to the Government, Rameswar was bestowed a *sanad* of his own by Emperor Aurangzeb in 1679. This conferred upon him the unique hereditary title of *Rājā Māhāsaya*, and gave him 401 *bighas* of rent-free land, a *zamīndāri* of a further 12 *parganas* (including Kalikata, one of the three villages that make up present-day Calcutta) and *Panj Parcha Khil'at*[8] or five-dresses of honour.

The new *zamīndāri* was marked even by its very name as being offensive against its smaller defaulting neighbours, defensive against possible invaders, and in allegiance with the Mughals to whom it owed its existence. This is important because once a *zamīndāri* was, for whatever reason, unable to prove its merit or perform with the same degree of efficiency or aggression as it did in the past, imperial Mughal power quickly pulled its support and implicitly or explicitly allowed the *zamīndāri*'s more powerful neighbors to annex territory from it. Thus, as long as Bansberia was one of the more powerful and aggressive *zamīndāris* in the region, it received support, patronage and honours from the Mughals. Once however, the *zamīndāri's* size and power were compromised, the rulers of neighbouring *zamīndāris*, such as Burdwan and Nadia were allowed to claim large parts of Bansberia's lands for themselves. Interestingly, it is this vulnerability in terms of proprietary rights that becomes, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, a key factor in shaping the religious identity of Bansberia's later *zamīndārs*.

In 1679, Rameswar, possibly in response to the many honours conferred upon him that year, commissioned Bansberia's first temple to be built [Figures 5a, 5b]. The finely carved terracotta Ananta Vāsudeva or Viṣṇu *mandir* still stands today and is an *ekaratna*

[7] Exact dates for the early Bansberia *zamīndārs* are generally unavailable.
[8]Dresses of honour, or *Khil'a* (in the plural) were, of course, crucial to Mughal court ritual. "…the *Khil'at* ceremony served the political objective or rewarding, honouring, and bonding servants of the state, personnel of the imperial bureaucracy and the representatives of foreign rulers" (Hambly 2003, 39). The custom of *khil'at* was, therefore central to reinforcing Mughal authority and to consolidating alliances. For more on the custom of *khil'at*, see Stewart Gordon (2003).

(or one-towered) shrine with curved cornices and an octagonal style, in keeping with period Bengali temple architecture. As Biswas and Haque (1995) comment:

> The temple has a square sanctum, a *chala* type of roof with curved ends, and a massive octagonal tower. Built in brick and mortar, the temple is distinguished by the splendour of decorated terracotta panels which are well carved in shallow relief, showing elaborate representation from the Ramayana and the Puranas. The terracotta plaques of this temple were separately made during the course of a number of years and affixed upon the temple walls. The noted scenes depicted in these panels represent *Dasa-mahavidyas*, Dakshayanga, Mahishasuramardini, Marriage of *Siva, Dasavatara* and the battle between Rama and Ravana. The two most notable scenes which deserve special mention, are, the *Naukavilasa* and the *Rasamandala*. The beautiful *Naukavilasa* scene is depicted in a sensitive manner, and the *Raasamandala* scene is also full of animation. Various types of iconographical variations are also noticed here. Workmanship of outstanding merit can be found in the figure of a dancer in a performing gesture which are formed by her hands, feet, and pleasant facial expressions. The band playing on a variety of musical instruments create a special mood. The figure may remind one of the *apsara* figures of the ancient Indian Plastic Art.
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> The terracotta decorations of this temple have been a remarkable achievement in the field of medieval art of Bengal. The temple was built by one of the early members of the Bansberia Raj family, Raja Ramesvara Deva in 1679 A.D. It is one of the oldest temples of the medieval Bengali tradition (Biswas and Haque1995, 34).

The temple expressed Rameswar's seventeenth century Vaiṣṇava leanings unlike his descendent, Nrisinghadeb (1741-1802) who commissioned two Śākta temples. The distinction between Vaiṣṇava and Śākta practices was not, of course, particularly rigid in the personal lives of most worshippers, including in that of Raja Nrisinghadeb himself. It becomes clear, however, that it became the vogue for the Bengali elite to align themselves with imperial goddesses such as Kālī or Durgā in their public lives and affairs in the eighteenth century, causing a proliferation of Śākta temple-building and the development of an exuberant culture of public goddess festivals. In her study of seventeenth-century terracotta *ratna* (turreted) temples, Pika Ghosh (2005), notes the widespread use of Śākta imagery in the carvings of these mainly Vaiṣṇava temples, pointing to the syncretic nature of temple-building. As is explored in the next chapter,

the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* also displays a deliberate acknowledgement of Vaiṣṇava iconography as well, clearly unwilling to sever ties with - what are often fluid - identity groups.

In addition to the Ananta Vāsudeva temple, Rameswar also established 45 *tols* (Veda *pāṭhaśālās*) and *chatuspatis* (small village-level tutorials run by Brahmins), establishing Bansberia as a site of Sanskrit (and later, missionary[9] and Brahmo[10]) learning (Banerji 1968, 520). He employed Ramsharan Tarkabagish, a pandit from Banaras, as his Sabhā Paṇḍita, a post that also became hereditary among Tarkabagish's descendents. According to the *Hoogly District Gazetteer*, there were, besides Tarkabagish, a number of well-known scholars who were patronized in Bansberia, namely Rambhadra Siddhanta, Ramchandra Bachaspati and Atmaram Nyayalamkar. It was with the death of Nyāya scholar Srinath Tarkalankar in 1919 that the tradition came to an end (Banerji 1968, 520). Rameswar also settled a number of Brahmin pandits with rent-free land grants, a common practice among *zamīndārs* that S.C. Dey (1908) describes, saying:

> There is a saying current in this part of Bengal that no Brahmin family which do not hold *Lakhraj Brahmutter* lands of Bansberia Rajas deserve to be called Brahamans at all (Dey 1908, 30).

This is a sentiment that is clearly echoed by other *zamīndārs* in the region with regards to their relationship with Brahmins who were exempted from taxes in many parts of Bengal by both Mughals and *zamīndārs*. "Today," says McLane, "former dependents

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[9] According to the *West Bengal Gazetteer*, the Hugli district was first visited by Portuguese in 1598, who established a hospital and school. The first English school in the district was founded in 1814 by Rev. Robert May, followed by various other missionary/educational projects in the area (Banerji 1968, 521-522). The Scottish missionary, Alexander Duff (1806-1878) started an English-language school in Bansberia in 1846 in his hopes to reach upper-caste Hindus and Muslims in his evangelical efforts through western education. It continued only until 1878 as "its evangelic activities became too unpopular with the local people" (Banerji 1968). In order to facilitate conversions to Christianity, a church was also established at Bansberia under a Bengali clergyman named Tarachand. This was the first church in Bengal to function under a Bengali minister. See George Smith (1879) for details.

[10] The Tattvabodhini Sabha, which was founded by Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) with the aim of combating the influence of Christian education, also opened a school here in 1843 that was successful until 1848 when it had to close for a lack of funds. See Arundhuti Mukhopadhyay (1987) for details.

of the rajas of Bishnupur, Burdwan, and Nadia say that these rajas intended that no Brahmin in their territory be without a gift of land" (McLane: 1993, p.103). Land-giving to Brahmins or *brahmutter* was something that was expected of *zamīndārs*. .As Rachel McDermott explains:

> Indeed, the raja's lives were not only political and economic; there were social and religious aspects to them, as well. Contemporary Bengali society expected a zamīndār to uphold the ritual and social orders by spending lavishly at marriages, funerals, religious festivals, and pilgrimages, in addition to building mosques, temples, and charitable institutions. Moreover, they were supposed to support Brahmins (*paṇḍitas*), scholars, and Muslim holy men (*pīrs*) with land and cash donations, and to patronize gifted people of all kinds. Sometimes they hired especially distinguished persons as tutors for their sons (McDermott 2001, 29).

The *rājās* of Bansberia evidently upheld this norm and acted in accordance to what was expected of them. Their relationship to their subordinates extended beyond merely civil duties. They were also expected to patronize the arts, sponsor and actively participate in religious activity and maintain the *dharmic* and ceremonial order of which they were at the centre, nurturing the ritual universe of the *zamīndāri*.

Another noteworthy event at the time of Rameswar was the loss of what would become hugely significant land. Although there is no mention of it in Dey's account of the Bansberia Raj, the villages of Kalikata, Gobindapur and Sutanuti (i.e. modern-day Calcutta) were given to the British in 1690 -- during Rameswar's lifetime. Kalikata, once part of the land grants given to Bansberia, was reclaimed by the Mughals and given to the British.

After Rameswar's death in the early eighteenth century, the *zamīndāri* was again divided by his three sons, two nephews and a Brahmin dependant. His eldest son Roghudeb of course retained the titles and the largest share (11 *parganas*) of the Bansberia *zamīndāri* and continued to make large grants of rent-free land to Brahmins. RoghudebÆs most well-known contribution to the family's history is acquiring the hereditary title of "Sudramani" from the then Nizam of Bengal, Murshid Quli Khan. Murshid Quli Khan was notoriously harsh in his treatment of *zamīndārs*. Appointed *diwan* or chief revenue administrator by Aurangzeb, Quli Khan was brutally effective in

bringing order to an otherwise disorderly province. Roghudeb reputedly saved a Brahmin *zamīndār* from the kind of public humiliation that Quli Khan allegedly punished defaulting *zamīndārs* with. One of Quli Khan's alleged and particularly harsh punishments consisted of a tank that was filled "with human excrement in such a state of putrification as to be full of worms, and the stench was so offensive, that it almost suffocated whoever came near it" (Allah in McLane 1993, 72). According to Dey (1908), this tank was nicknamed Baikuṇṭha (Skt. Vaikuṇṭha) or the "Paradise of the Hindus" and if any Hindu *zamīndār* was unable to pay his arrears, he was "stripped naked and dragged through this infernal pool by a rope tied under his arms" (Dey 1908, 27). John McLane, in his account of the Burdwan Raj, is somewhat doubtful of these accounts as they all seem to come from a single source (one Salim Allah) and are inconsistent with narratives about Murshid Quli's reputed brutal but swift justice (McLane 1993, 72). In any case, by paying the Nizam in lieu of the defaulting *zamīndār*, Roghudeb earned this title from Quli Khan demonstrating the reciprocal need of a functional relationship between the Mughals and the *zamīndārs*. The etymology of Śūdramaṇī ("Jewel Among Śūdras") may seem strange but in fact, possibly refers to the fact that Roghudeb (of the Uttara Rāḍhya Kaisthaya caste) saved a Brahmin *zamīndār*.

The Sad Tale of Raja Nrisinghadeb Ray Mahasay (1741-1802)

Roghudeb died leaving one son, Gobindadeb. As a *zamīndār*, he continued the religious traditions of his family, bestowing land to Brahmins and donating land and money to various shrines in Bengal. During Gobindadeb's reign, Bansberia lost a significant amount of land to Nadia's *zamīndār*, Roghunath, the father of the famous Krishna Chandra Ray of Nadia. Gobindadeb died in 1740, ostensibly leaving behind no heir, which signaled a turning point in the *zamīndāri*'s history. Not only had Gobindadeb been unable to maintain and add to Bansberia's territory, the shift in power that was taking place between the Mughals and the British was beginning to affect *zamīndārs* more directly than ever. To make matters worse for Bansberia, the news that there was no heir to the *zamīndāri* spread among its neighbours and, with the sanction of the Nawab, the Rajas of Burdwan and Nadia moved in to claim the land as their own, sharing

the property among them. Although he does not mention Bansberia by name, McLane (1993) has the following to say about the incident:

> Before his death in 1744, Chitrasen [*zamīndār* of Burdwan] and his diwan, Manickchandra, who apparently managed his revenue and military affairs, added still more territories...Chitrasen's major annexations seem to have been the Arsa zamīndāri in eastern Hugli district and the Gopbhum and Shergargh regions of western Burdwan.
>
> In the late seventeenth century, Arsa had been part of one of the largest and most important zamīndāris in Bengal, adjoining the trading ports of Chinsura and Hughli and extending along both banks of the Bhagirathi. However, Bengali rules of inheritance and Mughul decisions, including the 1690 grant of the villages of Kalikata, Gobindapur, and Sutanuti to the English, let to the partition and diminution of this major estate. It was the Arsa section of the estate, consisting of one third of the Kayastha family's original zamīndāri, that Burdwan obtained in 1742. When Raja Raghudeb's son, Gobindadeb died in 1740-41, Manikchandra, the Burdwan raj diwan, informed the nazim that there was no heir. The nizam agreed to transfer the Arsa zamīndāri to Chitrasen "in consideration of his having furnished a supply of grain" to the nawab's army during the first Marāṭhā invasion earlier that year (McLane 1993, 156).

Losing Arsa to Burdwan was a huge blow to Bansberia[11] and this corroborates S.C. Dey's somewhat more dramatic narrative of the land-grab in which he mournfully asserts that "the Bansberia House which not long before occupied the front rank in the aristocracy or Bengal, both in respect of property and of position was all of a sudden thrown on the background for no fault or lacks of its own" (Dey 1908, 38). Although this move is perhaps regarded as unjust by those sympathetic to Bansberia's interests, this type of expansion of *zamīndāris* by co-opting one's neighbours' lands was fairly common practice among *zamīndārs* in their attempts to retain potential volatile seats of power.

The Burdwan Raj particularly benefited during this period. Chitrasen's father, Kirtichandra had an unusually amicable relationship with Murshid Quli and as a result, "when Kirtichandra's neighboring zamīndārs failed to pay enhanced revenue demands or otherwise displeased the diwan, Murshid Quli allowed the Burdwan raja to occupy their holdings and become responsible for the revenue" (McLane: 1993, 147). Burdwan's established reputation and relationship with the Mughal authorities gave it a place of

privilege among other *zamīndāris*. As McLane notes, "it is clear that from Murshid Quli Khan on, the nawabs favored the large zamīndārs at the expense of the small ones…and they encouraged the growth and internal autonomy of Burdwan, Dinajpur, Nadia, and Rajshahi" (McLane 1993, 159). By the mid eighteenth century, the political climate in Bengal had shifted dramatically. As its lands were divided and subdivided by subsequent generations, Bansberia was too untenable for the Nawabs to be vested in its continued existence. Burdwan on the other hand, was in fact growing in power and had an internal cohesion and aggressiveness that made it attractive for both the Mughals and the British to support. Its unstable internal politics coupled with the massive political shifts in the early days of British colonialism made Bansberia's survival extremely tenuous. After the 1742 land-grab, the Bansberia family was left with only one small *mauza* (the smallest revenue-collection unit) – Kulihandi - which was also appropriated by the British a few years later.

However, during this redistribution of Bansberia's lands and three months after Gobindadeb's death, a son was posthumously son was born to him in the year 1741. Although Bansberia did have an heir after all, unfortunately, the property had already been divided and the prospect of reclaiming it seemed bleak. Nrisinghadeb Ray Mahasay was born at a time of intense turmoil in Bengal.[12] In 1765, following the Battle of Plassy, the *diwani* of Bengal was transferred to the British East India Company, which, had been consolidating its power in the province for over a century. This upheaval, coupled with a fresh period of brutal Marāṭhā raids made for a chaotic time for Bengal as a whole. What was perhaps most devastating to the region was the famine of 1770. Due to the East India Company's refusal to allow for revenues to be delayed, even in times of drought, there were "frequent and dreadful fires, pestilence and of course, huge numbers of

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[11] Ratnalekha Ray notes that "Kirtichand's son Chitrasen Ari (1739-1744) added Arsa to the Burdwan Raj from Narsing Deb Roy by working in collusion with an officer of Nawab Sarfaraz Khan" (Ray 1974, 7).

[12] It should be mentioned here that there is a severe paucity of information on the actual life of Raja Nrisinghadeb. Historians seem to be so compelled by the life of the temple that he built, that Raja Nrisinghadeb's own life recedes in the background of their narratives. Therefore although we are told of his religious and ritual activities, we have very little information of his administrative and economic roles as a *zamīndār*.

deaths" (McDermott 2001, 25) as *zamīndārs* scrambled to pay their dues to their overlords. The famine's devastation affected Bengal economically for many decades and "with so many people simply gone, zamīndārs could not find sufficient tenants to till their lands, which fell into a wild and uncultivated state" (*Ibid.* 2001, 25).

As a response to the famine and under 1773's Regulating Act, Warren Hastings was appointed the province's first Governor General. The Regulating Act invested the Governor General with a council of four members and also first established Bengal's Supreme Court. The Governor General's Council and the Supreme Court had a fairly acrimonious relationship and according to Dey,

> Nrisinghadeb very properly thought that, however well-grounded his claim might be there was not the slightest chance of its being heard with the attention it deserved, and that he had, therefore, no other alternative left than to bide his time... In this way he patiently waited for eight and thirty years until the country thoroughly recovered from the vortex in which it had so long been whirled about. (Dey 1908, 43)

Realizing it was futile to fight the behemoth that was colonial due process, Nrisinghadeb decided to turn his attention to more intellectual pursuits.

Raja Nrisinghadeb Ray Mahasay: Zamīndār, Scholar, Tāntrika

In the interim, Nrisinghadeb, who was a man of versatile talents, spent his time pursuing his many interests. Divested of his land and what would have otherwise been his complex and involved role as *zamīndār*, Nrisinghadeb became a religious scholar and mastered Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic as well as some English. He also had an interest in music and art and translated the Sanskrit *Uḍḍīśatantra*[13] into Bengali and later in life,

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[13] The only available version of this text that I am aware of is the *Uḍḍīśa Tantra* with the Hindi commentary *Śivadattī* by Śivadatta Miśra Śāstri, Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, n.d. N.N. Bhattacharyya (2002) summarizes the contents of the *Uḍḍīśa Tantra*:

> A late medieval hand book for those who practise Tantric rites to benefit themselves and cause harm to others. Its *patala* (chapters) are *marana-prayoga*, *mala-nirnaya*, *dhanyadinasa*, *mohana-prayoga*, *stambhana*, *vidvesana*, *uccatana*, *vasikarana*, *dravana*, *akarsana*, *vidyadharasiddhi*, *bhutakarana* and *vandhyatvanirvarani* It was translated into Bengali in the late eighteenth century by Raja

assisted Raja Jaynarayan Ghosal of Khidirpur in translating the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*[14] into Bengali verse as well. We shall return to these texts later in the thesis. His versatility in languages and his artistic talent made him a valuable asset to Hastings, who, like Robert Clive before him, employed *zamīndārs* under the British East India Company so as to make use of their familiarity with the region and their traditional positions of authority.[15] Nrisinghadeb was therefore commissioned to prepare a map of Bengal for the Governor General, which possibly helped the outcome of his appeal. By this time the Company had taken over the role of *diwan* of Bengal and was functioning as *zamīndār* of the 24 Parganas District. In 1779, Hastings, in response to Nrisinghadeb's petition, restored the lands that were under British control in the 24 Parganas District to him. However Hastings was unable and unwilling to contend with the powerful Burdwan Raj in the matter of returning Arsa district to Bansberia. Nrisinghadeb was, therefore, able to regain possession of only nine *parganas* through the British.

In 1785, Hastings returned to England and the much more influential Lord Cornwallis arrived to replace him. Cornwallis introduced the Permanent Settlement Act[16] in 1793, the last step in a long process of replacing the Mughal *zamīndāri* system of land tenure with an administrative system run by European tax-collectors. This had a drastic impact on both *zamīndārs*[17] and peasants. As Hugh Urban (2003) remarks,

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Nrsimha Devaraya of Bansberia. Its Hindi translation was published from Moradabad in 1898 (Bhattacharyya 2002, 167)

[14] The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, consisting of a hundred chapters, is one of seven *khandas* or chapters of the *Skanda Purāṇa*. It contains information on myths, *māhātmyas*, ritual prescriptions and geographical information. For more on the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, see Eck (1982, 1986) and Smith (2007).

[15] Many *zamīndārs* were officially "Dubashes" (>Skt. *dvibhāṣi*, "one who knows two languages"). For details on the culture of dubash-*zamindars* in Madras Presidency, see Susan Neild Basu (1984).

[16] Ray urges for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of the Permanent Settlement Act on *zamīndārs*. They were not, she argues, disenfranchised as a group in favour of emergent urban capitalists and argues, rather, that transfers of land deeds went to "established landholders with traditional connections to rural society" (Ray 1974, 2).

[17] "The Permanent Settlement recognized only the superior body of collectors of the tribute from the villages as "landlords"; the village landlords were placed mostly in the category of 'tenants' though they were the real controllers of particular plots of land" (Ray 1974, 3).

> There was a sudden and rapid transfer of landholdings, as many hereditary Zamīndār families found it increasingly difficult to meet the demands of rent and were in many cases stripped of their land... [and]...the burden of the rent was...passed on to the peasantry, and as a new class of landholders and moneylenders moved in under the protection of the company, an ever more efficient form of oppression was imposed which only intensified feudal exploitation of the peasantry (Urban 2003, 43).

The administration in the province was therefore again facing quite a bit of turbulence. Raja Nrisinghadeb, although "anything but contented with the few Parganas which were restored to him by Warren Hastings [and] was always on the look-out for an opportunity to regain the many that still remained out of his hands" (Dey 1908, 46) was once again forced to bide his time in petitioning for his land. In 1787 he married his second wife, Bansberia's famous Rani Sankari, in a polygamous marriage. Raja Nrisinghadeb returned his focus on his religious and scholarly activities, building a small Svayambhavā Mahiṣamardinī (Durgā) *mandir* in the next year [Figure 6]. According to oral narratives that continue to circulate in Bansberia today, Raja Nrisinghadeb dreamed of a four-armed Mahiṣamardinī or buffalo-demon-slaying deity and excavated the *mūrti* from a nearby tank (Debroy 2006, 2). The temple no longer stands, but its brick foundation is still visible to the north-west of the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* and the Svayambhavā *mūrti* itself is housed beside Haṃseśvarī Devī in the larger *mandir*. Like many of the ruling elite of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Bengal, Nrisinghadeb identified as a Śākta Tāntrika.

Lord Cornwallis, in the mean time, had informed Raja Nrisinghadeb that his petition could only be heard by the Court of Directors in England and that his hands were tied in the matter. This possibly had to largely do with a certain degree of reticence on the part of the British to challenge their already tense relationship with Burdwan. Raja Nrisinghadeb decided to further his religious education, and in 1792, leaving the *zamīndāri* in the care of relatives, he went to the holy city of Banaras (Kāśī). Here, Nrisinghadeb became an initiated Tāntrika and he collaboratively translated the

Kāśīkhaṇḍa.[18] While in Banaras, Nrisinghadeb came into a considerable sum of money, but by this time "he was advanced too far in the path of virtuous abnegation again to fall back upon groveling temporal affairs" (Dey 1908, 48) and he decided not to appeal the rest of his lands. He returned to Bansberia in 1799 and decided to spend the money instead constructing the Haṃseśvarī temple. Temple building – especially temple building to Kali - was an extremely popular act of public devotion among *zamīndārs* of this period. As McDermott (2001) notes,

> The zamīndārs demonstrated their interest in *sakti* not only by sponsoring goddess-centered festivals. They also built temples, both to represent their wealth and to help consolidate their influence. The majority of the brick temples they built in the eighteenth century were to Śākta or Saiva deities - which signaled a break from the former popularity of Vaisnava temples, prior to 1700. Between them, the Burdwan and Nadia *rajya* families of the eighteenth century established twenty-three temples to forms of Siva and the Goddess, an only nine to forms of Krsna (McDermott 2001, 32).

It is significant that given the declining financial and political situation in Bansberia, Raja Nrisinghadeb was willing to spend the extra finances that were suddenly available on building a Kali temple of his own. Although most *zamīndārs* already had quite involved ritual lives, there was a shift in the scope of temple-building in this politically tumultuous period. The Bansberia Raj is a good example of this in itself. Rameswar's Ananta Vāsudeva temple was built at a much more prosperous time in the *zamīndāri's* history. However, it was nowhere near the scale of the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple commissioned by Nrisinghadeb. Although unable to build the multiple Śākta or Śaiva temples as the larger *zamīndārs* were, the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple was clearly built as an explicit labour of love and an expression of Nrisinghadeb's devotion to Śākta Tantra practice and philosophy.

After Rājā Nrisinghadeb: The Appearance of Rani Sankari

The construction of the Haṃseśvarī temple was begun immediately upon Raja Nrisinghadeb's return. According to Banerji (1968), he commissioned the services of

[18] We do not know whom Raja Nrisinghadeb studied Tantra with in Banaras. But the idea of Raja Nrisinghadeb's "Tanric guru" is ubiquitous in oral narratives among the Debroy family.

architects from Banaras to build this temple. However, he died in 1802, before it could be completed. His elder wife, Rani Bhabanadamoyee, about whom there is not much information, became *satī* on his funeral pyre. Rani Sankari, the younger of his wives took over the task of completing the temple, which took another twelve years of construction. By this time, the *zamīndāri*'s fortunes were clearly in decline, and in 1814, the temple was finished at a great cost at 5 lakhs. The *prāṇapratiṭhā* ceremony was itself a lavish event where the Rani invited "Brahmin Pundits from different parts of India, and gave them valuable presets, and also distributed food and clothing among thousands of the needy and the poor in a way befitting the solemn occasion" (Dey 1908, 52). This lavishness was of course in keeping with the role that *zamīndārs* had come to occupy in the nineteenth century.

Rani Sankari was active as a *zamīndārinī* and until her son Kaliasdeb reached legal age, she was guardian and ruler of all of Bansberia's lands. However, the Rani and her son, who had a reputation for extravagance and an excessively opulent lifestyle, became embroiled in legal battle over land in 24 Parganas District in the Provincial Court of Calcutta. The case dragged on in appellate court till 1826 during which time no taxes could be collected and the Bansberia *zamīndāri* revenue fell into arrears. According to Dey, "the Zamīndāri, the subject matter of the litigation, ran the risk of being brought under the hammer." (Dey 1908, 60) This evidently motivated the two parties to settle out of court. Under the conditions of the settlement, the Rani was declared *sebait* (or temple custodian) of the Haṃseśvarī *mandir*. Says Dey, "In the matter of the daily Deb-sheba and the performance and observance of the periodical religious rites and ceremonies the Rani was given full and absolute power, in which her son Raja Kailasdeb was to have no share or concern" (Dey 1908, 60). The Rani therefore retained full control of the temple and its surrounding lands which was significant for the future of this *zamīndāri*. Kailasdeb died in 1838, leaving his property to his son, Debendradeb. Rani Sankari had a much more amicable relationship with her grandson who also died at a young age in 1852. She wrote her will that year, naming her three great-grandsons, Purnendradeb, Surendradeb and Bhupendradeb joint *sebaits* (custodians). They were divided into *baro taraf*, *mejo taraf* and *chōṭo taraf* so as to jointly manage the estate. Rani Sankari declared

her lands *debattar*[19], endowing them to the temple and designating the goddess Haṃseśvarī the official owner of the land (Debroy 2006, 3). As McLane (1993) explains:

> Land was often alienated to endow temples and the pujas performed in them. This land was called *debottar.* The *sebait* or temple custodian did not always or perhaps usually spend the land's total income on religious activity and physical maintenance so that these grants become a source of income for the *sebait. Sebaits* often hired low-paid *pujaris* (temple priests) to conduct temple rites. Debottar land was hereditable but unlike brahmottar, was not alienable. After the permanent Settlement of 1793 and the extension of the civil court system, landholders created debottar alienations as a device to protect their estates from attachment for debts. Money-lenders were reluctant to attach land that had been given to a goddess (McLane 1993, 103).

This bound the three branches of the Debroys to each other and to their land, disallowing the prospect of any further parceling of, at least, the old Rani's land. Rani Sankari, died in the same year, leaving Rani Kasiswari, Debendradeb's widow, in charge of the *zamīndāri.*

Raja Purnendudeb (c.1843-1896), the son of Rani Kasiwari and Debendradeb, was nine years old at the time of his father's death and acquired a reputation as being "distinguished for his liberality and public spirit" (O'Malley 1912, 252). He seemed to have actively donated to and participated in a number of public works and services. He supplied the "local authorities" i.e. the British "with a number of coolies and one thousand carts" in the Mutiny of 1857 or Sepoy Mutiny, as it is more commonly known (O'Malley 1912, 252). He was, in what seems to be the tradition of Bansberia

[19] This custom, although already in practice among *zamīndārs* who regularly made rent-free gifts of land to individuals as part of their expected redistributive role, took on special significance in the colonial era. Under the nascent legal system, *debattar* became a legal concept, with the deity to whom the land was dedicated to given the status of "juristic personality" i.e. with all the propriety rights of a human being. A disproportionate number of elite women found this legal provision a useful tool in protecting family property from the reach of the law through the "feminized" space of religious piety. Gender, class and religious identity coupled with Enlightment era legal theory and Orientalist assumptions made the *debottar* an exceptional site of emergent colonial modernity at play. For more on this, see Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer (2004), Richard Davis (1999), Ratna Ray (1974).

zamīndārs, fairly compliant with the imperial powers and the status quo. He seemed to be a believer in law and order and built and maintained roads, established a charitable dispensary, maintained an old "alms-house" or *atiśālā* at the palace, was especially charitable to destitute widows and orphans and was dedicated to promoting education. Dey describes Purnendudeb as the "*ma-bap* of the poor and distressed" (Dey 1908, 67). This was the ideal of an effective *zamīndār,* one who, in a reciprocal mirroring of temple ritual culture were seen as central to the *dharmic* theatre of their lands.

Contemporary Bansberia: Traces of the Raj in a Small Town

The last *zamīndār* of Bansberia was Raja Khitindradeb Ray Mahasay. Raja Khitindradeb lived mainly in his residence on Rani Sankari Lane in Calcutta and had a keen interest in education. After the abolition of *zamīndāris* in 1950, the family modified their surname to Debroy, thereby integrating two of their titles but dropping "Mahasay." Although under West Bengal's land reforms, the Debroys lost much of their property, they retained control over land that was *debottar* which, under Indian law, was inalienable as it belonged not to the family, but to the deity.

Raja Khitindradeb's brother, Kumar Munindradeb was quite well known in Bengal for his involvement in the library movement. An article titled "Bengal Native Scans British Library Plan" in *The Chicago Defender* (1938) has this to say about him:

> London, Dec. 9- A descendent of the ancient Kings of Bengal, Kumar Munindra Deb Rai Mahasai, is in London. His purpose is to learn all he can about the way in which Britain runs its educational system and its public libraries.
>
> Although his ancestors lived at Bansberia, Bengal, in royal state, honoured by Moghul emperors, their palaces and temples marvels of costiliness and magnificence, he is plain R. Rai Mahasai, Mayor to Bansberia. A bland, smiling elderly gentleman, with shining dark eyes, he has a keen interest in municipal water supplies, drains, schools, roads and public libraries.
>
> Bansberia a few years ago was a jungle-swept malarial place, but under this modern-minded mayor, who gave it an efficient water supply, it has become santitary and healthy.
>
> "Books," he observed "are the main gateways of education." So public libraries are one of his principal interests today. He has been visiting public libraries in Liverpool, Manchester, Deeds, Sheffield,

> Dublin and other large provincial cities, studying the way they are run.
>
> He admired the Sheffield and Manchester system chiefly. He will take back many hints for the libraries in Bengal, of which he was one of the chief initiators (*The Chicago Defender:* December 10, 1938).

Kumar Munindradeb's contribution to public libraries is well documented. He was president of the Bengal Library Association and established Bansberia's child-friendly library, which continues to exist today and is a community hub for many of the town's men who meet regularly for a midday chat with the librarian, and for school schoolchildren who drop by after school to quietly read or to finish their homework.

In Bansberia today, it is only the *chōṭo taraf* that is still standing. The original palace has long since fallen, and in more recent years, so have the *baro* and *mejo tarafs*. There is no real evidence of what must have been the former riches of the *zamīndāri* in the *gaḍhbaḍhi*, most of it having been sold off long ago. Many of the members of the family are quite poor, their vast wealth having rapidly disappeared in the years since IndiaÆs independence. The Archaeological Survey of India took custody of both of BansberiaÆs surviving temples under the *Preservation of National Monuments Act* in 1967, and allowed them to be fully open to the public. Well maintained, and set in a lush landscape, they draw large crowds. Despite the fact that the temples are autonomously provided for, the three *tarafs* are still the *sebaits* of Haṃseśvarī *mandir*, and continue to sponsor and actively participate in the various *pūjās* and *utsavas* of the temples. Thus, although in a greatly reduced economic capacity, the former *zamīndāri* family of Bansberia continue to symbolically fulfill their ritual and redistributive obligations. In return, members of the Debroy family are still locally recognized and are given a degree of traditional respect, not for their former administrative and civil authority, but rather, for the ritual place that they still hold. Despite temple priests and the visitors having no pragmatic reason to be deferential to these former landholders, the ritual theatre of Bansberia continues to be enacted everyday. To step into the *gaḍhbaḍhi* is to be conscious of the fact that one is participating in ritual acts of memory that both evoke the past and that define the present. To those visiting the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple, it is clear

that integral to the experience is the awareness that the head of the Debroy household is still very much the paternalistic head of the ritual family of Bansberia.

Chapter 2

Monumentalizing Tantra: The Haṃseśvarī Devī Temple

I have been visiting the Haṃseśvarī *mandir* for many years now. In a town where rapid population growth has significantly changed its demographics and landscape, and where the older, colonial-era homes are crumbling for a lack of funds, the *mandir* remains as beautifully maintained as ever. Despite a tendency to periodically paint the exterior walls in a stark whitewash and its turrets in various shades of shocking pink, thanks to funds provided by the Archeological Survey of India supplemented by the revenue generated by the temple itself, the *mandir* is in excellent condition. This chapter will examine the architectural significance of the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple, reading the temple as a particular historic moment, shaped not only by Raja Nrisinghadeb's philosophical and scholarly interests, but also as an artifact of the emergent colonial modern. As one of many Śākta temples built in this period, the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple necessarily shares in their collective history. However, it is, according to N.N. Bhattacharya (1992) also unique in that it is the only known example of explicitly Tantric architecture (Bhattacharyya 1992, 375-378) and it clearly articulates the kind of Tantra *sadhanā* popular among elite Bengalis in colonial India. According to Bhattacharyya, this temple follows no "architectural cannons" and its plan was conceived entirely in the imagination of Raja Nirsinghadeb (Bhattacharrya, 376). That is, while other structures may have Tantric iconography or artwork, the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* is, in its very structure, self-consciously built to reflect Tantric philosophical principles, making it a crucial index by which to document the popularity of Tantra in Bengal during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As anomalous as certain architectural features of the Hamesevari Devī *mandir* may be, I will also attempt to show that its imaging draws on a particular tradition of temple building in Bengal - that of architectural pastiche. My analysis of the temple's architecture is based on the oral accounts of informants such as Tapan Thakur, the temple's current head priest, as well as through a reading of nineteenth century Tantric texts that were produced in Bengal just after the construction of the temple. The description and analysis will therefore be derived primarily from three

sources; (1) Tapan Thakur, the current head priest of the temple; (2) John Woodroffe's *The Serpent Power* (1918) and (3) from N.N. Bhattacharyya's encyclopedic modern work *Tantrābhidhāna* (2002). In attempting to study the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*, I found it impossible to proceed without engaging fully with the various narratives that already surround this enigmatic temple and those narratives will be taken into account here. This chapter will also discuss the complex nature of Haṃseśvarī Devī herself. Though she is represented in a singular form, it becomes evident that she symbolically and literally wears many "faces." It is important to note, however, that to most devotees and visitors of the temple, Haṃseśvarī Devī remains simply another *rūpa* or form of Kālī. Despite this academic investigation, which attempts to effectively complicate this assumption, it is imperative to fully integrate this popular understanding into the final analysis. The richness of Haṃseśvarī Devī's symbolism and meaning is only possible by understanding both her place in the popular imagination as well as within Raja Nrisinghadeb's extraordinary vision.

Marking Flux: Temples as Indexes of Change

Before turning to the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple specifically, it is helpful to keep the parameters of method in mind. In pre-colonial India, the categories of "religion" and "politics" were conflated in a way that is no longer viable due to colonialism's profound rupturing of social institutions on one hand and nationalism's representations of them on the other. Before the disruptions caused by colonialism and the advent of Judeo-Christian/post-Enlightenment epistemological categories, grand temples were the dominion of the political elite as testaments to, and tools of, their all-important ritual power. Kings especially – both "great" and "little" – were known for their extensive temple-building throughout Bengal's history. Although the construction of temples might appear to be simply acts of piety and devotion, as Ghosh (2005), Waghorne (2004) Dirks (1996), Price (1996) and others have argued, temple patronage was rooted in motivations that were as pragmatic as they were spiritual. Not only did temples often serve as the hub of complex economic and political activity, they also signified political status, legitimacy, authority and an assertion of political will. By erecting a temple, the

ruler reinforced not only his sovereignty, but his sacrality as well, placing himself at the centre of a complex ritual universe and fulfilling his imperial responsibilities. With the multitude of deities available in the broader "Hindu" pantheon, the semiotics of a temple became important signifiers for the identity of the sovereign. The *iṣṭadevatā* or chosen deity of the king, his particular engagement and relationship with the deity, whether the temple reflected the religious affiliations of his subjects or set him apart from them – these were political as well as religious decisions. The politics of temple architecture were complex indices of a ruler's assertion of his identity and control over his domain.

Pika Ghosh's (2005) study of temples in sixteenth and seventeenth century Bengal provides an important theoretical framework with which to also approach temples in early modern Bengal[1]. Ghosh probes the social and cultural circumstances that gave rise to the profusion of terracotta temples built the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. She finds that these architectural moments coincide with the growing Mughal imperial presence in the province of Bengal and locate these temples in the social upheaval that resulted from this large-scale power shift. This phenomenon is of course seen in Bansberia as well, in the construction of the Ananta Vāsudeva temple in 1679. Ghosh explores the emergence of these new Vaiṣṇava temples (in a time when Brahmanic Śaiva and Śākta religiosity was culturally dominant) and the significance of their particular, two-storied structure. Rather than serving as anchors for distinctive "Hindu" or even Vaiṣṇava identity, these temples were, by their very architecture, spaces of religious integration and intermingling. Appropriating many architectural features from the mosques built by the sultanate of Bengal, these temples are evidence of shared cultural sensibilities and purpose[2]. They were also self-consciously political; Ghosh contends that the impulse among *zamīndārs* to maintain their affinity to sultanate-inspired temple architecture shows the landholders' resistance against the new Mughal authority by rejecting Mughal aesthetics. Joanne Waghorne (2004) studies temples in

[1] I will be referring to the "modern" throughout this thesis and mean to refer to specifically colonial modernity, informed by post-Enlightenment philosophy, Victorian morality, differentials of power and the mimetic exchange between the colonized and the colonizer, resulting in a particular type of discursive field that is unique to colonial (and post-colonial) South Asia.

[2] For more on the shared characteristics between early *ratna* temples and sultanate mosques, see Ghosh (2005).

contemporary Madras in the face of the current turbulence of globalization and arrives at a similar conclusion;

> Temples, usually associated in old history-of-religious circles with anchoring space and time, actually appear in modern times at periods of transition and movement… The notion that temples as "sacred space" mark Hindu territory embedded and confined to the ancient soil of mother India becomes problematic if their appearance in modern times is because of and not in spite of global economic forces (Waghorne 2004, 37).

Waghorne also argues for a historically contextualized analysis of temples and of temple ritual. She critiques early scholars of Indian religion as well as Hindu nationalists who tend to put forth a vision of India that has always been "Hindu" i.e. structured according to an unchanging *sanātana dharma*. This sort of essentialistic meta-narrative is inevitably ahistorical, erasing both voices and subjectivities from history. To reexamine temples is to revisit the notion that religion is an untouched, unmediated, unbroken realm, indifferent to the massive economic and political changes transpiring around it. Similarly, Ghosh urges scholars to read temples not as monuments that historically delineate religious communities (thereby alienating them from each other) but rather, as architectural "pastiche" that serve to acknowledge and engage with a multitude of religious identities. She critiques colonial and post-colonial frameworks that overemphasize religious difference (even between communities that have since come to be identified as "Hindu" versus "Muslim") thereby ignoring the possibility of interaction among communities (Ghosh 2005, 66). Although Waghorne deals with contemporary temples and Ghosh looks at temples in the seventeenth century, both situate temples in particular moments of flux and rupture in history. Whether it be globalization or an increasing Mughal regional presence, political upheaval seems to be fertile ground for the efflorescence of religious architecture. As Waghorne reminds us, temples can "open our eyes to moments now and in the past when buildings are and were worth more than a thousand words." (Waghorne 2004, 41)

Reading the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple as a historical moment in upheaval and flux allows for a rich and fascinating project. Both the deity and the temple display a wealth of atypical symbolism and aesthetic anomalies, bearing the marks of an imagination

informed by a deep understanding of esoteric principles, intellectual curiosity and rapid changes in its cultural environment. Lying at the confluence of individualistic Tantric meditation and popular Bhakti tradition, the temple is, as we shall see, carefully designed to reflect the philosophical notions of the Tantric subtle body or *sūkṣma śarīra* in a fully public form. The temple indexes the transformative process that Tantra, once an esoteric and marginalized tradition, undergoes in the eighteenth century in order to be palatable to the religious life of one of Bengal's most socially conservative and elite homes[3]. Haṃseśvarī Devī's connections to Tripurasundarī, *kuṇḍalinī yoga* and a particular esoteric mantra are equally critical to fully understanding her hybrid nature. However, despite these explicit links to Tantra, to the majority of followers of Haṃseśvarī Devī, she is simply a gentle form of Kālī – something that is not perceived as particularly odd considering that in Bengal, Kālī is usually regarded as a compassionate and loving mother. In order to contextualize the particular ritual role that Kālī embodies in Bengal, it may be helpful to briefly focus on this particularly Bengali mother-goddess and her close relationship to *zamīndāri* culture.

Temple Building: Tantra, Bhakti and the Bengali Zamīndāris

Along with the many social, political and economic transformations that occurred in eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengal, one is of particular significance for our purposes; this period's dramatic rise in Śākta temple-building on the part of its landed elite. Although there have been several attempts to explain this phenomenon, it is perhaps Rachel McDermott (2001) who provides the most comprehensive and plausible inference as to why this is the case. According to McDermott, although patronizing religion and the arts had always been always an integral part of *zamīndāri* culture, in the eighteenth century Śākta poetry and ritual had started to hold particular resonance in the

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[3]This is reflective of the larger trend of "Brahminicization" and domestication of "folk" and "fringe" traditions within mainstream Hinduism. As Burkhard Schnepel notes in regard to tribal deities in Southern Orissa, when they are "royally patronized… [deities] have undergone various kinds and degrees of 'Hinduization'" (Schnepel 1995, 148) The influences of Bengali Vaiṣṇava (Bhakti) culture coupled with upper caste and upper class appropriations resulted in many "fringe" deities becoming increasingly sanitized in a way to make their image more normative and socially acceptable as elite objects of worship. Kālī is of course a prime example of this process in Bengal.

process of self-authentication for the Bengali elite. Śākta religiosity became so significant that it was co-opted by "both the Marathas and the British… when they came to power in the region" (McDermott 2001, 32). This affinity for goddesses was not completely unexpected. Powerful warrior-goddesses such as Durgā and Kālī had long served as imperial deities, and, as McDermott explains, "the deliberate adoption of Śākta deities by several of the landowning families can be interpreted, therefore, in the context of their claims to royal identity power" (*Ibid.*, 32). It is evident that in this period that many *zamīndāri* families took on much more explicit Śākta identities than they had in the past. This transformation is clearly visible in Bansberia as well. The Ananta Vāsudeva temple, commissioned by Raja Rameswar indicates that the Ray Mahasay family originally had clear Vaiṣṇava leanings. It was only during the time of Raja Nrisinghadeb in the eighteenth century that the *zamīndāri* began to officially identify itself as Śākta. This conscious shift in religious identity had particular significance in the turbulent eighteenth century when the traditional elites were being stripped of their economic and political powers and religious symbols of authority became exceptionally important tools of legitimization. McDermott sees caste dynamics further influencing this shift towards outward Śākta religiosity and she highlights the caste differential that existed during the Mughal period between the mostly Vaiṣṇava "middle castes" such as traders, cultivators and artisans and the Śākta-leaning "upper castes" such as Kaisthyas, Vaidyas and Brahmins. That the Ray Mahasays are Uttara Rāḍhi Kaisthyas supports McDermott's suggestion. Erecting a temple devoted to a goddess or sponsoring elaborate public Kālī and Durgā *pūjās* (both of which became integral to the identity of the Bansberia Raj) were clear ways by which to establish the Śākta leanings of one's lineage. This allowed elite rulers a method of "marking, maintaining, and highlighting caste boundaries and solidarity while at the same time, through conscious techniques of popularization, expanding their sphere of influence into the lower classes" (*Ibid.*, 33). In her examination of Śākta poetry, both written and commissioned by eighteenth and nineteenth century *zamīndārs*, McDermott states that "there is ample evidence to demonstrate… that Rāmprasād, Kamalākānta, and even many of the early rājā composers were influenced by an esoteric Tantric tradition of interior meditation rather than solely by a dualistic Bhakti" (*Ibid*, 31). McDermott uses this evidence to make the point that Śākta worship in

this time flourished mainly as a trend among the elite classes. It is sometimes suggested that the rise in Śākta devotionalism is directly related to the either popular worship or to the suffering of the "common people" who, under the feudal system of the time, faced famines, the violent invasion of their villages and various other forms of exploitation at the hands of their lords and overlords. McDermott argues however that if Śākta Tantra was in fact a result of the common religious practices of the proletariat, one would see more examples of the production of Śākta culture at the village-level and a higher incidence of devotional or Bhakti-oriented Śākta culture in general. Instead, what emerges is a culture of "esoteric Tantric tradition of interior meditation, " reflecting a rather reified, intellectual institution suited to the privileged few of elite Bengal. Judging from the architecture of the temple with its large courtyard and impressive stature, however, the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* was meant to accommodate large numbers of people. Thus though Śākta religiosity was a mark of pride for the cultural elite, temple patronage was clearly meant to reach the general populace. It could be argued that Śākta Tantra was "Sanskritized" by "staking a claim to the urban cosmopolitanism and Brahminic ritual order" (Ghosh 2004 17) thereby transforming an individualistic "fringe" tradition into one that was sanctioned by temple priests, patronized by the elites, and shared with the masses.

This shift in religious affinities among the elite did not mean a complete break with its Vaiṣṇava past, however. In Bansberia, the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* has been constructed only a few meters away from the Ananta Vāsudeva *mandir*; there is a room constructed on the side of the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple specifically meant to house images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and there is a now-empty space adjacent to the main hall of the temple where a *dolnā* or swing for Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā once hung, showing a certain attachment to Bansberia's past Vaiṣṇava allegiances (Personal Communication, Tapan Thakur). Although no major rituals are performed today at either the Vāsudeva *mandir*, or these other Vaiṣṇava sites, flowers continue to be left at each location. Visitors to the temple will also stop at these places as they make their way around the temple complex. Inside the *garbha gṛha* of the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* is a *śālagrāmaśīla* – a round

stone that is an aniconic representation of Viṣṇu – seated in a silver throne and protected by a silver umbrella that is present during all rituals at the *mandir*.[4]

In Bengal, Kālī is a mother goddess first and a warrior goddess second. She is imaged as loving and compassionate, and, throughout the region, is represented as a fertile, smiling maternal figure instead of as a shriveled, retributive and bloodthirsty goddess. McDermott has argued that the Śākta-Vaiṣṇava syncretism particular to Bengal has effectively "sweetened" the otherwise wrathful goddess and it is clear that although it was the elite who were particularly fascinated with Tantra and Śākta culture, their religiosity continued to be influenced by popular Bhakti practice. This is evident at even the most emblematic Kālī *mandir* in Bengal – the *mandir* at Kalighat in Calcutta. Sanjukta Gupta (2003) examines the particularly heavy Vaiṣṇava influence at this temple where the Vaiṣṇava affiliations of the Haldars – the temple's hereditary priests – continue to influence this ostensibly Śākta temple. There is an unmistakable parallel between Kālīghat and Bansberia, where the family's own Vaiṣṇava inclinations, (although apparently discarded under Raja Nrisinghadeb), also continue to "sweeten" their Tantric temple. At Kalighat, the *garbha gṛha* contains an image of Vāsudeva along with the image of Kālī, underscoring the significance of Viṣṇu in this space. Attached to the main structure is another, smaller temple which houses the images of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa along with a *dolamañca* platform for the swing of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa (Gupta 2003, 67-68). Kalighat's Kālī is marked with sandalwood across her forehead, further blurring the line between her own Śākta identification and the Vaiṣṇava affinities of this temple. Gupta, like McDermott, stresses the importance of Vaiṣṇava influence on Śākta religiosity in Bengal. "As a result of... Vaiṣṇava influences, by the eighteenth century in Bengal Kālī was transformed from a wild, ferocious deity of death to a benign youthful mother, albeit capricious and crazy" (Gupta 2003, 65). Similar to Bhairavī Vaiṣṇavī in Bolpur (another benevolent Kālī image) who is a Tantric goddess with "such Vaiṣṇava qualities as compassion and the ability to bestow happiness" (McDaniel 2000 73), Haṃseśvarī Devī

[4] This includes the ritual of *balidān* or goat sacrifice at both the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple and at the annual Durgā *pūjā* where the immolated goat head and the Vaiṣṇava *śālagrāmaśīla* are placed centimeters away from each other in a moment of clear sectarian cohabitation.

is regarded as a particularly compassionate boon-giving goddess by her followers. Also, like Kālī of Kalighat and Bhairavī Vaiṣṇavī, the figure of Haṃseśvarī Devī conflates multiple identities. While ritual in Bansberia is at present far more unabashedly Śākta than at Kalighat[5], both temples share a culture of softened, Śākta Tantra, reflecting the syncretic nature of Śākta identity in Bengal in general. Not only is this exchange inevitable given the proximity of these various traditions, but, "sweetening" temple ritual with popular cultural mores allows these rituals much greater currency and greater reach.

The Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* must, therefore, be examined within this complex set of identity politics and devotional trends. Haṃseśvarī Devī herself displays clearly syncretic iconography and is regarded by her followers as a benevolent Bhakti goddess in the guise of a powerful Tantric *mahāvidyā*. She embodies the Vaiṣṇava ideal of gentle compassion as she smiles serenely instead of showing her tongue as is customary for an image of Kālī, purposefully complicating her own identity. We will explore her multi-valanced iconography as well as the complex place occupied by Tantra in colonial Bengal later in this thesis.

The Architecture of the Haṃseśvarī Mandir: Description

In order to understand Haṃseśvarī Devī, it is imperative to first engage with her temple. Although I have visited this *mandir* informally many times, the head priest, Tapan Thakur Chattopadhyay [Figure 7] kindly and patiently walked me around the premises during my fieldwork in 2006, pointing out different points of interest and teaching me how to ôcorrectlyö read the temple's architecture and symbolism. South-facing[6] and immense, the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple forms an imposing structure with

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[5] Despite these Vaiṣṇava traits, Haṃseśvarī Devī continues to demand blood sacrifices in the form of goat immolation at all important temple festivals. Kalighat, however has placed sever restrictions on this once integral Kali ritual since September 2006. Although illegal, blood sacrifice continues to form an important part of ritual at many Śākta sites throughout Eastern India.

[6] Although temples were once predominantly east-facing, with the rise in popularity of Bhakti under the rubric of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the east-west axis became the locus of priestly activity while the new increasingly prominent courtyards were placed at the south. This accommodated the coexistence of both priestly ritual central to Brahminic Hindusim, as well as the large

arches, thirteen towers, and large, multifaceted turrets in the shape of closed lotus-buds. An architectural anomaly, it is clearly the product of a very specific vision and a unique imagination. David McCutcheon (1983) writes

> The Hamseshvari temple of Bansberia can only superficially be placed in the *ratna* class, for its thirteen lotus-capped towers are unlike any others in Bengal, and its cruciform plan is far more pronounced than those of the Lalji and Bopalbari temples at Kalna; with its plain walls and straight cornices, it has no specifically Bengali feature (McCutcheon 1983, 107).

Biswas and Haque (1995), however, explain the temple's peculiar appearance as an evolution of Bengal's more typical *ratna* or turreted temple design. According to them, the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* is an example of "modified *ratnas*" and therefore perhaps closer to conventional Bengali temple architecture than is obvious at first glance.

> With the passage of time the standard designs of temples are found to have progressed in a curious way. The modified *ratna* designs are found in some parts of Hooghly, Bankura and Medinipur districts. Among such unusually designed structures, the temple of Haṃseśvarī (1814 A.D.) at Bansberia, Hooghly, is famous for its lotus-capped towers. These are quite unique in character and form. Its superstructure is composed of thirteen turrets, each resembling a lotus bud. They stand graded along the vertical ascentury. The plan of the temple is believed to have been based upon a Tantric design known as 'Yantra' (Biswas & Haque 1995, 10).

In addition to this resonance with Bengali temple aesthetics, the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple is also clearly heavily influenced by European architecture. Its straight lines, symmetrical proportions, sweeping arches, fluted cornices, delicate pillars and many balconies show a familiarity with Western aesthetics and design. Unlike the Ananta Vāsudeva temple which is terracotta and covered in fine carvings, this temple is made of brick and is whitewashed, has no carvings and is remarkably tall for a Bengali temple. That this temple represents a multitude of identities is immediately clear.

The *mandir* has a large raised courtyard that faces the home of the *choto taraf*. There is a *bali pīṭha* located at the far edge of the courtyard, directly in front of the *garbha gṛha*, but well outside the actual temple structure itself. Inside the temple,

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groups of ecstatic worshippers as emphasized by Bhakti in the new *ratna* temples of this era (Ghosh 2005, 3).

between the *bali pīṭha* and the *garbha gṛha* is a large (now defunct) scalloped fountain that is carved into the floor like a large well, a fairly dangerous structure given the large crowds that gather here on festival days. A few feet away from the fountain is the *garbha gṛha*, housing the smiling figure of Haṃseśvarī Devī. This is flanked by two windows, one of which holds the image of the Svayaṃbhavā Mahiṣamardinī Durgā – a permanent Durgā image slaying Mahiṣāsura as he emerges from his buffalo form. When Raja Nrisinghadeb's Durgā *mandir* collapsed, this image was moved to be housed within the Haṃseśvarī temple itself. "This is highly unusual," says Arati Debroy, "two *śaktis* are usually never housed together because they will start fighting." (Personal Communication, Arati Debroy August 21, 2006.).

The temple is surrounded by fourteen black Śiva *liṅgams*, each housed in a small shelter, connected to one and other by a series of open-air passages. Offerings of flowers are laid at each one and most visitors to the temple will circumambulate the *mandir* at least once, to pay their respects at each one of the *liṅgams*. There are a few large rooms on the sides of the temple where the priests and cooks prepare various rituals, store equipment and cook the daily *bhoga* etc. Directly behind Haṃseśvarī Devī, on the north side of the temple, is a small hole carved into the wall, at ground level. This leads to a passage that has been dug out from under the spot on which Haṃseśvarī Devī has been placed. There is rich local mythology regarding this passage and it has been the source of much romanticized speculation about the temple. According to popular legend, although probably now defunct, this passage-way once led all the way to the Hugli river, and served as an escape route for the women of the palace in case of an invasion by marauding dacoits or "rabid Muslims." In other versions, this passage functioned as a private ways for royal women to access the river to bathe. Both myths are reflections of popular fantasy and are both implausible. Not only is the tunnel is far too small for anyone to pass through it, more importantly, it does not lead to the river at all, but ends at the temple's north garden. The ritual significance of this tunnel will be discussed in the next section. Moving towards the eastern side of the temple, we come across a small, locked wooden door that leads to the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir's* most unique feature; its passages.

I was granted special access to these passages by the very accommodating temple priests and was able to climb up the length of this large, beautiful temple.[7] Facing the door is a steep stairway that periodically opens out into large courtyards on level with the various lotus-bud turrets, contrasting the narrow claustrophobia-inducing stairwell with dizzying, expansive open spaces. I had an increasingly panoramic view of the surrounding areas as we climbed higher and was able to see the entire *gaḍhbaḍhi* as well as much of the town of Bansberia from our vantage point. As we climbed to the first level, Tapan Thakur led me to a small passage near the stairs and pushed aside a pile of abandoned baskets to reveal a small arched structure in one of the walls – "*Nābhi,*" he said, "navel." On the next floor he led me to a room that lay off of one of the terraces and housed a large, solitary white-marble Śiva *liṅgam.* I met a middle-aged couple with offerings on a tray here – they were performing the daily *pūjā* to the sixteenth Śiva of the temple. Tapan Thakur pointed to two walls through the open space beside our stairway and I noticed the faint imprint of a ladder on one wall and a wooden ladder propped up against the other; "*Iḍā* and *piṅgalā.* They aren't what they used to be, but they are still there" he said (*Ibid.*) [Figure 8]. Something was particularly strange about the main stairway between level four and five. There is a "trick" in the stairway here that is designed to leave us in a limbo between level four and a false level that leads nowhere. To continue our journey upwards, we had to exit the stairway altogether, go around and find a second stairway to climb up [Figure 9]. Common local mythology has it that this feature was built by Nrisinghadeb in order to fool and escape from pursuing Muslims (or alternately, "Borgis" and local dacoits) who had a propensity to raid the Garhbari. This is a romantic but not particularly plausible explanation. The problem of the trick stairway, although very easy to fall trap to, is also very easily solved. While the double moats around the property and the guard towers protecting the residential complex of the Ray

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[7] According to the temple priests, although the door was once left open to the public as a part of the complete sensory experience of the temple, in more recent years, it had to be locked due to the public engaging in "unsavory" activities within the passages and upper rooms. In the 1970s, during Indira Gandhi's Emergency, Naxalite radicals, allegedly used the temple as a hiding place. Ever since then, the doors have been locked. However, there was evidence of some graffiti inside the passages, indicating that the padlocked door was not totally foolproof.

Mahasays would serve as protection against whatever invading forces were posing a threat, it is unlikely the temple would be used for this purpose.

We passed through a total of three levels, each with wide terraces and sweeping arches until we finally reached an octagonal room. There was a last set of extremely narrow stairs with no banisters here that I had to squeeze myself through to come up from the floor of what was the highest of the thirteen lotus-shaped turrets of the temple [Figure 10]. This room was circular with tall, curved ceilings and after spending a few moments spent to admire the spectacular view of the Hugli countryside, we made our way down again.

The Architecture of the Haṃseśvarī Devī Mandir: Analysis

Most visitors to the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* seem to be aware that it is simply a "Tantric Kālī *mandir*." Not too many outside members of the *choto taraf* and Tapan Thakur seem concerned with the complexities of the temple's architecture or the significance of Haṃseśvarī Devī's iconography. Before engaging with the *mandir's* Tantric features, however, it is important to address its features that are not quite as anomalous with temple architecture in Bengal. As Pika Ghosh has shown in her careful analysis of seventeenth century terracotta temples, there was a shift in temple aesthetics in this period. Temples were no longer built in the traditional *chala* or flat, thatched roof style that emulated village homes, but rather, were being built as two-storied structures with turrets or *ratnas*. Ghosh's work is particularly innovative as she attempts to redress the lack of attention paid to *ratnas* in Bengal architectural history by pointing to their very important ritual role. According to Ghosh, *ratnas*, first appearing in seventeenth century terracotta Vaiṣṇava temples, were meant to be secondary shrines and were built to house images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. While they were worshipped in Brahmanic style in the *garbha gṛha* on the ground floor, these figures were then transported to the second story shrine by a set of interconnecting stairs. From here they could enjoy private conjugal time while watching the exuberant *rāsalīlā* and *kīrtana* performances below (Ghosh 2005, 15-17). Ghosh traces the transformation of *ratnas*, noting that not only did they become a standard architectural feature for Bengali temples that cut across sectarian lines but that this practice of building stairways by which to access the *ratna*'s second

shrine disappeared after a century, making them an integral, but decorative feature of Bengali temples. The one exception that she notes is the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple. "Built in... 1799, it is six storied, the stacking of shrines now used for mapping Tantric conceptualizations of the cosmos and the verticality as a metaphor for the mapping of the practitioner's aspirations" (Ghosh 2005 endnote, 42). Although the temple is clearly innovative, it does, as Haque and Biswas (1995) have alluded to, follow a certain tradition of Bengali architecture and is not devoid of all "specifically Bengali features" as McCutcheon (1983) has suggested earlier.

Approaching the temple's architecture requires a engagement with both the larger politics of temple building in Bengal, as well as late eighteenth century Tantra. Tantra, a particular "fad" of the nineteenth century elite in Bengal, began to make its presence felt in these circles in the eighteenth century itself. Given Nrisinghadeb's role in co-translating both the *Uḍḍīśa Tantra* and *Kāśikhaṇḍa*, his familiarity with Tantric texts was clear. His intellectual engagement with Tantra as both a philosophy and a practice is characteristic of the way in which many elite Bengalis approached Śākta Tantra in the eighteenth century.[8] The *Kāśikhaṇḍa* itself is a fairly elite Brahmanic text. In his doctoral dissertation entitled *The Sacred Center and its Peripheries: Śaivism and the Varanasi Sthalapurāṇas* (2007), Travis LaMar Smith argues that the *Kāśikhaṇḍa*, a late-eleventh century text, articulates a "brahmanical orthopraxis".

> The *Kāśikhaṇḍa* clearly targets an elite audience, one of educated scholarly Brahmins and cosmopolitan, monied patrons, royal and otherwise. This is evident from its language; the literary sophistication of the *Kāśikhaṇḍa* is carefully articulated and impossible to overlook when compared with the language Purāṇas such as the [*Skandapurāṇa*]. Secondly the text is rife with references to, and guidelines for temple construction... I argue that this text, in fact, was composed in large part to commemorate and glorify the funding of a royal temple... in the late eleventh century (Smith 2007 20).

This Brahmanic text would have held fairly obvious appeal to the intellectual and class interests of both Raja Nrisinghadeb and his co-translator, Raja Jaynarayan Ghosal.

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[8] For more on the elite intellectual Śākta tradition in eighteenth century Bengal, see McDermott (2001).

Although we do not know the identity of Raja Nrisinghadeb's Tantric guru, the *Kāśikhaṇḍa* itself provides a few clues to the *zamīndār's* interests, and the influences that would later inform his plans for the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*. We will return to a discussion of the contents of the *Kāśikhaṇḍa* later in this chapter.

The esoteric principles articulated in the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple are the same Tantric concepts that were to capture the imagination of the Bengali elite in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Texts such as the *Mahānirvāṇatantra*, championed by members of Bengal's Westernized social elite such as Raja Rammohun Roy (1773-1833), the founder of the Brahmo Samaj, became well known among cosmopolitan Bengalis in this period. The *Mahānirvāṇatantra*, anomalous as a Tantric text for its sanitized language and content, appealed to both the British and the Bengali in the nineteenth century and, as Hugh Urban (2003) suggests, was probably a recent text, with distinctly "modern" concerns and tone.[9] John Woodroffe (1865-1936), the Supreme Court judge, who, in collaboration with his Bengali associates, wrote under the pseudonym Arthur Avalon is a particularly valuable source on Tantra in the colonial context. He both translated existing Tantric texts (including the *Mahānirvāṇatantra*) as well as wrote numerous books in the early twentieth century on Tantra himself. Many of Woodroffe's texts attempt to document the very principles that seem to inform the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple. For this reason, it is important to locate Woodroffe and his immense contribution to modern Tantra in the nineteenth century.

Woodroffe's familiarity with and sympathy towards Tantra at a time when other Orientalist scholars approached this subject with an obsessive mix of horror and fascination, affords him a unique place within European scholarship on Indian religion. As Kathleen Taylor (1996) explains on her piece on the figure of Arthur Avalon,

> Tantra... had [a] special place in the Orientalist discourse; it was regarded as an extreme example of the degeneration which, by general consensus of both Europeans and Western-educated Indians, was believed to have affected Hindu religion since its glorious classical past in the so-called Aryan civilization. It was viewed as a prime example of the 'non-Aryan culture' which was believed to have intermingled with that civilization and corrupted it. The

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[9] For more on the *Mahānirvāṇatantra's* distinctly "modern" characteristics, see Duncan Derrit (1977) and Hugh Urban (2003).

> 'Aryan' civilization that was believed to be associated with the orthodox Vedic texts had usually been idealized by European Orientalists; but the Tantras were texts which stood outside the Vedic tradition and hence, to more orthodox Hindus as well as to Orientalists, they were by implication 'non-Aryan' and therefore 'uncivilized'. In addition to this, for the foreign Orientalist they had the added disadvantage of being more recent than the Vedas, and therefore closer to the Indian present than to the idealized past. Indians too had the idea that time itself is corrupting and all manifestations of culture represent a degeneration from an ideal in the past; this view is to be found in Avalon's pages too... But nowhere does Woodroffe himself give the impression of preferring the idealized past to the living religion around him (Taylor 1996, footnote 151).

Although "his scholarship is now considered highly suspect and flawed," (Urban 1999, 134) Woodroffe's attempt at an unbiased engagement with the "Tantra" of his time makes his treatises on Tantra invaluable to any analysis of Tantric practice among elite Bengalis in the colonial period. His scholarship may be dated, but it is an invaluable artifact of its times, providing a snapshot of the way in which the Bengali elite knew Tantra in the late nineteenth century – a trajectory of reception that begins in the eighteenth century with figures such as Raja Nrisinghadeb. These early high-profile *tāntrikas* who were often tied to *zamīndāri* culture such as Rāmprasād Sen (1720-1781), Kamalākānta (1769-1821)[10] and Raja Nrisinghadeb set fertile ground for the proliferation of elite Śākta culture in Bengal. John Woodroffe's work is particularly useful in examining elite Tantic practice in early modern Bengal as he both participated in this phenomenon and produced copious texts which today, are highly circulated and considered authoritative by those who engage with Tantra. Woodroffe's writing thereby transformed the very epistemological and discursive field of Tantra and these texts are reflective of the sort of knowledge that was circulating among a limited group of elite individuals. Not only did they share a fascination for Tantra's esoteric religious practices, but the very nature of that practice, closely guarded and difficult as it was, also

[10] For more on these eighteenth century Śākta *zamīndāris* such as Nadia, Dijnapur, Natore and later, Burdwan, see McDermott (2001). McDermott notes that despite personal religious affiliations, most *zamīndārs* patronized religious activities of various types.

served to demark their class status. John Woodroffe belonged to a social circle which included the Tagores, especially Rabindranath Tagore's artist nephews, Abanindranath and Gaganendranath as well as E.B. Havell and Ananda Coomaraswamy. This was a prominent group of urban artists and intellectuals who shared an interest in various Orientalist subjects, the most exotic of which was, of course Tantra. Woodroffe's elite Bengali circuit inevitably included *zamīndārs* who were living increasingly urban lifestyles, spending much of the year in the booming city of Calcutta. The ties that bound Bengali intellectuals and cultural elites were tight and fairly impenetrable, and were solidified by intermarriage, political alliances, social networks, caste affiliation and their participation in various social movements (Personal Communication with A. Debroy August 22, 2006)[11]. Both Raja Nrisinghadeb and Woodroffe were participating in a phenomenon specific to early modern Bengal. Although the Haṁseśvarī Devī temple was constructed over a century before John Woodroffe's books were written, there is a traceable continuity in the philosophical principles that guided the construction of Raja Nrisinghadeb's temple and those discussed by Woodroffe.

The Serpent Power (1918) is Woodroffe's commentary and English translation of an already-published Sanskrit text attributed to one Purṇānanda Svāmi (c. 1913?), entitled *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa* or "Treatise on the Six Centres". According to Woodroffe, the *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa* is a part of a larger unpublished work called *Srītattvacintāmaṇi*. According to Taylor, Woodroffe's *The Serpent Power* is "the first full account in English of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* [and] was to become the best known and most enduring of all the books... undoubtedly it was Arthur Avalon who first made the concept of *kuṇḍalinī* familiar in the West" (Taylor 2001, 148). *The Serpent Power* describes the *ṣaṭ-cakra-bheda* system, which explains the human body in terms of seven *cakras.*[12] This

[11] According to Alokendra Debroy, in his later years, Rabindranath Tagore spent months at a time in solitude in a garden home in Bansberia as a guest of the royal family (Personal Communication with A. Debroy August 22, 2006).

[12] Incidentally, because Woodroffe's work is now taken to be authoritative on the subject of Bengali *kuṇḍalinī yoga,* his understanding of Tantric anatomy has served to standardize the number of *cakras* in the body at seven. These *cakras* are the *mūlādhāra* (at the base of the spine), the *svādhiṣṭhāna* (above the genitals), the *maṇipūra* (at the navel) *anāhata* (at the heart), *viśuddha* (at the throat) and *ājñā* (between the eyebrows). The seventh *cakra* is the *sahasrāra* which exists above one's head. This list corresponds

conception of the human body is central to the figure of Haṃseśvarī Devī as *kuṇḍalinī* as will be discussed later in this chapter.

If the temple is to be read as an actualization of Tantric anatomy as laid out by the principles of *ṣaṭ-cakra bheda*, then Haṃseśvarī Devī is seated on what corresponds to the temple's *mulādhāra cakra*. Tapan Thakur confirmed this, pointing to the large fountain in the front of the temple as representative of the temple's "phallus" while the tunnel in its back is its "rectum". The *mulādhāra* is said to be found between these two points, near the base of the spine. Haṃseśvarī Devī is therefore clearly identified as the temple's *kuṇḍalinī* or "serpent power" to use Woodroffe's terminology, which is found in the *mulādhāra cakra*. Bhattacharyya summerizes the *ṣaṭ-cakra-bheda* system and explains the significance of *kuṇḍalinī*

> Śakti which as serpent power remains latent in the mulādhāra-cakra as the source of all energy. It reveals itself when roused by Yogic exercises. Through different nerve-channels it takes up an upward motion and eventually reaches the sahasrāra (highest cerebral region) and then comes down to its original place. The rousing and stirring up of Kuṇḍalinī is a form of the merging of the individual with the universal consciousness. The whole process is very complex and depends entirely on the mental and intellectual faculties of the aspirant. It has two forms – dynamic or kinetic and static or potential. The āsanas, kumbhakas, mudras, etc. are used to rouse kuṇḍalinī so that the life force withdrawn from the ida and pingala may enter the suṣumnā and then go upwards towards the brahmarāndhra. Prāṇa which exists in the form of vital air, generates heat which causes kuṇḍalinī to be aroused which then hisses and straightens itself and pierces the cakras. This is possible through repeated efforts and by a gradual process. The uncoiled kuṇḍalinī first enters the citriṇī-nāḍī and then pierces each of the lotuses. Thus the kuṇḍalinī absorbs 23 tattvas and then meets its source in the sahasrara. This union is known as samārasya. The Sādhaka (aspirant) thinking of himself as Śakti experiences union with Śiva and enjoys infinite pleasure through the flow of nectar which runs from brahmarāndhra to mulādhāra, flooding the kṣudra Brahmapiṇḍa or microcosm, i.e. the body of the aspirant. Forgetful of all in this world the aspirant is immersed in ineffable bliss. (Bhattacharyya 2002, 84).

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with the structure of the Haṃseśvarī *mandir* and it can be safely assumed that both text and temple are following the same *kuṇḍalinī* system.

If, following this logic, the *garbha gṛha* is the *mulādhāra* and Haṃseśvarī Devī is the *kuṇḍalinī*, the temple's central stairway can only be the *suṣumnā* and the wooden ladders are indeed, as Tapan Thakur had mentioned, its *iḍā* and *piṅgalā*. Similarly, the alcove that Tapan Thakur identified on the temple's first floor as its navel is therefore its *maṇipūra cakra*, the body's third *cakra*. According to Tapan Thakur, the solitary white Śiva *liṅgam* is placed on the fourth floor of the temple in order to mark its *anāhata cakra* or heart *cakra*, as, according to him, when this *cakra* is activated, the aspirant experiences visualizations of deities (Personal Communication with Tapan Thakur September 30, 2006). The "trick" stairway, about which there are so many romanticized speculations, has anatomical significance as well. As is the case with many soteriological systems, there are "danger zones" in the aspirant's progress towards liberation that she or he must overcome without getting trapped in a twilight zone of existential limbo. According to Tapan Thakur, the aspirant faces such a challenge at the *anāhata cakra*. The stairway represents the difficulty in reaching the fifth, *viśuddha cakra* after activating the *anāhata*. "The aspirant must be especially careful here" says Tapan Thakur pointing to the "twilight room" at the end of the "trick" stairs, between level four and five of the temple. "It is easy to get lost after the fourth *cakra* and not make any further progress. The aspirant will become mad" (*Ibid.*).

On the fifth level, which corresponds with the *viśuddha* or throat *cakra*, is the large room with the very narrow stairs that curve their way up the wall and disappears into the ceiling. Although built against the wall, the stairs are otherwise unsupported and have no railing. Climbing these stairs, usually made even more precarious by the bird droppings that cover them, is not easy and I had to squeeze my way very carefully into the opening to reach the sixth level. According to Tapan Thakur, activating the *ājñā* – or sixth – *cakra* requires the help of one's *guru* but the aspirant has no other support to reach this difficult stage. This unsupported stairway and difficult passage is meant to be representative of the complicated ascent into the *ājñā*.

At the pinnacle of the temple, on its highest *ratna*, is a metal sun in an eight-petalled *yantra*, resembling a Kālī *yantra* [Figure 11]. This functions as both a lightning

arrester as well as a visual representation of *sahasrāra*, the seventh cakra in this system[13] and symbolizes the realization of liberation in physical form. The architectural peculiarities of the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple, are meant, therefore, to actualize particular Tantric and aesthetic ideals of eighteenth century Bengal. In his *History of the Tantric Religion* (1992), N.N. Bhattacharyya has this to say about the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*

> In reality we can refer only to one temple in India which is absolutely Tantric. It is the Haṃseśvarī temple situated at Bansberia in Hooghly district of West Bengal. This is the only temple in India in the construction of which no architectural canons were followed. It is quite dissimilar to any architectural type of Bengali or Indian temples. The plan of the temple was entirely the conception of Nrisimha Devaraya who was a Tantric *sādhaka* and the Bengali translator of *Uḍḍīśatantra*, and his purpose was to demonstrate through this temple the essentials of Tantrism, especially those of the *Ṣaṭ-cakra-bheda*. (Bhattacharyya 1992, 376).

Although, as we shall see in the next chapter, Raja Nrisinghadeb did in fact use Bengali architectural features in his *avant garde* temple, he also clearly and deliberately manipulated the conventions of architectural precedence. This allowed him to utilize its entire structure to narrate a process that is usually a private affair and even a closely guarded secret between aspirant and *guru*.

This desire to map the spiritual or subtle (*sūkṣma*) in material form may itself have been inspired by Raja Nrisinghadeb's familiarity with both the *Kāśikhaṇḍa* and Banaras itself. In her exploration of Banaras as a sacred city for many Hindu traditions, Diana Eck (1986) explores the concept of the city of Banaras as both materially real city as well as a carefully organized sacred space.

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[13] "The highest cerebral region above all the cakras (nerve plexuses) where Kuṇḍalinī meets its source. It is designated to be the abode of Śiva while the lowest region – mūlādhāra is the seat of Śakti in the form of an electric force, generally known as kulakuṇḍalinī. The mūlādhāra is the region of pravṛtti (attachment) while the sahasrāra is that of nivṛtti (detachment). The sahasrāra cakra or padma is of a thousand petals which have the fifty letters place in twenty rounds. In the sahasrāra there is the union of Śiva and Śakti… On the pericarp is Haṃsa and above it is Parama-Śiva himself. Above these are the sūrya and candra-maṇḍalas. In the latter is a lightening-like triangle within which is the sixteen kalā of the moon. Its subtle aspect is known as nirvāṇa-kalā, the parābindu symbolizing Śiva and Śakti" (Bhattacharyya 2002,138).

> If we ask, then, what kind of space Kashi represents in the popular imagination, insofar as it is visible in the *Kasi Khanda*, it is clear that it is schematic space. It is a microcosm of the Hindu universe, as virtually a geographical *mandala*... Along with a very schematic sense of the geography of Kashi, the texts simultaneously display an elaborate, "geographical realism"... This insistence on local particularity is especially striking in a world-view in which the particulars are soy highly systematized, multiplied and transportable. (Eck 1986 47)

The Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* and the city of Banaras attempt to realize sacred geography. Both function as spaces that can be navigated both physically and soteriologically, depending on the desires and the development of the visitor or aspirant and both represent microcosms of a grander, cosmic anatomy that can be experienced by traversing them.

The Many Faces of Haṃseśvarī Devī

Haṃseśvarī Devī-as-Kālī

Constructed of *neem* wood and painted bright blue, Haṃseśvarī Devī sits regally on a twelve-petal lotus with one leg tucked underneath. The lotus emerges from the heart of the prone Śiva under her who lies expressionless, staring up at his consort [Figure 12]. Smiling benevolently, Haṃseśvarī Devī is clearly an imperial deity. She is eternally youthful at sixteen and is a *sumaṅgalī* or an auspiciously married woman, as indicated by the generous amounts of *sindūra* on her forehead. The Śiva *mūrti* is made of stone and is painted white with a lion-skin loin cloth around his waist and lies on a large Kālī *yantra* which is itself placed on an upside-down thousand-petal blue lotus with eight red filaments. The Kālī *yantra* is one of many signifiers that identify Haṃseśvarī Devī with the larger Kālī cult in Bengal and is significant in Tantric imagery of *cakras* and liberation.[14] The vast majority of her followers understand her as another, particularly indulgent, materialization of Bengal's favourite goddess and it is this popular understanding that binds her the most tightly to Kālī. More powerful than any

[14] Anecdotally, although not visible, this lotus is said to be interred with "appropriately" antinomian symbols such as human skulls. While the priests at the temple will smile knowingly when asked, no one is able to conclusively confirm or deny these claims.

iconographical identifiers, Haṃseśvarī Devī is Kālī due mainly to popular consensus rather than any iconographic identifiers.

Joanne Waghorne speaks of a phenomenon that emerges during the colonial period in Madras that may be of relevance here the "duplicated temple" – "those shrines built not so much as copies but as a kind of "branch office" of older, more famous temples" (Waghorne 2004, 41). In these "duplicated temples", says Waghorne, "the ruling god lives in tension with his own multiplicity" (*Ibid.* 74). Haṃseśvarī Devī may, therefore, be seen as one of the multiple forms of Kālī whose identity lies in a certain tension between broader Kālī worship and the particulars of her location, history and iconography. There are of course, a few iconographical aspects that clearly and intentionally link her to the cult of Kālī. Although she lacks Kālī's most identifiable marker, a protruding tongue, Haṃseśvarī Devī holds Kālī's sword (*talvāra*) and skull (*muṇḍa*) in her left hands and shows *abhaya* and *dāna mudrās* with her right. Around her neck she wears a garland of skulls (*muṇḍa mālā*). She is worshipped daily as Dakṣiṇa Kālī (the most common manifestation of Kālī in Bengal) and on the night of Kālī *pūjā*, a mask with a lolling tongue and a large silver crown is placed on Haṃseśvarī Devī, physically transforming her to a more recognizable form of Kālī [Figure 13]. The fact that Haṃseśvarī Devī lacks of a protruding tongue does not cause dissonance for worshippers. Rather, it effectively domesticates the Kālī image for popular consumption. That she is seated above Śiva without touching him with her foot or engaging in sexual union with him, removes both her *ugra* Tantric ferocity and enforces Haṃseśvarī Devī's *lajjā* [15] or feminine modesty, prized and associated with Kālī-as-householder-mother in Eastern India (Menon and Schweder 2003, 87) [Figure 14].

[15] The process of "domestication" of the image of Kālī from a fiercely wrathful and powerful one to one that is transformed to a respectful and fairly docile one lies mainly in the meaning and mythology of her protruding tongue. As the figure of Kālī becomes absorbed into the normative mainstream, the way in which this tongue is received is radically altered by her worshippers. In the earliest Sanskrit textual accounts of Kālī (around 600 CE) her protruding tongue is a signifier of her blood-thirsty nature; "she is described as having an awful appearance she is gaunt, has fangs, laughs loudly, dances madly, wears a garland of corpses, sits on the back of a ghost, and lives in the cremation ground. She is asked to crush, trample, break, and burn the enemy" (Kinsley 2003, 24). This ghoulish figure becomes standardized as a dark woman with a bloody sword, with

Multi-faceted and fluid, Haṃseśvarī Devī's identity invariably shifts according to occasion and the proficiency with which an observer is able to read religious symbolism. Tapan Thakur, a self-declared admirer of Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedantic ideals, reveals in a half-conspiratorial tone that Haṃseśvarī Devī is more than just Kālī:

> Kālī is black, she is endless and signifies time. Haṃseśvarī also represents the same thing – but she is blue and endless like the sky. Kālī is *ugra* and full of wrath. Haṃseśvarī is a loving *gharoā* ("homely") image. She is eternally young and beautiful. The temple embodies non-duality as does the goddess herself, positioned with Śiva (Personal Communication with Tapan Thakur October 1, 2006).

That Haṃseśvarī Devī is meant to be more than "just" Kālī is evident in every aspect of the temple. Her iconography is wholly anomalous – without her *mudrās*, her *yantra* below her and the insistence of locals, it would be almost impossible to identify her as Kālī. Everything about this deity, her name included indicates ambiguity and implies something quite philosophically sophisticated and nebulous about her identity. Tapan Thakur offers a theory as to why this may be case. "When Nrisinghadeb saw Haṃseśvarī as his *iṣṭadevatā*," Tapan Thakur responded "he saw the *śakti* of all Mahāvidyās. It is not possible to say she is one or the other – she is all of them." Then why does everybody seem to think she is Kālī? "Because," he explains, "Rākṣasa Kālī is the primordial image. This is the image that we start with when we first start our journey, hence also the Kālī *yantra* under Mahādeva." (*Ibid.*) In his introduction to *Tantric*

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corpses as earrings, a necklace of skulls, dominant over her consort Śiva – an emblematic Tantric figure with imbued with esoteric meaning in her antinomian nature. Even this is further transformed as Kālī enters the mainstream of the Bengali Śākta pantheon where, with the influence of Vaiṣṇavism in particular, she becomes maternal, her imagery is read as symbolic of her righteous victory over ignorance and evil and her lolling tongue is now seen as a sign of her *lajjā* at having trampled on her husband. Usha Menon and Richard A. Shweder have this to say about the contemporary Eastern-Indian Śākta interpretation of Kālī: "...it is female power that energizes the world, but such power can only be effectively checked and regulated from within one-self, through developing a sensitivity to the emotion of *lajjā*. According to...Oriya Hindus, to be full of *lajjā* is to be refined, to be civilized, to be a moral being" (Menon and Shweder 2003, 87). Thus Kālī shifts from being a goddess on the fringes of "decent society" to embodying a magnificent example of moral behaviour and propriety.

Visions of the Divine Feminine, Kinsley speaks directly to this privileging of Kālī among the Mahāvidyās given her "primordial" nature.

> Although the order, number, and names of the Mahāvidyās may vary, Kālī is always included and is usually named or shown first. She is also affirmed in many places to be the most important of the Mahāvidyās, the primordial or primary Mahāvidyā, the *ādi* Mahāvidyā. In some cases it seems apparent that the other Mahāvidyās originate from Kālī or her deferring forms...Kālī's place as the primary Mahāvidyā, the first among the goddesses, is reinforced by the fact that she lends the group as a whole her own characteristics. Her character, attributes, and nature are shared by the others. She is typical, perhaps even paradigmatic, as the *ādi* Mahāvidyā and her symbolic meaning, I think, often helps to uncover the meaning of some of the other goddesses in the group... Kālī reveals or symbolizes the ultimate goal suggested or implied in the other Mahāvidyās. She completes the others, as it were (Kinsley 1997, 68).

Although Tapan Thakur acknowledges this identification with Kālī, he makes sure to qualify Haṃseśvarī Devī's special place as "the beautiful, gentle, loving and maternal aspect" of Kālī, and insists that although she is Kālī, she is also not Kālī. "I do not like her *ugra rūpa* on the night of Kālī *pūjā*" Tapan Thakur says "I finish the *pūjā* and then take off her mask and Kālī's jewelry as quickly as possible – I do not like seeing her *ugra* form with her tongue sticking out. I want her to return to her true form. She is all the Mahāvidyās, but this is the form that I love" (Personal Communication with Tapan Thakur, October 1, 2006). Haṃseśvarī Devī exists in tension even in the mind of the temple's priest, who genuinely loves his deity but finds himself struggling with her more "Tantric" aspects.

Haṃseśvarī Devī-as-Kuṇḍalinī Sakti

The impact of elite Śākta culture – most often articulated within the parameters of the Bengali Kālī cult coupled with a fascination with Tantra – on the process of imagining Haṃseśvarī Devī cannot, of course be undermined. While Haṃseśvarī Devī displays an affinity to both this "mainstream" Kālī as discussed above, she also shares in more explicit Tantric themes, in particular, those of the *ṣaṭ-cakra bheda*. Given Raja

Nrisinghadeb's long and comprehensive training under a Tantric *guru*, one can safely assume that he was familiar with the complex principles of *ṣaṭ-cakra-bheda*, an esoteric process of internalized meditation and self-realization. The temple's iconography and architecture immediately resonates with the basics of this soteriological system and, as has been discussed previously, it is possible – for those who possess a certain knowledge of Tantric somatics – to read the temple against these philosophical principles. The most accessible way in which to approach this system is through the work of Arthur Avalon which codified this complex process.

As we have already seen, if we take the temple to represent the human body, it is fairly easy to infer Haṃseśvarī Devī's identification with *kuṇḍalinī sakti* within the physical ôanatomyö of the temple. To further reinforce this point, let us turn to the etymology of Haṃseśvarī Devī's name. Tapan Thakur explains her name is derived from a *mantra* – *haṃsa* and the word *īśvarī* or female deity. N.N. Bhattacharyya explains the significance of the sound *haṃsa*:

> A symbolic *mantra*, which means the breath of life – haṃsaḥ. It is the form of inhaling (haṃ) and exhaling (saḥ) of breath. Haṃ is the symbol of bindu (Purusa, the male principle of creation) and Saḥ of visarga (Prakriti, the female principle of creation) (Bhattacharyya 2002, 57).

This *mantra* speaks to the philosophical importance of non-duality in *kuṇḍalinī yoga* and is the verbalization of the unity between Śiva and Sakti. Haṃsa therefore marks their eventual merger in the *sahasrāra cakra* and Haṃseśvarī embodies this idea. John Woodroffe also pays quite a bit of attention to the concept of *haṃsa* in *The Serpent Power* (to be referenced henceforth as SP):

> Ham and Sah. The union of the two makes Hamsah. This is the beginning and end of creation. The outgoing breath (Nisvasa) Ham of the Supreme is the duration of the life of Brahma the Creator... and Sah is the indrawing of breath by which creation returns to Prakriti (SP 492).

While the significance of *haṃsa* can be fairly easily established by the vast amount of literature available on this idea of cosmic breath, the way in which this concept is imaged in this particular case can be best understood if we look at the imagery that Woodroffe

uses to describe the place of liberation – the *sahasrāra cakra* – where Śiva and Śakti are said to become one. Woodroffe speaks of the *sahasrara* saying

> Above (the end) of the Susmna-Nāḍī is the Lotus of a thousand petals; it is white and has its head downward turned; its filaments are red. The fifty letters of the Alphabet from A to La, which are also white, go round and round its thousand petals twenty times. On its pericarp is Hamsah, and above it is the Guru who is Parama-Siva Himself… Within Nirvana–kala is Para Bindu, which is both Siva and Sakti. The Sakti of this Para-Beindu is the Nirvana-Sakti, who is Light (Tejas) and exists in the form of Hamsah (Hamsa-rupa) and is subtle like the ten-millionth part of the end of a hair. That Hamsah is Jiva (SP 453).

To add to this imagery, Woodroffe also goes into some detail about the pericarp of this thousand-petalled lotus "The Candra-Mandala in the pericarp of the Lotus of a thousand petals is turned upward; the Hamsa is there, and there is the Guru's place" (SP 497-498) saying elsewhere "That is, the Hamsa is in the twelve-petalled Lotus below the Sahasrara" (SP 391). If one looks carefully at Haṃseśvarī Devī, the remarkable similarities between what Woodroffe describes and her iconography become obvious. Haṃseśvarī Devī sits on a red lotus of twelve petals – an image that is repeated multiple times in *The Serpent Power*. The twelve-petalled lotus (or to be more precise, pericarp of the thousand-petalled lotus) emerges from the heart of the prone Śiva who, as described in *The Serpent Power*, lies atop a triangle. The triangle itself is significant as it represents the non-duality of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*[16] and is simultaneously a representation of Sakti, "denoted by a triangle because of its threefold manifestation as Will, Action and Knowledge (Iccha, Kriya, Jnana)" (SP 129). The single downward facing triangle is also the Kālī *yantra* or abstract representation of Kālī, therefore cementing her allegiance to both this Tantric system and to the most beloved of upper-class Bengali goddesses. Haṃseśvarī herself is of course paired with the figure of Śiva who lies under her. Although they are not depicted in sexual union as is often the case with Tantric figures,

[16] "In the Agama-kalpadruma it is said 'Hamkara is Bindu or Purusa, and Visarga is Sah or Prakriti. Hamsah is the union of the male and female, and the universe is Hamsah.' The triangular Kamakala is thus formed by Hamsah. The Hamsa-pitha is composed of Mantras." (Woodroffe, 1918, 131)

they are inextricably linked. Tapan Thakur has this to say "Mahādeva and Mā, Deva and Devī – they are *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, which is Brahman. It is Truth. One cannot exist without the other" (Personal Communication with Tapan Thakur, September 30, 2006). His explanation is no doubt shaped by his Neo-Vedāntic ideologies, but what is important to note is the significance of non-duality representing the nature of reality. These aspects of Thakur's descriptions resonate with the Śākta world-view in which

> everything in the world is of female form (*strīrūpa*). It is often emphasized that Śakti is the active partner in the cosmic act of procreation, while Śiva remains purely passive and would be unable even to move without her impulse... In iconography it is reflected in the famous representations of Kālī... dancing or sitting on Śiva's immovable body. (Goudriaan 1992, 56)

Woodroffe calls this feminized ultimate "Nirvāṇa-Śakti," commenting that

> within Her is the everlasting place called the abode of Siva, which is free from Maya, attainable only by Yogis, and known by the name of Nityananda. It is replete with every form of bliss, and is pure knowledge itself. Some call it the Brahman; others call it the Hamsa (SP 450).

According to Woodroffe, the "some" who "call it Brahman" are "the Vedantists (Vaidāntikas)" (SP 451), showing a certain congruency of thought between emergent neo-Vedantic thought and this type of elite Bengali Tantric practice. This is not surprising given that adherents of both philosophies tend to draw from the same socio-economic and cultural pool of urbane *bhadro* society, further shaping the face of Tantra in Bengal.

Haṃseśvarī Devī-as-Tripurasundarī

In addition to her strong ties to Kālī and to *kuṇḍalinī*, Haṃseśvarī Devī is also identified with a third figure; the goddess Tripurasundarī. Despite her strong popular associations to Kālī, it is perhaps the aspects that tie her to Tripurasundarī that are in fact central to Raja Nrisinghadeb's own vision of his deity. In his *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine The Ten Mahāvidyās*, David Kinsley classifies Haṃseśvarī Devī under

his section on Tripurasundarī – an unusual thing to do and a taxonomic move that I have not seen elsewhere. He says,

> I also have been told of a temple to Haṃseśvarī -Devī, an epithet of Tripura-sundarī, in the village of Bansberia near Hooghly in Bengal. The temple is six stories tall, and the central image is of Tripura-sundarī, who sits on a lotus that emerges from the navel of Śiva, who is reclining on another lotus that in turn rests on an image of the Śrīcakra. There are fifteen black liṅgams in the temples and a sixteenth that is white. The sixteenth may symbolize Tripura-sundarī as Ṣoḍaśī, "she who is the sixteenth" or "the one who goes beyond or includes the fifteen lunar *tithis*" (lunar days). The temple also has three staircases, one on the right of the image, another on the left, and a third descending into the temple. These probably represent the three *nāḍīs* (veins or arteries) of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* and, taken together, the whole of reality (Kinsley1997, 115).

Although there are a few iconographical errors in Kinsley's description,[17] his classification of Haṃseśvarī Devī as Tripurasundarī raises important questions about the deity's identity. Kinsley does not tell us where he had heard about this temple to Tripurasundarī, which is unfortunate given how rare it is to interpret Haṃseśvarī Devī in this way. Identifying Hamesvari Devī with Tripurasundarī is something of a scholarly excavation, as no visitor to the temple would describe her as being anything other than Kālī or perhaps "Tantric". Even Tapan Thakur seemed unconvinced of this confluence of identities, insisting instead that as an amalgamation of the Daśamahāvidyās, she could very well display characteristics that seemed to fit each one. However, there is enough of an internal coherence to speculate with a certain degree of confidence that Raja Nrisinghadeb did in fact mean to construct Haṃseśvarī Devī to both defy narrow definition while simultaneously integrating multiple characteristics of a few "key" Tantric deities. Despite this lack of a popular engagement the possibility of

[17] The lotus on which Haṃseśvarī sits emerges from Śiva's heart, not his navel; there are in fact fourteen black Śiva *liṅgams*, one white Śiva *liṅgam* and of course the prone figure of Siva under Haṃseśvarī adding up to, sixteen representations of Śiva in total; there is no Śrīcakra under Śiva – but rather, a single inverted triangle – a Kālī *yantra* - and his description of the stair cases is not quite accurate – there were once three "staircases," however two were merely symbolic wooden ladders which have long since disappeared and now are merely imprints on the wall. The third staircase that ascends up the length of the temple however does in fact represent the *suṣumṇā nāḍī*.

Tripurasundarī being represented within the figure of Haṃseśvarī Devī,[18] David Kinsley's speculation cannot go unexplored. Kālī's characteristics may seem far more immediately recognizable in Haṃseśvarī Devī, however, it is also important to note that unlike Kālī, Tripurasundarī is not a popular Bengali goddess, making her iconography unfamiliar in this region.[19] But given the strong tradition of Śrīvidyā worship in Banaras in the eighteenth century, it is highly plausible that Raja Nrisinghadeb would have both encountered and engaged with Tripurasundarī during his Tantric traning there.[20] A helpful approach for investigating Kinsley's claim and excavating Tripurasundarī's hidden symbolism in the iconography of Haṃseśvarī Devī is to read her iconography against the *Lalitā Sahasranāma*[21] a Purāṇic liturgical text that enumerates the thousand epithets of Tripurasundarī or Lalitā ("Beautiful One"), as she is more commonly known.

The *Lalitā Sahasranāma* is a litany of Tripurasundarī's thousand names. Reading through the list, it becomes clear that many of the names resonate strongly with Haṃseśvarī Devī's imagery, suggesting that the connection between them must be more than merely coincidental. The first point of confluence between the two goddesses is in reference to Haṃseśvarī Devī's name. Another name for Tripurasundarī is,

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[18] Of course, Tripurasundarī is by far the most popular Tantric goddess in South India, where she worshipped in large numbers of Śrīvidyā adepts. For more on the southern Śrīvidyā, see Brooks (1992). Nrisinghadeb's decision to integrate these two *mahāvidyās* in the figure of Haṃseśvarī references the two great traditions of Śākta-Tantra: Kālīkula (centered on Kali) and Śrīkula (devoted to Tripurasundarī).

[19] There seem to be no other prominent Bengali Tripurasundarī temples at all. David Kinsley's singling out of the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* as an example of a Tripurasundarī temple speaks to the fact that they are not easily encountered in this region.

[20] Bhāskararāyamakin (c. 1690-1785), the great Śrīvidyā commentator received his training in Śrīvidyā in Banaras under a guru named Śivadatta Śukla (Brooks 1992, 54). That Banaras continues to be a site of Śrīvidyā worship is clear; even today, several institutions such as the "Śrī Vidyā Sādhanā Pīṭha" exists in Banaras and regularly publishe Sanskrit and Hindi works on Śrīvidyā.

[21] I will be using the very popular "chapbook" edition of the *Śrī Lalitā Sahasranāma* published by the Sri Ramakrishna Math (2002). The English translations of the epithets are based on this version, and I will reference each epithet with the acronym LSN, followed by the number of the epithet as it appears in the Sanskrit text.

unsurprisingly, "Haṃsinī – She Who is the Haṃsa Mantra" (LSN, 456), marking a definitive link between the two goddesses.[22]

In *The Tyāgarāja Cult in Tamil Nadu* (1996) Rajeswari Ghose examines the deity Śiva-Tyāgarāja at Tiruvārūr, Tamilnadu. Tyāgarāja is also imaged according to the principle of *haṃsa* or cosmic breath and, according to Ghose, is an unmistakably Tantric image with the "root" metaphors evolving around the twin metaphysical concepts of *ajapā* (primordial sound) and *haṃsa* (Ghose 1996, 11). Significantly, Ghose identifies the *ajapā haṃsa mantra* with Śrīvidyā – the South Indian Śākta system associated with the worship of Tripurasundarī (*Ibid,* 120). This link strengthens Haṃseśvarī Devī's associations with Tripurasundarī as it reveals a relationship between Nrisinghadeb's decision to name his goddess after this well-established *ajapā mantra* and his philosophical orientation as well as his intellectual interests. As a scholar and practitioner of Tantra, he almost certainly had access to and knowledge of the practices and teachings of Śrīvidyā Tantra in Banaras allowing him to imagine the multi-valanced Haṃseśvarī Devī. Interestingly, the *Kāśikhaṇḍa* also references the concept of *haṃsa* as an *ajapā mantra*:

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[22] Reading *The Serpent Power* with a certain degree of inference allows us to see that it too identifies the concept of *haṃsa* with Tripurasundarī. On his section on *cakras*, Woodroofe speaks of an important image in ésoteric Tantric practice, namely the triangulated *bindus* – *bindu* and *visarga*;

> In the Kamakala meditation (Dhyana) the three Bindus and Harda-kala are thought of as being the body of the Devi Tripura-sundari... "Let him think of the three Bindus as bing in Her body (Tripura-sundari), which Bindus indicate Iccha, Kriya, Jnana – Moon, Fire and Sun; Rajas, Tamas, Sattva; Brahma, Rudra, Visnu; and let him meditate on the Cit-kala who is Sakti below it" (Woodroffe 1918, 135)

However, earlier in the same section, Woodroffe also discusses the three *bindus*;

> The two Bindus making the base of the triangle are the Visarga. In the Agama-kalpadruma it is said "Hamkara is Bindu or Purusa, and Visarga is Sah or Prakriti. Hamsah is the union of the male and female, and the universe is Hamsah." The triangular Kamakala is thus formed by Hamsah" (*Ibid.* 131).

This again suggests that Tripurasundarī is the embodiment of an esoteric principle - *haṃsa*; the union of male and female principles. The icon of Haṃseśvarī therefore gives concrete form to an abstract and complex meditative idea that is otherwise difficult to visualize.

82. The Prāṇa called *Haṃsa* is thirty-six Aṅgulas as it goes out. It is called *Prāṇa* as it (the breath) goes out through the *Savya* and *Apasavya* path (or *Iḍā* and *Piṅgalā nāḍīs* i.e. through left and right nostrils).
156. The breath goes out with the *HA* sound and comes with the sound of *SA*. Hence Jīva always recites this Mantra, *Haṃsa, Haṃsa.*
157. Jīva always recites this Mantra, twenty-one thousand six hundred times, in the course of everyday and night (i.e., 900 times per hour).
158. This Mantra is called *Ajapā Gāyatrī.* It bestows salvation unto the Yogi. By mere thought of this Mantra, a man gets rid of all sins. (*The Skanda-Purana* 1996 461-468)

It is highly possible that Raja Nrisinghadeb's involvement in translating the *Kāśikhaṇḍa*, which referred both Banaras and *haṃsa*, further influenced the conception of his temple.

Various other epithets in the *Lalitā Sahasranāma* directly address the nature of *kuṇḍalinī sakti.* For example, Tripurasundarī is called "Mulādhāraika Nilayā – She Whose Chief Residence is the Mulādhāra" (LSN, 99), "Sahasrārāmbujārūāḍhāyā – She Who Then Ascends to the Thousand-Petalled Lotus known as the Sahasrāra" (LSN 105) and "Kulāmṛtaika-Rasikā – She Who (As Kuṇḍalinī) Revels in the Nectar Flowing from the Sahasrāra Through the Whole of the Kula Path (i.e. the Suṣumnā)" (LSN 90). The *Lalita Sahasranāma* also speaks to the relationship between Tripurasundarī and her consort (most commonly identified with Śiva), calling her "Kāma-Sevitā – She Who is Meditated Upon by Kāmadeva, the God of Love" (LSN 586), "Śiva-Priyā – She Who is the Beloved of Śiva" (LSN 409) and "Kāmeśvara-Prāṇa-Nāḍī – She Who is the Very Life of Her Consort Kāmeśvara" (LSN 373). These, together with names such as "Śṛṅgāra-Rasa-Sampūrṇā – She Who is the Essence of the *Rasa* of Love" (LSN 376) and "Hṛdayā – She Who Dwells in the Heart"(LSN 303) perhaps explains why Haṃseśvarī is shown to emerge from Śiva's heart, instead of from his navel as is more conventional for images of Tripurasundarī. At the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*, Śiva is indeed staring up open-eyed at the goddess, reflecting his meditative gaze upon his beloved consort as described by the *Lalitā Sahasranāma.*

The *Sahasranāma* also makes numerous references to the calm nature and beauty of Tripurasundarī calling her "Dara-Hāsojjvalan-Mukhī - She Whose Face is Lit with a

Gentle Smile" (LSN 602), "Maṅgalakṛtā – She who Produces Auspiciousness" (LSN 933) which are reflected in Haṃseśvarī Devī's benevolent and attractive form, juxtaposed against the possibility of Kālī's wrathful and sometimes hideous appearance. Haṃseśvarī Devī is, according to Tapan Thakur, "Eternally Sixteen" just as Tripurasundarī, who is known as Ṣoḍaśī or "She Who is Sixteen." Also known as "Rāja-Rājeśvarī - The Ruler of Rulers" (LSN 684), Tripurasundarī is the paradigmatic imperial deity, making her an attractive deity for kings, "big" and "little". Given her established position as an imperial deity, Tripurasundarī a powerful image with which to legitimize political authority. In our context, however, invoking her does not entail a rejection of Kālī, the era's most popular Bengali goddess. Not only did Raja Nrisinghadeb skillfully and consciously maintain Haṃseśvarī Devī's relationship with Kālī, his decision to do so has textual rationale; the *Lalitā Sahasranāma* calls Tripurasundarī "Kaulinī -- the Core of the Kaula Form of Worship" (LSN 94) while elsewhere, she is called "Maha Kālī" (LSN 751), neatly resolving any conflict of identity between the two goddesses. Haṃseśvarī Devī of course holds her hands in Kālī's conventional *mudrās* and carries the *muṇḍa* and *talvāra* that mark Kālī instead of the noose, goad, sugarcane bow and five arrows that are carried by Tripurasundarī. Haṃseśvarī Devī's colouring is also ambiguous. While Tripurasundarī is described repeatedly as "Rakta-Varṇā - Having a Ruddy Hue" (LSN 499) or "Sarvānīlā – Rose-Hued all Over" (LSN 49), Haṃseśvarī Devī is rendered a striking bright blue. This is of course, much closer to Kālī's black or sometimes dark blue complexion than Tripurasundarī's red one.

In *Auspicious Wisdom*, Douglas Renfrew Brooks (1992) discusses Tripurasundarī's esoteric nature in the Sri-Vidya tradition. He speaks of her mythological qualities - as ruler of the "Three Cities," the *trimūrti* of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva as well as her cosmological and epistemological characteristics (as knowledge, the process of obtaining knowledge and the situations in which knowledge is critical) (Brooks 1992, 77). He then goes onto the third, and for our purposes, the most significant, aspect of her esoteric nature; the "yogic" qualities of Tripurasundarī

> The full implications of these cosmological patterns are evident only when Tripurā is interpreted as part of the yogic body. Bhaskararaya… quoting the *Tripurārṇava* Tantra identitifies Tripurā with the three basic *nāḍīs* or subtle channels that, according to the

> theories of *kuṇḍalinī* yoga, control the passage of the breaths. The bodily cakras described in *kuṇḍalinī* yoga are systematically identified with the sub-cakras of the *śrīcakra* and so relate the microcosmic body to the acrocosmic universe (*Ibid.* 79).

Given the primarily esoteric nature of this goddess, Tripurasundarī's meaning is purposefully obscured. Brooks says that in the case of Tripurasundarī,

> [her] dominant textual genre is liturgy [of names that] gain their importance precisely because they are part of a closed and restricted system in which the gurus of the tradition, not the names or the rules governing them, control the content and the modes of discourse (*Ibid.* 4)

This secretive textual tradition ensures that access is restricted to the goddess, making her the dominion of an elite few. Kathleen Taylor compares the figure of Tripurasundarī to Kālī. Similar to Kālī, who is simultaneously domesticated for the public and esoteric and wrathful, Tripurasundarī is also a goddess of seemingly contradictory characteristics. Both have undergone processes of "domestication" or "sweetening" in order to render their once-antinomian personas ready for public consumption. Taylor, in studying the popularity of Tantra in colonial Bengal, has this to say about the two Mahāvidyās:

> In still more esoteric forms [Kālī] is not beautiful but 'a hideous emaciated destroyer'. The shift towards the feminine and the more terrific corresponded with an increasing emphasis on non-dualism in philosophy; the deity representing the non-dual Absolute appearing inimical at first to the ego-consciousness. In the southern Tantric sect called *Śrī-Vidyā* however, the 'Triple Goddess' *Tripurasundari* kept some of her gruesome accoutrements but acquired others that were not so – like her flowery arrows to inspire passion – and became beautiful, erotic and benevolent (Taylor 2001, 161).

That the goddesses at the centre of both major Śākta Tantra cults share parallel histories of transformation, binds them implicitly to each other. Raja Nrisinghadeb's attempt to articulate the esoteric principle of *haṃsa* within parameters intelligible to the general public by using imagery from both Mahāvidyās is in keeping with the dual identities he was compelled to straddle. Simultaneously a *zamīndār* and a serious scholar-practitioner of Tantric *sadhana,* Raja Nrsingahdeb lived a life in a constant

tension between the magnificently public and incredibly private. His temple expresses that dynamic perfectly.

Conclusion: "Making the Secret Public"

According to David Kinsley (2000), it was Krishnachandra Nadia (1710-1782) who spearheaded the popular public culture of annual Durgā and Kālī *pūjā* in his *zamīndāri* by issuing a threat of punishment for non-attendance, "while Isanacandra celebrated [the goddesses'] worship extravagantly," with sweets and gifts and animal sacrifice on a grand scale (Kinsley 2000, 100). Though Raja Nrisinghadeb did not force his subjects to attend his temple (which until the middle of the twentieth century, was considered mainly a family shrine), he did establish a religious tradition that would legitimize his own religious affiliations and political position. Haṃseśvarī Devī is, of course, much more than just another of many Kālī images. Similarly, Raja Nrisinghadeb established himself as much more than yet another *zamīndār*, while assuring his place as one of this elite class who popularized Śākta culture.

Raja Nrisinghadeb's deep commitment to Tantra and his understanding of Tantric philosophy are made clear at the Haṃseśvarī temple in its many explicitly Tantric markers. By building such a temple, one that clearly is meant to represent the Tantric initiate's "journey" into liberation, he makes what is usually a jealously-guarded secret a public affair. Such a move cannot be dismissed as a mere whim given the highly esoteric nature of Tantric practice[23]. By making his "secret" public, Raja Nrisinghadeb was participating in the larger *zamīndāri* culture around him while setting himself apart as even more extraordinary than other Śākta *zamīndārs*. At a time when Kālī had clearly been embraced as fairly normative among the elite, where blood sacrifice and Śākta *pūjās* were seen as markers of urbane sophistication, Raja Nrisinghadeb had made his mark as

[23] The *Kulārṇava Tantra*, one of the primary texts for Kaula *tāntrikas* composed between the ninth and eleventh centuries, contains the following injunction:
antaḥ kaulo bahiḥ śaivo janamadhye tu vaiṣṇavaḥ |
kaulaṃ sugopayeddevī nārikelaphalāmbuvat ||
"Kaula by heart, apparently Śaiva, and a Vaiṣṇava in the midst of ordinary men – in this manner, O Devī, like the water in the coconut, a Kaula's identity should be kept secret." (*Kulārṇava Tantra* ed. Ram Kumar Rai, 11.83).

even more *avant garde* than his contemporaries. He was one of them and yet he was different. Although he was, by his very participation in Tantric practice, crossing societal norms, the demarcation between the normative and "transgressive" was not quite so clear in eighteenth century Bengali Tantra. Due to the growing elite fascination with Tantra, Nrisinghadeb's experiments lent him a certain social and ritual caché. His elite status allowed him to engage with Tantra in a way that further legitimized his status as an upper-class, worldly ruler.

The extent to which Raja Nrisinghadeb's temple was understood by even those who were closest to him is unclear. His labour of love came after years of deep study, meditation and commitment. Highly educated and an intellectual by nature, this temple was far too cerebral, far too abstract and far too personal to be grasped by most people who visited or worshipped at it. Despite Raja Nrisinghadeb's integration of what had become canonical Bengali temple architecture by using *ratnas* in their original purpose as ritual spaces, his temple was regarded as completely new and anomalous; its very hybrid nature drew from already-esoteric and obscure references. As unusual as it seems from our perspective, removed from its original context by two centuries, it must have seemed just as strange to those who were alive during the early years of its construction. Raja Nrisinghadeb was satisfying years of intellectual curiosity and a passionate devotion to Tantric practice and philosophy by commissioning this temple. Far better educated and much more philosophical than the average person, Raja Nrisinghadeb seems to have poured his all his remaining energy, his money, and the fate of his descendents into expressing the esoteric knowledge he carried with him. From the available literature on Bansberia, Nrisinghadeb's religiosity, his devotion to his people and even his relationship to the British was seen as special, or at least unusual. By erecting an atypical yet fashionable temple, Raja Nrisinghadeb's legacy has been one that has earned him the sympathy of public opinion. He is perceived as a highly-educated and other-worldly *zamīndār*-scholar who was wronged by scheming neighbours. That he seemed to spend his disappearing funds on religious pursuits rather than in search of power only earned him additional respect.

Chapter 3

"Honouring" Goddesses: Land, Temples, and Titles in Colonial Bengal

The "British Raj," an evocative concept in the popular imagination, conjures images of opulence, ceremony, royalty, ritual, and the authority of the British officers of the East India Company. The very "Raj" term points to the idea of colonialism as imperial rule that privileges the British within a social network of "native" elites. This assumes a large degree of institutional continuity with the pre-colonial, an assumption that many scholars have challenged. Post-colonial studies scholars in particular contend that historians overlook the massive disruptions and transformations of the social order under colonial dominance. In this chapter, we will temporarily move our focus away from the Bansberia Raj in order to examine these ruptures and disruptions in a more general context. In doing so, this chapter hopes to serve two aims: (1) to explore the context in which imagining Haṃseśvarī Devī becomes possible in the early days of British domination in Bengal; and (2) to provide "background" for the next chapter where we specifically discuss the persistence of religious ritual in contemporary Bansberia.

Keeping in mind that the British colonization of South Asia was self-serving and exploitative, colonialism proved of course, to be an extremely destructive process in that it resulted in a fundamental rupture in the region's political, social and economic institutions. However, it was inevitably productive as well; colonial-era policy and structures served to construct and delineate that which was "traditional" as defined against the colonial "modern" creating a powerful new discursive milieu. Both processes resulted in the formation of new social groups, social norms and economic practices, as both products and producers of this emergent socio-political culture. The political and economic dominance over the pre-colonial elite aside, the British, precisely by delineating the "religious" as a realm in which they would not interfere, permanently transformed ritual practice by privileging select practices and texts in their quest for bureaucratic efficiency and codification. The traditional relationships between religion, politics and economics in little kingdoms were shattered as kingship was reduced to a sum of its parts. The British then distilled the idea of "honours" based on their understanding of South Asian courtly cultures, fetishizing and essentializing the integral

ritual aspects of these cultures. This process was of course mimetic, in that the perceptions of the British and those of the indigenous elite under colonial rule cross-pollinated each other in order to enable this phenomenon.

While indigenous cultural practices were radically altered during this period, the discourse of modernity was simultaneously being constructed.[1] The Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* will therefore be located in this discursive milieu by both engaging with the late eighteenth century as well as looking forward into the nineteenth century. This will, it is hoped, allow us to trace a mimetic process between colonizers and the indigenous elite beginning in the eighteenth century that resulted in the subsequent period of immense social change.[2] The increasing British domination of South Asia formed the political backdrop for Bengal in the eighteenth century where traditional elite groups such as *zamīndārs* were being divested of material power while and new cultural elites, the new urban elites[3] in particular, emerged as both producers and products of the colonial modern. Although the *bhadralok* are usually associated most strongly with the

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[1] Partha Chatterjee (1993), Anthony Good (1999), and others discuss the heterogeneous nature of the term "modernity" in its various colonial contexts, which are creative in that they subvert the idea of a singular European "modernity." Coupled with this insight, we must keep in mind what Richard King says; that "... it seems at best naively simplistic, and at worst downright false, to suggest that we can drive a firm wedge between Westernization and modernization... 'modernity' is intrinsically bound up with the European Enlightenment project. Thus, despite the claimed cultural and political neutrality of the language of 'modernization', and their dispute with the Anglicists, ...(affirmative) Orientalists were still involved in the Europeanization of the Orient, and, even when they appeared to be promoting the vernacular and the indigenous, their methods, goals and underlying values presupposed the supremacy of European culture" (King 1999, 87-88). This constant negotiation between the dominant colonial culture and indigenous groups give rise to a richly productive discursive field, breaking with what was then considered "traditional."

[2] As Tanika Sarkar points out, it is overly simplistic to attempt to reduce colonialism to a "crude binary" with fixed colonial structures on one side with indigenous rejection or acceptance of these on the other. This sort of structural determinism strips the colonized of both agency and voice, "supposedly [constituting] and iron cage of language and meaning within which the colonized mind may only perform mimetic gestures" (Sarkar 2001, 24) This is not the mimesis I am referring to. Rather, I point to a fertile cross-pollination (though acknowledging the inherent power differential) between the desires and imaginations of the colonizer and colonized, leading to mutually constructed discourse of modernity. See also Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Hugh Urban (1999).

[3] I am referring here to the *bhadralok*, discursive construct of the colonial modern that we will explore in more detail in the next section.

nineteenth century, once again, in order to locate the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple, it is important to place them along this social trajectory of elite identity in colonial Bengal. Searching for legitimacy within the emergent social order, new elite groups often turned to the manipulation of cultural markers of authority, thereby commodifying what was once integral to complex social relations. The significance of these markers, or "honours" as Nicholas Dirks (1996) famously calls them, will provide an analytical framework by which to situate Raja Nrisinghadeb and his Haṃseśvarī Devī temple. Śākta religiosity, one of the primary markers of urban *zamīndāri* culture in nineteenth century Bengal can, I would argue, be read within this rubric of commodified "honours." This chapter will explore the various changes in Bengal under colonial modernity that mark the Hamsesvari temple both an object of religiosity as well as an index of a particular and crucial historical moment in colonial Bengal. As we have already seen, the innovative stylings of the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*, while certainly a product of the colonial modern, may be used as an index of the development of a certain trajectory of pastiche characteristic of Bengali temple architecture.

An Emergent Elite: The Bhadralok in Eighteenth Century Bengal

As the first point of colonial contact in South Asia, Bengal experienced the transformations of modernity fairly early on. The social transformations of colonial Bengal have received a good deal of scholarly attention, since the transmogrification of this region gave rise to a complete overhaul of the economic and socio-political climate in India. Times of political and economic interruption and change are, of course, highly productive in terms of religious expression throughout South Asia. Architectural patronage, says Ghosh, "allows for [sixteenth century Bengali landholders] the opportunity to establish and express the role of elites within reconstituted political spheres." (Ghosh 2005, 65) The late eighteenth century is certainly also a reconstituted political sphere, giving rise to the divestment of older elites, the establishment of a new culture of political dominance and the possibility of new contenders to colonial privilege. Despite the long-established status afforded to the Bansberia Raj, this emerging culture of temple building was a fertile environment in which Raja Nrisinghadeb was able to imagine a spectacular and novel temple.

The changes in the economics and politics of Bengal were marked most clearly by the emergence of the *bhadralok*. The literature in the Bengal from the eighteenth and nineteenth century is full of caricatures of the collaborators to the British project known sometimes pejoratively *babus* or, more politely, the *bhadralok* The *bhadralok* were, as a rule, urban, Westernized, full participants in early colonial modernity, both as producers and products of this new discursive sphere. Their formation is a topic that is covered in great detail in the contemporary scholarship of Bengal, and is particularly significant in examining nineteenth century as their emergence signifies a particular type of break with the pre-colonial. [4] Their existence is contingent on the power differential with the British, marking a new social order with the prospect of a new elite. Although the term *bhadralok* is often used as both an emic and etic identity-marker, how exactly to define this group is up for some debate. Tithi Bhattacharya (2005) argues the term is not a necessarily class signifier but that it indicates a certain ideology informed by colonial modernity (Bhattacharya 2005, 24). The term however is neither homogenous nor static. Although, towards the end of the nineteenth century, *bhadralok* came to signify those with a certain kind of colonial education, in the earlier decades of the British presence in Bengal, the *bhadralok* were the colonial collaborators of Bengali descent who made their fortunes from their financial associations with the British. What remained consistent, however, was that despite disparities in wealth, class and caste, the *bhadralok*, by their very willingness to engage with the colonial modern, maintained their cultural privilege. *Bhadralok* identity served to formalize what was considered acceptable and ômoralö social behaviour in nineteenth century Bengal, re-casting Bengali aspirations with far-reaching effects. However, despite their access to economic opportunities and urban life, their social legitimacy could only be completed by their willingness to engage with certain socially accepted "honours" as we shall see later in this chapter.

As Sumanta Banerjee notes, the demographics of the colonial elite changed through time. At first consisting of *baniyas* and *dewans*, this privileged position was then

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[4] See Ranajit Guha (1963) demonstrates that the emergence of the *bhadralok* or "respectable classes" was contingent on land politics under colonial rule, namely the introduction of private property and The Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. See also the work of Indrani Sen (2002), Partha Chatterjee (1993), Pradip Sinha (1978), and Mrinalini Sinha (1995).

filled by absentee landlords and, finally, as we reach the end of the nineteenth century there develops "a middle class consisting of professionals who were products of an English education system" (Bannerjee 1989,1). Though a key force in the later nationalist struggles in the nineteenth and twentieth century, during these early days of British rule, the *bhadralok* were fairly opportunistic in their pursuit of social and economic advancement and served to fulfill the needs of the British[5]. Having established themselves in the brand-new city of Calcutta this rising elite group lived a very particular – and peculiar – lifestyle in the eighteenth century. Willing to do business in the new colonial economic system, the *bhadralok*, usually merchants who conducted trade with and on behalf of the British, were in positions of a good deal of power in this time of flux. However, the *bhadralok* were more than just wealthy, they were active participants in early colonial modernity, fashioning themselves in conjunction with what was a burgeoning self-referential colonial culture of ritual, pomp and imperial culture that served the interests of both the British and this new Bengali elite. In order to fully participate, and to contend for truly elite status, however, individuals were aware that they had to participate in the "markers" that were seen as integral to *zamīndāri* culture in Bengal. Established by this mimetic process of modernization, these amounted to a lavish lifestyle, the possession of land (especially valuable if it was "rural"), titles, the hosting of magnificent public *pūjās* and the construction of temples - especially to the increasingly popular goddess, Kālī.

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[5] In fact, referring to a list compiled by a Radhakanta Deb who, himself a *bhadralok*, "compiled for H.T. Prinsep 'The accounts of all respectable and opulent natives of the Presidency [in 1822]", Tithi Bhattacharya notes that some of the most famous individuals of that time, such as Rammohan Ray were not included. She speculates this is because unlike in the late nineteenth century, when it was "intellectual activity and education" which marked the *bhadralok*, in his own time, Rammohan's importance (he was not conspicuous consumer like other "opulent natives") "was not recognized by the political economy" (Bhattacharya 2005, 40). "The men who found their place in Radhakanta's list were all newcomers to the city and had risen to their present opulence in the latter half of the eighteenth century. All of them had made their fortunes either as dewans, or *baniyas*, to the Company" (*Ibid.* 41).

The Trend of "Honours" in Bengal: The Consumption of All Things "Zamãndàri"

The centrality of "ritual honours" to court culture in South Asia has been well documented by scholars such as Nicholas Dirks (1996) and Joanne Waghorne (1994), both of whom have worked on *zamīndāris* in Tamil-speaking South India. Objects holding complex symbolic meaning, "honours,"[6] as Dirks and Waghorne show, are appropriated under colonialism, extracted from their network of meaning and commodified on a sort of "free market". Dirks summarizes his argument on the political significance of honours, saying:

> ... I have proposed the need for a totalizing analysis, one which in the Indian case is sensitive to the complex interweaving of ritual-symbolic forms with the so-called actual mechanisms of state power...The shared sovereignty of overlord, kin, chief, and headman was enacted and displayed through gifts and offerings: through privileges, honors, emblems, "material" resources, women, service, and kinship. Indeed kinship, caste, territorial organization, temple worship, and the growth of protection networks and local chiefship were all variably but powerfully inflected by a discourse of order, control, dominance, and power; this discourse was in turn expressed through, and in, these gifts, offerings, and related political and social processes... The social relations which made up Indian society, far from being "essentialist" structures, were permeated by "political" inflections, meanings, and imperatives... [An] insistence on the "religious" foundations of hierarchy reflects both post-colonial Orientalist classificatory structures and the depoliticization of Indian society under colonial rule (Dirks 1993, 404).

Although honours were critical to the pre-colonial political economy of Pudukkottai, Dirks contends that under the British, they ceased to have any meaning beyond the performative (and the "religious"), undermining their once political function. He describes a historical process in which honours were no longer integral to the social relations of the state or the *zamīndāri*; rather, they were now mere "commodities under capitalism" (Dirks 1996, 356). This is significant because despite the increasing bureaucratization of the Indian state, it was important for the British to maintain the

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[6] In the Tamil *zamīndāri* and temple contexts, the term used to refer to "ritual honours" is *mariyātai* (>Skt. *maryādā*, "honour, respect").

facade of an unchanged social order. The British simultaneously divorced honours from their political function while participating enthusiastically in the spectacles of the princely states. Honours thus became floating objects coveted for their flamboyant symbolic value and were transformed into "autonomous markers of old regime inheritances and colonial favours" (Dirks 1996, 333). A fairly impenetrable minority class, the elite found themselves rapidly losing control of their traditional institutions of authority. The colonial presence therefore allowed for a degree of upward mobility by those who were privileged yet were kept at the margins of actual power. Those traditional "markers" of elite supremacy were now for sale in an open market for those with enough capital and official connections to afford them.

Whether one chooses to emphasize the political or the religious power that is depleted from these signifiers of royal authority, what is certain is that once "honours" were emptied of their meaning, they were suddenly free to be re-imagined and manipulated. This allowed the British to participate in the *idea* of *zamīndāri* culture – that is, to dabble in its outward signifiers – while dismantling the very political structures that once gave *zamīndārs* economic and political viability. The purpose of this kind of reconfiguration of pre-colonial structures was to lay down the groundwork for the new political and economic order intended by the British while maintaining the pretense that nothing had changed. Bureaucratic, opportunistic and inconsistent, colonial rule reformed land politics and forever changed the nature of the political and economic structure in South Asia.[7] The elite had to be reconstructed to fit the needs of their new overlords, the British. As Dirks notes, "colonized lords – whether as talukdars, zamindars… were progressively constructed as edifices not only of loyalty and subservience, but of a newly created and gentrified managerial elite: a tribute, and a support, to British rule" (Dirks 1996, 384). Coming back to Bengal, this analysis of the systematic "emptying" of ritual honours and their transformation under colonialism can be applied to the *zamīndāri* situation here as well.

a) The "Secular" Prizes: Land and Titles

[7] See Ranajit Guha, (1963) and Ratnalekha Ray (1980) for extensive analyses of colonial land-reform and their effects on pre-colonial landholders in Bengal.

In Bengal, "honours" came in the form of what had become locally prized cultural signifiers of prestige: land, titles, and lavish Śākta religiosity. In many ways, this parallels the processes in Pudukkottai that have been described by Dirks and Waghorne. Although honours in Bengal may have had little material resemblance to many of those prized in the South, they carried similar functional and symbolic meanings. Here too, honours were commodities to be produced and reproduced in an open market and were devoured with great enthusiasm. Conspicuous consumers, the highest echelons of the *bhadralok* in and around Calcutta, lived sumptuous lifestyles in large and ornate mansions, threw grand parties (to which the most honoured guests were British officials), held thrilling *nautches*, went hunting for big game and generally comported themselves as they imagined *zamīndārs* would in their rural landholdings. They even encouraged the development of slums around their homes so as to "maximize the rent income" and, significantly, to emulate the culturally familiar lifestyle of a Bengali "landlord" (Bhattacharya 2005, 48). There was, among this group, clearly a conscious effort to legitimize one's elite status by establishing ties to the land[8]. Even in the nascent metropolis of Calcutta, founded and fixated upon the principles of modernity, proving one's (often non-existent) blood ties to rural land-holding lineages was something of an obsession. Tithi Bhattacharya notes that:

> ...The legacy of land and its ideological imperatives was as yet a part of both the material reality and the universe of imagination. Most of the older urban families of Calcutta claimed descent from the 'jungle clearing inhabitants' of the city... This [land] Sinha has noted... was cleared not in conformity with notions of urban residential space but within the trope of the rural, where it would yield immediate income... The older social semiotic of land relations folded in itself the new stories of an urban life (Bhattacharya 2005, 48).

[8] By the end of the eighteenth century, the *banias* and *dewans*, who lived in the city, had become Bengal's economic elite. However, instead of fashioning a new identity, they were purposefully "re-enacting a role expected of the 'zamindar' in the little *rajyas* (kingdoms) of the earlier period. These little *rajyas* accommodated centres where a kind of urbanism, at level other than that of commercial cities or great politico-military centres, persisted through the centuries... The comprador purchased land and settled it with tenants. Rent was his primary concern. He had, however, to distribute patronage on an elaborate scale – he had to acquire prestige and status" (Sinha 1978, 16-17).

While land was the most obvious of *zamīndāri* "honours" that the eighteenth-century *bhadralok* sought to reproduce, there was also the matter of titles for the most privileged of this emergent class. *Zamīndārs* were once granted *sanads* by the Moghuls by which they were bequeathed various titles along with new grants of land. The newly-wealthy merchants of Calcutta were conscious that without also possessing titles, they would not be able to gain full access to the culture to which they aspired. The British, eager to maintain colonial spectacle in this age of imperial ritual, freely handed out titles to favoured and successful merchants. Sumanta Banerjee, in his study of *bhadralok* culture in eighteenth and nineteenth century Calcutta, describes the scramble among the emergent urban elite to establish themselves in this new and opportune time:

> Bribery, embezzlement of funds, forgery of documents became the order of the day among the new Bengali elite who seemed to be inspired by the single, obsessive motive of making fortunes as fast as possible, and thereby establish dynasties that would be regarded as successors to the old Hindu 'maharajas' and 'rajas'. There was a virtual scramble among the parvenu to obtain these honorary titles from the new rulers – and judging by the proliferation of such appellations in eighteenth and nineteenth century Calcutta, it seems that the rulers were quite munificent in granting them (Banerjee 1998 25).

Under these conditions, the symbolic currency of being "landed" (whether or not strictly a matter of fact) and having access to titles (no matter how newly acquired) were worth more than actual wealth. The fortunes of the *bhadralok* were built on their willingness to do business with and allow cultural access to, the East India Company's officers, who, during this period, were keenly interested in participating in the ritual theatre that was colonial India. This "access" was of course mitigated by British perceptions of ôcourtly cultureö and their notions of "Raj". The British needed ritual theatre – no matter how vacuous and politically meaningless – to maintain the sham that everything was just as it was before. Dirks notes that

> Colonialism subverted the fundamental structures of the old regime at the very moment it put on the appearance that nothing had changed, indeed, that nothing could ever change again. Colonialism attempted to freeze social and political relations, while it simultaneously displaced the political dynamics of the old regime

> upon which social and political relations had previously been predicted. Under colonialism politics was replaced with the cultural economics of empire. (Dirks 1993, 333)

Exhibitions of wealth were extravagant, elaborate, and critical to the politics of merchant culture of the time. The British responded by enthusiastically handing out a gamut of titles ranging from "Chaudhuri" to "Maharaja" to these cooperative and entrepreneurial men who both served them politically and validated their imperial project with their extravagant displays of "courtly culture."

Nabakrishna Deb (1733-1797), the founder of the Shovabazar Raj family was a contemporary of Raja Nrisinghadeb and a particularly good example of a wealthy merchant, who, after emulating the lifestyle and partaking the simulacra of *zamīndāri* culture, was eventually granted a title by the Governor of Bengal, Robert Clive (1725-1774) to compliment his image. Persian tutor to Warren Hastings (1732-1818), he was also employed as a clerk or "Munshi" to the Company (later to be appointed Political Banyan[9]), collected intelligence against *zamīndārs*, and in return, was awarded the all-important land-tenure and title, critical to the identity of one who wished to be considered a *zamīndār.*[10] Shovabazar was granted to him in perpetuity, and Nabakrishna Deb could therefore lay claim *zamīndāri* society while the British furthered the colonial pageantry that they craved. Although he made his fortune under the British, for merchants such as Nabakrishna Deb, it was the social elevation that the British could offer that was invaluable. As Bhattacharya notes,

> Wealth depended not so much upon rational calculation and sustained industry as upon speculation and varying degrees of idleness. The wealth of the *bania* was not contingent on his official income from the Company. It was not a salaried wealth bound to a rhetoric of thrift, or saving. At the time of the now famous funeral of his mother on which he is reputed to have spent Rs 9 lakh, Nabakrishna [Deb's] official salary was only Rs. 60. In 1766, when

[9] Pradip Sinha identifies *dewans* and *banians* as "compradors" of the British who represented the "upper echelons of a large body of intermediaries" employed by the East India Company (Sinha 1978, 16)

[10] It should be remembered here that Raja Nrisinghadeb also worked for Warren Hastings, as a cartographer for the Company. The favourable relationship between the two men was no doubt due in good part to Raja Nrisinghadeb's willingness to cooperate with the British and in some way, participate in their project for regional dominance.

> Clive awarded Nabakrishna the title of maharaja, he was offered a salary of Rs 2000. The uncrowned raja, now made official, refused this and demadied only Rs. 200! However, he rode home from the ceremony on an elephant literally throwing currency notes around him... Far from being a private assertion of culture, the cock-fights, entertainment by the leading *baijis*, the elaborate weddings and funerals were a theatre of leisure, a part of the fluid, unbounded time of the merchant (Bhattacharya 2005, 46-47).

This fetishization of neo-*zamīndāri* culture was not, despite what we have discussed here, restricted to only the *nouveaux riches* merchants of Calcutta. *Zamindars* such as those of Burdwan and Nadia who already had some rural holdings and titles, rapidly grew in rank and size due to their loyal service to the British as well.[11] They, like the *zamindars* of Bansberia, found that survival necessitated participation in this emergent colonial rendition of *zamīndāri* culture.

b) Holier Than Thou: Kālī and Durgā at the Service of the Upwardly Mobile

In the previous chapter, the architecture and iconography of the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple was discussed in the context of socio-political flux in the eighteenth century. As mentioned earlier, the pageantry, objects and signs of empire were critical to the self-identification and self-aggrandization of the British Raj. The Orientalist appetites of the British made religious symbols especially valuable in this economy of signs and resulted in a mimetic exchange between the colonizer and colonized, creating a shared space for religious spectacle.[12] Alongside the land tenures and the much-coveted titles, the obsession with *zamīndāri* culture also involved exuberant and lavish parties to which the British were usually invited as chief guests. The *nautches*[13] hosted by the emergent elite

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[11] Sinha outlines the more prominent of Bengal's urban elite in his chapter "Fortune-makers and Family-founders". He says "...these families may be brought under the general category of compradors, but not before qualifying the term in certain ways. The Setts, Basaks, and Malliks, the Debs, Ghosals, and Tagores, all acquired positions of power and influence through direct and indirect collaboration with the British" (Sinha 1978, 80-81). Although this list is not exhaustive, it shows the potential for ambitious individuals to join the ranks of the elite during the eighteenth century.

[12] See Urban (1999), McDermott (2001) for discussions of these processes in Bengal, and Waghorne (1994) and Price (1996) for similar information on Tamilnadu.

[13] "[Courtesans] formed a part of British cross-cultural social life in India from the eighteenth century till the early part of the nineteenth century, with the 'nautch'

were the subject of much British fascination[14] and in the eighteenth century, the British attended these events with an obvious enthusiasm. As Sumanta Banerjee notes,

> [Members of the 'wealthier classes'] made use of the available indigenous cultural resources û both the traditional and the new-fangled urban form – to entertain lavishly their British patrons in perhaps one of the earliest public relations campaigns of the modern era. All through the eighteenth century till almost the middle of the nineteenth, we read in contemporary newspapers every year of sumptuous dinner parties and *nautch* performances (dances and songs by north Indian performers) organized by the Bengali parvenu class in the Black Town on occasions like wedding ceremonies or religious festivals where the Company's European servants and traders thronged – their thirst for Madeira (the popular wine in those days) and whisky apparently getting the better for their religious prejudices about 'native' customs (Banerjee 1998, 24).

Although *nautches* were often held without being attached to the rhetoric of *pūjā*, the significance of *nautches* for our purposes is the particular role they played in the proliferation of large public goddess-centred *pūjās* during the colonial era. *Nautch* appeared as something that was clearly entertainment on one hand, but also accepted as a

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constituting a popular form of entertainment during formal interactions between British colonials and wealthy Indians" (Sen 2002, 45).

[14] Fanny Parks, who lived in India from 1822-1846, had this to say about a *nautch* she attended:

> May 1823-The other evening we went to a party given by Ramohun Roy, a rich Bengali *baboo*; the grounds, which are extensive, were well illuminated, and excellent fireworks displayed.
>
> In various rooms of the house *nach* girls were dancing and singing. They wear a petticoat measuring, *on dit*, one hundred yards in width, of fine white or coloured muslin, trimmed with deep borders of gold and silver; full satin trousers cover the feet; the *dupatta*, or large veil, highly embroidered, is worn over the head, and various ornaments of native jewelry adorn the person... The style of singing was curious; at times the tone proceeded finely from the their noses; some of the airs were very pretty; one of the women was Nickee, the Catalani of the East. Indian jugglers were introduced after supper, who played various tricks, swallowed swords, and breathed out fire and smoke. One man stood on his right foot, and putting his left leg behind his back, hooked his left foot on the top of his right shoulder; just try the attitude *pour passer le temps*. The house was very handsomely furnished, everything in European style, with the exception of the owner (Parks 2003, p.21).

"Hindu religious" ritual, oddly blurring the post-Enlightenment categories of "profane" and "sacred", "religious" and "secular". Throughout the eighteenth and the greater part of the nineteenth century, the British eagerly attended Durga and Kālī *pūjās* and visited Śākta temples. Given the power differential between the indigenous elite and the British during the colonial era, the performative aspect of these lavish *pūjās* cannot be overemphasized. This is not to imply, of course, that elite Śākta religiosity itself was entirely product of colonial mimesis. But, the large-scale consumption of spectacular *pūjās* and *nautches* by *zamīndāris*, *bhadralok* and the British certainly contributed to the rising popularity of autumnal Durga and Kālī *pūjās*. As Dirks notes, "'colonial' does not mean something exclusively British – it signifies a form of hegemony that embodied a dialectical process of transformation and refinement" (Dirks 1996, 360). It is fairly clear that the large-scale, elite-sponsored public Durga and Kālī *pūjās* were predicated on the presence of the East India Company and on its members' perceptions of India which, in turn, were fed by the response by the Company's "informants." Later on, of course, these festivals were appropriated (and sanitized) by Bengalis of more modest means. By setting up neighbourhood *pūjā* committees and through local fundraising, Durga and Kālī *pūjā* became synonymous with popular Bengali identity[15].

The celebrations of Durgā *pūjā* and the popular worship of Kālī are of course inextricably linked. Both appear at around the same time, and are patronized by the same demographic – the Bengali elite. While Durga *pūjā* is an annual event, featuring images that are constructed every year and then immersed in the river, Kālī is usually worshipped in a permanent temple dedicated to her. Building even a small temple to Kālī held an immense degree of symbolic power for the emergent elite in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Ghosh writes of the modestly-sized terracotta temples of the seventeenth century:

> Shifts in patronage partly explain why smaller temple complexes were constructed in large numbers.... Temples were built by local landholders... rather than the highest authorities in the land. ...the new scale of construction was probably attractive within the new

[15] See Sudeshna Banerjee (2004), Saugata Bhaduri (2004), June McDaniel (2004), Akos Ostor (2004), Madhu Khanna (2001), Ralph Nicholas (1982), (2003) as well as Rachel McDermott's forthcoming book on Durgā *pūjā* entitled *Of Fortunes and Festivals: Money Power and the Goddess of Bengal.*

patronage system for a number of reasons. Monuments on this scale were less expensive to finance while they enabled their patrons to map out territory and establish control over their populations. At a time of significant political and administrative renogatiations... rising Hindu *zamindars* probably found temple construction a useful strategy for asserting their authority (Ghosh 2005, 77).

Kālī *mandirs* become ubiquitous in Bengal, serving as anchors for their patrons' power and authority within the turbulence of their changing environment. Whereas Durga arrives, visits and departs with much fanfare over a period of ten days, Kālī is a much more permanent presence in Bengali landholdings, a constant affirmation of a *zamindar's* stability and of his legitimacy. In discussing Kālī *pūjā* in the eighteenth century, Rachel McDermott notes that

> ...Kālī's festival may have indeed lagged behind Durgā's, but by the end of the eighteenth century both were being used by the Hindu elite as means by which to prove their social position, independence and muscle. They emerged during a time in which the nawabs' power was growing weak and contestable, and when new – if unstable – opportunities were perceived as available under British protection; the Pūjās provided aspiring *zamīndārs* the exteral show of desired, and sometimes actual, clout in their regions. The festivals demarcated their sponsors as Hindus in relations to the Muslims and the British, as Śaktas in relation to the Muslims and the British, as Śaktas in relation to Vaiṣṇavas (Kālī Pūjā, especially, exacerbated tensions between the two religious communities in the eighteenth century) and as founts of wealth and financial independence in relation to the local populace.... Kālī and Durgā were attaining increasingly public and impressive demeanors (McDermott 2001, 174).

These large, grand Śākta *pūjās* were also legitimizing tools, which had the power to link the host of the *pūjās* to an 'imagined community" of *zamīndāri* culture.[16] Those who had the means – usually those who could afford to demand titles under the British – held these *pūjās* as lavish cultural events, and the British were the chief and most honoured guests. The *pūjās* and their accompanying *nautches*, the imported wines and the

[16] See Burkhard Schnepel (1995) for the long-established connection between goddess tutelary deities and imperial culture and pre-colonial "little kings" throughout South Asia.

trendy deities, were all simultaneously constructed and romanticized as "tradition." Alokendra Debroy (1924-2007) a member of the Bansberia royal family postulated:

> The Durga *pūjā* that is celebrated in Bengal now was started at the time of the British. It is *akāl* (untimely) Durga *pūjā*; Annapurna *pūjā*, usually occurring in March, is the time to celebrate Durga *pūjā*. But the *zamīndārs* in and around Calcutta changed it as a way to revel with the British and show off their wealth. Although most of the larger *zamīndārs* such as Burdawan and Bansberia were once Vaisnava, when Kālī became the main goddess in the region and Durga *pūjās* became fashionable, everyone began to celebrate both. (Personal Communication with Alokendra Debroy August 22 2006).

I then asked him if he was suggesting that the presence of the British served to change religious practice in the region.

> Yes, it was what you might call a cultural revolution during that time. *Zamīndārs* in West Bengal were very closely tied to the British - the more cosy their relationship, the more power they had. The bigger *zamīndārs* used the *pūjās* as a time for dancing girls – *nautch* – and parties with music, alcohol, *bhāng* etc. as grand occasions for the benefit of the elite and for the British. (*Ibid.*)

Did he know if there was this kind of revelry in Bansberia as well?

> Bansberia was always much more conservative. Burdawan and Nadia for example, were very Westernized and did well under the British. They, along with Paikpara, the Belgachia Tagores, Shovabazar, etc. all lived in Calcutta most of the time. They were much closer to the British, much more Westernized and the British, in turn, had much more affinity to these urbanized *zamīndārs* than the traditional rural *zamīndārs* such as Bansberia (*Ibid*).

While Durgā *pūjā* certainly was a marker of wealth and status among *zamīndārs*, as a part of the greater colonial spectacle of the era, it embodied a kind of internal logic in its displays of wealth and extravagance. Banerjee reproduces a section of a journal called *The Benal Hurkaru* of 12 October, 1829 which describes that year's *pūjā* in Sovabazar.

> At about ten o'clock Rajas Shibkrishen and Kalikrishen with their brothers had the great honour of receiving Lord Chambermere suit shortly after which came in Lord and Lady Bentinck with their suites, when 'God Save the King' was struck up and their Lordships

> were seated on a golden sofa, placed at the centre of the 'nautch' place... The nautches... greatly pleased their Lordships and her Ladyship (quoted in Banerjee 2004, 38-39).

It is this mimetic process, then, that enables the possibility of Durgā *pūjā*. A "modern" phenomenon, no doubt, and therefore, as King (1999) has noted, inherently and ideologically "Westernized," Durgā *pūjā* manages to creatively serve the immediate purposes of both its "Oriental" hosts and its "Western" spectator-participants.[17] However, as already mentioned to, Durgā *pūjā* reflects a certain problematic for the neat dichotomies as produced by post-Enlightenment thought which seeks to divide the world into the religious/secular, sacred/profane, spiritual/material, private/public, insider/outsider, irrational/rational. How then is one to categorize something ostensibly religious yet profane in many ways, clearly held in the public sphere, rational in its execution and material in its displays of wealth yet engaging in something that which would be regarded as "spiritual"? Hosted by "insiders", largely for the benefit of "outsiders"[18] the festival seemed to revel in its infamous reputation as an intoxicated, caste-breaking, blood-sacrificing festival. For some modern Bengalis, Durgā *pūjā* represents a corruption of an earlier, purer, tradition. Sudeshna Banerjee (2004), recounts an account of an early colonial officer, J.Z. Holwell, the "zemindar of Calcutta" who in in 1766 notes that "Doorga Pujah... is the grand general feast of the Gentoos, usually

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[17] Fanny Parks writes of a *nach* she attended at a Durgā *pūjā*: "We went to a *nach* at the house of a wealthy *baboo* during the festival of the *Doorga Pooja* or *Dasera*... on one side of the area was the image of the goddess raised on a throne, and some Brahmins were in attendance on the steps of the platform." Parks goes on to describe the image of Durga and then says" In the rooms on one side of the area a handsome supper was laid out, in the European style, supplied by Messrs Gunter and Hooper, where ices and French wines were in plenty for the European guests. In the rooms on the other sides of the square, and in the area were groups of *nach* women dancing and singing and crowds of European and native gentlemen sitting on sofas or on chairs listening to Hindustani airs..." (Parks 2002, 23-24). Parks also goes on to describe the animal sacrifices during "seventh, eighth and ninth great days" and the immersion of the image on the tenth day when the "goddess is reverently dismissed" (*Ibid.*) which shows the level of involvement and access that someone like Parks would have to all the various aspects of Durga *pūjā*.
[18] These were not hard-and-fast categories. Sudeshna Banerjee both makes reference to "Lord Clive himself... [having] made offerings of baskets of fruits, Rs. 101 and even a goat for sacrifice" and Company auditor-general John Chips who "even used to organize Durga Påjà at his office in Surul, in Birbhum district" (Banerjee, 2004).

visited by Europeans (by invitation)... and are entertained every evening while the feast lasts, with bands of singers and dancers." Banerjee laments "a great religious ceremony was thus reduced to a 'general feast'" (Banerjee 2004, 36). Her account reveals a tendency to identify ritual acts with a reified sacrality that must remain untouched by the mundane affairs of politics, entertainment and "foreigners". Saugata Bhaduri's framework for analyzing Durgā *pūjā* is similar. To her, these acts of revelry and the relatively recent development of public Durgā *pūjā* among those who were close to the British, render colonial *pūjā* void in terms of "religiosity". Bhaduri views Durgā *pūjā* as a way for *zamīndārs*, reluctant to pay taxes to the British, to money-launder:

> ...While the zamindars discovered to much dismay that they had to pay more taxes to their current masters, they also discovered to much glee that the Britishers did not wish to meddle much in the religious affairs of the natives. An annual extravagant event like the Durga Pūjā became and easy route for zamindars to get major tax reliefs and even manage extra allowances from the British (Bhaduri 2004, 82).[19]

Bhaduri's assertion brings up an important point. The ostensible policy of the East India Company was to stay out of all matters of personal faith and religion, which meant they had to engage in the painstaking task of identifying which aspects of culture were "religious" and that which was "secular." As Dirks notes, the colonial category of

[19] Bhaduri is even more forceful in her conviction that Durgā *pūjā* was a way for avaricious *zamindars* to exploit the "system": "The word must have spread pretty fast and especially after Lord Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, whereby it became even more difficult for zamindars to spend as they wished to, and Lord Wellesley's Court of Wards, whereby minor zamindars had to have their entire accounts audited by the British administration, the religious safety valve of Durga Puja came in very handy and pratically every Zamindari household took to it. The sudden origin of this annual activity can thus be possibly credited to a successful money laundering strategy adopted by the Dinajpur estate, which soon became popular among all zamindars eager to avoid the strict financial auditing under the British Raj, which was however lenient about money ostensibly spent on religious affairs. Soon, zamindars who would not have thought about the money laundering strategy would have joined in thinking it to be the duty of every zamindar, or getting into simple games of rivalry and competition, so that by 1820, it becomes a relatively usual annual practice in Zamindari households" (Bhaduri 2004, 82-83).

"public" gave rise to the "private" which the colonial authorities felt it was their duty to protect. "The private protruded into the public through disorder, which was always the concern of the state" (Dirks 1996, 361). This very distinction severed, as Dirks has argued, the political meaning from honours, which to the British, were purely public and therefore malleable, divesting them of their traditional efficacy.

Rachel McDermott, referring to the rise of *zamīndāri* patronage of Śākta poetry during the early nineteenth century, has this to say:

> As in the countryside, the nouveaux riches used the patronage of art and literature as indicators of prestige, and competed with each other to make names for themselves as supporters of religion and culture. In short, Calcutta during and after the time of Warren Hastings provided intellectual, economic, social, and religious opportunities for many Bengalis, the leaders among whom gained prominence and prosperity in the growing city (McDermott 2001, 35).

The separation of "religion" and "culture" from politics allowed it to become an arena of competition in the colonial era. By over-representing the rituals of the elite in the public sphere, religious ritual became codified in a way that compelled individuals to conform to them. This was largely in the hopes that it would serve to legitimize their place within the colonial modern.

A Temple Among Temples: Raja Nrisinghadeb in Early Colonial Modernity

It is clear that the eighteenth century enthusiasm for Śākta religiosity among the Bengali elite was shared in the Bansberia Raj. Bansberia, however, engaged in a certain reversal of the paradigm we have discussed so far. Unlike the emergent "neo-*zamīndārs*," Raja Nrisinghadeb already possessed the requisite lineage, ties to rural land, pre-colonial titles and the kinship networks needed in order to establish his privileged status. Although the connection between this highly intellectual *zamīndār* and the larger Śākta culture of Bengal are plain to see, the case of Raja Nrisinghadeb is not one that is free of analytical contradictions. Economically disenfranchised and politically crippled, the Raja's choice to build a large, expensive temple could seem bizarre, especially considering that he was already in possession of the markers of legitimacy in the new political order. Joanne Waghorne provides a helpful clue in her examination of

Pudukkottai during the colonial period. She examines the actions of Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman (1829-1886) who was also confronted with the East India Company's intrusive and extensive infringement upon his power in response, increased his physical ornamentation and opulent lifestyle. While to the British, "signs/uniforms were not an integral part of their beingness, but rather simply decoration to be put on and taken off at will," (Waghorne 1994, 112) to a traditional *zamīndār*, they were steeped with religious and political meaning and were extensions of the very identity and sovereignty of the ruler. Within the conceptual framework of post-Enlightenment thought, commissioning a temple in a time of economic hardship could only be an act of mere whimsy at worst or a sign of particular "religious" devotion at best.

> By this kind of logic, if there is not enough money to afford fancy uniforms and jewels, economy would demand that a raja set aside such frills for the moment. Clearly this was not a message Raja Ramachandra could hear. In fact, the more the British nibbled away at his "secular" power, the more he spent on jewels, clothes, and lavish rituals. He seemed to cling to his ornaments for dear life. The British are assuming that all he need do is take off some of these excesses. They are also saying he could simply remove some signs and put on others. But that was no so easy for this lord. These clothes were not easy to pull off, and their removal implied more than a temporary embarrassment over finances. Ornamentation here is not a uniform, not a costume. It is something else (Waghorne 1994, 112).

This "something else" is the profound meaning that the ritual acts performed by a royal figure have on the "little kingdom". The most obvious parallel here with Bansberia is Raja Nrisinghadeb's temple. Like the ostentatious Ramachandra Tondaiman, Raja Nrisinghadeb seemed to be spending much-needed funds that could have been allocated to improving his political position. After all, Raja Nrisinghadeb had already erected a Śākta temple to Durgā Svayaṃbhavā in 1788 and had, thereby, established his Śākta ties. The Haṃseśvarī Devī temple, however, was special. Clearly playing with architectural guidelines, the temple was always meant to stand out. Not only was it a "labour of love" and an effort to express the intellectual depth of one man's engagement with Śākta Tantra, it also set Raja Nrisinghadeb's temple apart from all the other temples that were being built by Bengali *zamīndārs* as part of an emergent trend. The Haṃseśvarī Devī

mandir was meant to be representative of both the Raja's sectarian loyalties, as well as his unique status both among his peers. Like the magic clothes of Ramachandra Tondaiman, the temple held the theological power of the ritual head of the *zamīndāri*, not so much because of its "religious" significance, but rather because of the long-standing power inherent in the act of *zamīndāri* temple building itself.

The architecture of Bengal's temples is meant to communicate much more than their patrons' devotion to a particular deity or religious trend. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the Hindu kings of this time were fully cognizant of the sea change that was taking place in the political environment of Bengal under the assertion of Mughal domination over the Karrani sultanate. Unable to defy the Mughals militarily, the kings articulated their allegiance to the Karranis through their religious architecture. However, in the eighteenth century, says Ghosh, in an attempt to reconcile with Mughal authority and as a way to express their modernity, Hindu rulers did in fact liberally incorporate Mughal architecture in their temples, especially in the form of *chatris*. "Ironically, by the time the architectural integration of Mughal elements was achieved in the Ratna form, imperial political authority was collapsing in Bengal." (Ghosh 2005, 119). Architectural bricolage in Bengali architecture is therefore both indicative of the wide range of religious pluralism in the region as well as significant for its expressions of alliance or defiance with higher political authority.

The Hamesvari Devi temple is well known in Bengal for its anomalous architecture. If mentioned in scholarly work on the region's religious, architectural or *zamīndāri* histories, the *mandir* is always cited as an "exception" to architectural and sectarian conventions. However, it is possible, using Ghosh's analysis, to challenge that assumption. The Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*, while certainly visually atypical, also following in the long-established regional trend of pluralistic temple architecture and is particularly expressive in its use of political pastiche. Incorporating Tantric iconography, Mughal *chatris* and Karrani-era *ratnas*, it also self-consciously employs distinctively European architecture in its "pointed spires with scalloped stucco decoration… inspired by European contact." (Ghosh 2005, 218) Raja Nrisinghadeb, aware of the complex and numerous political trajectories that circulated around him he straddled many identities simultaneously. As a late-eighteenth century *zamīndār*, he necessarily participated in the

fashionable culture of Śākta religiosity that defined his class, his credibility among his peers established by his Śākta temple with its overt references. As an intellectual and a Tantrika, however he was, of course far more deeply engaged with the tradition than most *zamīndārs*. His particular understanding of complex Tantric philosophy, expressed so explicitly in the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple gave the Raja added cultural cache. His installment of a powerful tutelary goddess as his *iṣṭadevatā* tied Raja Nrisinghadeb to an established practice among little kings who wished to secure their authority[20].

A product of the colonial modern in its material expression that was clearly enabled because of the British presence in Bengal, Raja Nrisinghadeb's decision to incorporate European-style architectural features also expressed something that had just as much to do with established pre-colonial traditions as it had to do with "modernity".[21]

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[20] In his study of Southern Orissa jungle kingdoms, Burkhard Schnepel has this to say about little kings attempting to gain legitimacy by the patronizing of a goddess:

> Royal patronage of powerful and respected local goddesses was one of the most effective means available to an outside king seeking to to obtain the trust an support of the original inhabitants of his new realm. It established some kind of legitimacy for these kings, since it linked them ideologically and ritually to the very earth of their kingdoms and to their tribal inhabitants. Moreover, they were seen not only as patrons of the goddesses but also as their chosen favourite Royal patronage of local goddesses was therefore particularly important in the initial and consolidating phases of a newly established dynasty, though it hardly ever diminished in importance, not even during centuries of established rule.
>
> As a consequence of their royal patronage, these goddesses came to be respected by all those who belonged to a given little kingdom, though they never lost their local roots completely and remained most powerful in their location of origin. While their fields of influence thus became wider, in another sense they became narrower, because to a certain extent the goddesses were appropriated by their royal patrons. The latter adopted a given goddess as the personal tutelary deity (*ista devata*) of their house (*ghoro devata*), of their family (*kula devata*), of one part or gate of their realm, or of the kingdom as such (*rastra devata*). In these functions, the goddess offered privileged protection and blessings for their royal patrons at the expense of the original worshippers (Schnepel 2003, 149).

[21] This phenomenon is not restricted to architecture of course. Multiple cultural forms in South Asia were – and continue to be -- influenced by colonial modernity. The

Following a custom of Bengali temple architecture that absorbed the various political affiliations of temples' patrons, the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple expressed this continued culture of politicized architecture. Despite the particularities of early colonial modernity and its resultant (often mimetic) cultural forms, what is clear is that, as post-colonial scholars often point out, the actions of the colonized cannot be read as the reaction of passive agents who were blindly acquiescing to deterministic colonial structures. Hugh Urban, in his study of the rising popularity of the Kālī cult under colonialism identifies the Bengali colonized elite as "creative agents, who retain the freedom to rethink, reshape, and redeploy their own mythic symbols in new ways, in response to or even subversion of the colonial order." (Urban 2003, 170).

Indigenous agency took many and varied forms, not all of which were directly oppositional. The case of the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple is a perfect example of *zamīndāri* engagement with colonial modernity, while carving out a space for political expression. Although the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple may seem to have incorporated European architecture in an act of simple mimetic emulation, the dynamic here is much more complex when it is historically contextualized. Structurally, Raja Nrisinghadeb's architectural decisions have an incredible amount of congruency with the decisions of Bengal's sixteenth and seventeenth century little kings who expressed their political intention through their incorporation or rejection of certain architectural features in their temples. Temples were powerful precisely because the *religious was political* and there was an accepted, shared tradition among Bengal's little kings that compelled an intricate, expressive architectural vocabulary between them. Raja Nrisinghadeb may have imagined his temple more than a hundred years after the little kings who were caught between the Karranis and the Mughals, but he too lived in a time that was highly productive in expressions of religiosity. Drawing on this tradition of expressive and politicized architecture, his Haṃseśvarī Devī temple expresses his political engagement with the new European overlords of Bengal, recognizing the inevitability of colonial

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Mahānirvāṇatantra in which we "find many elements that have a strangely 'modern' flavour" (Urban 2003, 64) is another example of the way in which colonial transformations affect textual cultures. It is a particularly significant example in our case as it too engages with elite Tantra while consciously participating in the colonial modern in its very form.

dominance. Fully aware of the vast power differential between the colonized and colonizer, Raja Nrisinghadeb's temple represented a certain degree of resignation similar to the little kings of the seventeenth century who finally began to incorporate Mughal *chatris* in their temples. His familiar with *ratna* styled temples is clear as discussed in the previous chapter, making it unlikely that his architectural choices were accidental. It can be surmised fairly safely therefore that politically tumultuous time, at a time when the importance to elite expressions of religion was clearly on the rise, Raja Nrisinghadeb's intellectual labour of love had firm political implications as well.

Although Raja Nrisinghadeb commissioned his temple in 1799 he died in 1802, long before it was completed. He left explicit instructions to his younger wife on how exactly to finish the work he had started which she famously executed with care and precision. Raja Nrisinghadeb was never able to see his visionary temple although in the public imagination, he and Hamesvari Devi will forever be linked. Rani Sankari, by association with the temple, was deified – oral narratives around Bansberia will often claim she was in fact the incarnation of Haṃseśvarī Devī herself. Remembered for her wifely dutifulness and her competence as a *zamindar*, Rani Sankari also served to forever change the significance of ritual in Bansberia. Although envisioned by her husband, it was Rani Sankari who executed his plans and actualized his Tantric temple. She then made Haṃseśvarī Devī temple the legal focal point of the *zamīndāri*, cementing the relationship between Haṃseśvarī Devī and their land. In the next chapter, we turn our attention to the legendary and unusual figure of Rani Sankari.

Chapter 4

Legislating Rituals, Remembering Rituals: Memory and Puja in Colonial and Contemporary Bansberia

I begin this chapter with the figure of Rani Sankari Dasi. An almost mythological figure to locals, Rani Sankari's legacy lies both in her reputation as an extremely capable *zamīndārinī* and her decision to bequeath the *gaḍhbaḍhi*'s lands to Haṃseśvarī Devī as *debattar*. Her *Deed of Will* (henceforth referred to as RSW)[1] is an invaluable historical document that defines and regiments the ritual role of the Bansberia *zamīndāri,* and continues to be referenced today in order to settle disputes regarding to the rights and duties of the Bansberia *zamīndāri* family. Engaging the nascent colonial legal system and a rapidly changing political order, Rani Sankari authored a document that both forever changed and forever encapsulated the ritual life at Bansberia. On October 8, 1852 she wrote a will in which she left all the lands under her possession not to her descendents, but instead, to Haṃseśvarī Devī, naming her as the new owner of the personal lands of the Bansberia *zamīndāri.* Composed by an educated, "modern" woman who was clearly cognizant of the emergent colonial legal order, Rani Sankari's will is an incredibly detailed document. This chapter will examine the way in which contemporary ritual in the *gaḍhbaḍhi* indexes the *zamīndāri* past, making these rituals acts active sites of remembering *zamīndāri* culture. In contemporary Bansberia, ritual links the present to the town's history; although rendered from its previous political and economic contexts, religion anchors the identity of the Debroy family. It is this remembering – both individual and collective – that is central to the subjectivity of those who still to live in Bansberia and whose identity is formed around their continued participation in these ritual acts. This chapter is divided into two parts: the first half focuses on the legal and ritual complexities around Rani Sankari's will, while the second half examines contemporary ritual and remembering among the descendants Debroy-Mahasay family. Reading contemporary ritual in the context of colonial transformations, post-colonial politics, and the injunctions left behind by the Rani herself, I illustrate the ways in which ritual reifies identity through remembering.

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[1] A Xerox copy of the original document dated 1852 was made available to me by Alokendra Debroy in July 2006.

In the collective memory, Rani Sankari is celebrated for having spent a fortune on building a temple that exactly followed her husband's wishes and is admired for both upholding orthodox *strīdharma* and for her religious piety. In English-language colonial biographies especially, she is described in glowing terms:

> unlike the females of the day [as she had] learnt to read and write, and, what was still more remarkable, to keep accounts. In point of fact, she was much above the average of her sex, it was, therefore, no wonder that she found no difficulty in personally managing the estate left in her charge. She also did not forget the injunction of her deceased lord in regard to the temple which he had left unfinished. (Dey 1908, 52).

Having taken on the responsibility of the *zamīndāri*, she was, according to all accounts, a very capable administrator. She outlines her ritual responsibilities in her will, saying:

> And having ceremoniously installed and established (the idol of) Goddess Sree Sree Iswari Thakurani with the permission of my deceased husband and performing the worship of the deities and feeding chance guests performing only the poojas of the Goddess Durgā and Shyama and the Doljatra festival of the deities and the Sradh ceremonies etc. and keeping the prescribed annual rites and ceremonies intact and meeting family expenses, I have been in possession of the rent free and rent paying lands and the Taluks and Agma Haria and Beg Kalu Saha under the collectorate on having Purchased for the worship of the godess [sic] Sri Sri Hanseswari Thakurani (RSW 1).

In addition to being an important first-hand account of the Bansberia royal family, Rani Sankari's will is a turning point in the history of the Bansberia Raj. After being awarded three-sixteenths of the family's total landholdings, Rani Sankari transforms the Ray Mahasays from *zamīndārs* to *sebaits* or caretakers of that land. As *sebaits*, the Ray Mahasays were meant to use what profit they make from their property in the proper ritual care of their family deities, making religious ritual the very core of this *zamīndāri*.

A Will to Power: Land and Legacy in the Bansberia Raj

In her will, Rani Sankari speaks of her husband's death, the litigation with her son, their eventual reconciliation, her fulfillment of various ritual duties and her intent to

endow all her lands to "Śrī Śrī Ṭhakurāṇī" or Haṃseśvarī Devī as *debattar*, naming herself (and after her death, her descendents), *sebait*. In a single action, therefore, she transformed her descendents forever from *zamīndārs* or "owners" of land to its *sebaits* or custodians,[2] relinquishing, in effect, the family's legal authority to the recently installed *neem* goddess and left detailed orders for her descendents to follow suit. Addressed to Sreematya Kaisiswari Dasi, the widow of her grandson Debendra Deb Roy, Rani Sankari lists the many assets in her possession, saying:

> After my death so long as my great grandsons do not attain majority you shall in accordance with the terms of this will get yourself substituted in my place as my representative and shall take possession of all the properties, moveable and immovable held by me Viz. the Zemindaries, for worship of the Goddess Sree Sree Hanseswari Thakurani and Sree Sree Sayambhaba Thakurani Taraf Lakshikantpur etc. in short whatever I have; and you shall get the name of Sree Sree Hanseswari Thakurani registered, in respect of above mentioned Zemindaries purchased in my own name other than those already standing at the names of the deities in the Collectorateà in mutation of the names of the previous holders thereof; and having your own name registered in place of the name of the Shebait in respect of all the properties... (RSW 1852, 3).

In addition to providing a detailed list of the *zamīndāri's* assets, this will makes clear an important assumption; that a deity, as a fully sentient being, is capable of owning land. In his study of temples, Arjun Appadurai asserts that a deity is quite literally, a "person":

> ...this deity, however, is not a mere image. It is conceived to be, in several thoroughly concrete senses, a person. The problem of how a stone figure can be a person has engaged legal and philosophical scholars for almost the last ten centuries and has been a particular subject of contention since the advent of British legal systems in South India...Both high-level philosophical treatments and popular behavior provide evidence that the deity is considered fully corporeal, sentient and intelligent. (Appadurai 1982, 20)

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[2] This definition of *sebait* (also *shebait* or *sebayat*) as "custodian" is used by Tarapada Mukherjee but sometimes it may also be translated as "trustee." Its usage is similar to that of the term *dharmakartā*. These have different implications and in the nineteenth century, *sebait* at a legal concept was emerging in the colonial courts, leaving the exact meaning of the term up for debate. For a discussion of *sebait* and its cultural and legal implications, see Sontheimer (2004).

However, Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer (1965) contends that neither textual discussions on *debattar* as found in Mīmāṃsa texts "nor the modern doctrines based in part on Western models are apt for the [popular understanding of land dedicated to the deity in pre-colonial India.]" (Sontheimer 1965 57) The emergent colonial legal system, concerned with the minutae of the codification of "Hindu Law," saw the need to legally regulate the traditional practice of dedicating land to deities. Pre-colonial *zamīndārs* often allocated rent-free land for the use of deities such as various communities such as Brahmins, religious institutions, educational educations etc. This was not unique to Hindu *zamīndārs*, nor did *zamīndārs* of one faith only grant rent-free land to those of the same religion. Redistribution was an expected part of *zamīndāri* culture, and bequeathing land to various individuals and institutions was a part of the *zamīndār's* many responsibilities. Despite not being granted technical "ownership" of their land by *sanad*, *zamīndārs* excercised their customary and de facto power to

> make sales, conveyances and donations of land... *zamīndārs* had vastly extended their power of distributing lands from *debutter* and *brahmottar*, to land endowed or sold to *mandals*, barbers, washermen, leather workers, blacksmith, milk-men, book binders and the *zamīndārs* and their relatives themselves. (Ray 1975, 10)

The redistribution of land, integral to the role of a *zamīndāri* included donating lands to deities for their "enjoyment," with appointed human *sebaits* to take care of that land on the deity's behalf. Appadurai suggests that the corporeal nature of the temple-as-microcosm "answers explicitly the question of where the deity resides, rather than the question of what the deity rules. The deity is sovereign ruler, not so much of a *domain* as of a *process*, a redistributive process" (Appadurai 1982, 22). Coupled with the redistributive role expected of a *zamīndār*, the very nature of a tutelary deity within the context of a *zamīndāri* allows for the bequeathing of land as an integral part of the ritual processes within a landholding. This understanding of course pre-dates the formalized legal concept of *debatter*, which we will return to shortly.

Religious ritual, always integral to *zamīndāri* culture, became central to the very survival of Bansberia after Rani Sankari's will. Rani Sankari, clearly aware of the turning political and economic fortunes of many traditional *zamīndāri* families including her own, ensured the continuity of the Ray Mahasay Raj by purposefully divesting the

family of official royal power. The Ray Mahasay *zamīndārs* were now to be explicitly in the service of their deities. Rani Sankari's will states:

> In short whatever I have you shall get the name Sree Sree Hanseswari Thakurani registered… and you shall defray the prescribed expenses of the daily worship of the deities …you shall carry on the repairs of the temples and of the buildings on the deities etc. every year shall keep in tact the same. You shall purchase for the purpose of the Sheba of the deities, properties in their names but of the surplus that will be left after meeting the aforesaid expenses. The Devattar property meant for the worship of the deities of its income has never been spent on any other account and you too shall not do so. (RSW 1852, 3)

In order to contextualize Rani Sankari's actions, it may be helpful to return to the moment of her husband's death. When Raja Nrisinghadeb died in 1802, leaving his younger wife to carry out the execution of his visionary temple, his older wife, Rani Bhabanandamoyee was *satī* on his pyre. Although this is common knowledge that his older wife, nothing else is known about her other than this singular fact - often, she is not even named û a silence which, of course, is fairly standard practice in any historiography that deals with the discursive battleground that is *satī*[3]. It is, in fact, at this juncture that the story of Rani Sankari really begins for historians; after the deaths of her husband and co-wife. The silence of Rani Bhabanandamoyee speaks much louder than colonial historians intended her to; it is her very erasure that allows the fullness of Rani Sankari's narrative to stand in stark relief. The hush that hangs over the story of Rani Bhabanandamoyee is heavy with the complex chatter of colonial modernity. She and her so-called "traditionalism" are used as the index against which to measure Rani Sankari as the ideal of the "new" upper-class Bengali woman that defined the colonial *bhadramahilā*. Not only was Rani Sankari apparently "forbidden to [become *sati*], she was to carry out the injunctions of her deceased husband." (Bower 1896, 20) As problematic and essentialist as this clearly is, their juxtaposition is a classic way for Orientalist historiographies to articulate the apparent ideological tensions critical to the formation of *bhadralok* identity. Her agency was afforded not to her, but to her husband,

[3] For more on the colonial discourse on *satī* and the chronic marginalization and suffering of upper-caste widows as individuals and as a group, see Lata Mani (1998).

reinforcing her role as the ideal woman within the patriarchal mores of *bhadralok* society. Both Bower's 1896 and Dey's 1908 accounts conform almost uncannily to Partha Chatterjee's analysis of the idealized colonial *bhadramahilā*. Rani Sankari's education served to

> inculcate [in her] typically bourgeois virtues characteristic of the new social forms of "disciplining"— of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting and hygiene and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world. (Chatterjee 1989 629)

As Chatterjee points out, the "modern" woman would have to carefully and selectively bridge the *ghar* and *bahir* dichōṭomy taking care not to compromise her so-called "femininity." Biographical accounts of Rani Shankari impress upon the reader the "orderliness, thrift, cleanliness and personal sense of responsibility" (*Ibid.* 630) with which she ran her *zamīndāri*. By imaging the *bhadramahilā* as goddess or mother – in other words, somehow sacral - notes Chatterjee, her carefully constructed and jealously guarded sexuality is safeguarded in the world outside the home (*Ibid*). Dey's account, unsurprisingly, aligns itself almost perfectly with Chatterjee's examination of colonial ideal for women:

> Rani Sankari was, as we have already stated, a very able and intelligent lady. She understood Zamīndāṛi affairs well and by good and efficient management added much to the property left by her husband... she used to personally go to the Zamīndāri and see with her own eyes the condition of the tenantry... Rani Sankari was anything but a cruel or an exacting landlord; indeed she looked upon her ryots as though they were her children, and was in turn regarded by them as their much-respected mother. The Rani Mata, as she was commonly called, was viewed in the light of a Goddess, and a notion had got abroad among the simple tenantry that if they took her name early in the morning - a practice which they generally observed - their day was sure to pass off in peace and comfortà But though motherly to all her tenants, the Rani was discriminate in the matter of the bestowal of favour, she only showed kindness where the case really required it." (Dey 1908, 56)

The mirroring between Chatterjee's account of the colonial *bhadramahilā* and Dey's imaging of Rani Sankari are fairly clear.

In addition to her performance of ritual, administrative and adjudicative duties, Rani Sankari also famously entered into litigation against her adopted son, Raja Kailashdeb who, she believed, was squandering the *zamīndāri's* already-precarious resources on an opulent lifestyle with no interest in fulfilling his duties as *zamīndār*. Raja Kailashdeb, in turn, sued Rani Sankari for exclusive possession of the *zamīndāri* lands, claiming that they rightfully belonged to him. The litigation drew on for years, during which time the Bansberia *zamīndāri* was dangerously close to accumulating arrears and thereby being confiscated by the British. In 1826, the two parties therefore reached a compromise by which Rani Sankari retained under her control of three-sixteenths of the *zamīndāri* land, which included among other assets, their residential property and the Haṃseśvarī temple. Raja Kailashdeb brought the rest of the land under his control until his death, when they were passed on to his son.

"Debutter": Devī as Juristic Personality

The exact etymology of the world *debattar* remains unclear and is therefore often transliterated in a variety of ways (including *devattar* and "debutter"). Broadly, it refers to land endowed to a deity and is a recognized, legal term in both colonial and contemporary India. Once endowed as *debattar*, land is inalienable under the law as it belongs to the deity who can certainly receive the land, but in no way can anyone claim to have obtained consent to sell it once more. The *sebaits*, as caretakers of the land on behalf of the deity, are, in turn, free to use the land as they see fit. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the issue of *debattar* was one that emerged quite regularly in the Bengal courts. The British desire to identify and codify "Hindu" law, coupled with their reluctance to offend religious sensibilities resulted in an inordinate amount of case law during this time. Landowners recognized that which was inalienable under the colonial system was mercifully, out of the reach of colonial hands. Rani Sankari, quite aware of these stipulations, says in her will to Sreematya Kaisiswari Dasi and her descendents:

> You shall not, on any account, sell, transfer, waste or give away the properties, and on your minor sons, attaining majority you shall deliver to their satisfaction, all the properties to themà They have not and shall not have the powers of sale, gift and transfer. If any transfer, sale or gift be made the same shall be void. (RSW 1852 3)

Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer gives us perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the legal discourse surrounding *debattar*, tracing its existence in pre-colonial India and its subsequent transformations as a legal concept under Anglo Indian law. According to Sontheimer, despite the eagerness amongst the colonial authorities to identify and codify so-called "Hindu law", and thereby protect the "religious tradition" of the "Hindu community", what emerges as the discussion of colonial *debattar* is in reality a complex construct and an artifact of its times. Sontheimer's detailed examination of the transformation of *debattar* from the pre-colonial redistributive process to a colonial legal concept indicates a radical shift in the relationship between ritual, land and politics. Sontheimer examines particularly pre-colonial popular understandings of the concept of *debattar*, challenging the reliance on either textual or colonial sources to engage with this term.

> According to common practice the worship is primarily concentrated on the deity, as personified or symbolized by an idol. In the simplest case offerings (*prasad*) are first given to the deity and if there are eatables a portion of it at least is kept for the deity and the rest of it maybe distributed as *prasad* (gift from the diety) by the priest among the worshippers or may be consumed by himself. The more wealth the deity possesses and the more prestige is attached to a deity, the more elaborate the forms of worship become. The priest or *shebait* has to apply the property according to the prestige and respectability the deity enjoys which corresponds with the amount of property donated to the deity. After the demands of the deity - in forms of daily worship, foods, festivals, repair of the temple, and not least facilities for worshippers, because the deity expects worship - are fulfilled, the excess of the property may be used by the *shebait* for his own purposes, unless there is a specific and complete dedication with directions as how the excess of the property must be used for the benefit of the deity. Thus the *shebait's* discretionary power extends firstly to the amount of property to be spent for the benefit of the deity and secondly to how to use the excess property or the income, which in most cases gives him a right, though the utilization should conform with the dignity of his office. It is from this excess of property or its income, which is still the deity's property, that the *shebait* may derive his maintenance as a kind of remuneration for his services, the amount depending on custom or on the provisions in the dedication deed. Sometimes the income of the temple may be used for charitable

> purposes, the gods' doing some charity with the superfluous wealth being a possibility conceivable in Hindu eyes. Whatever interests or benefits are attached to the property of the deity they are secondary and derivative, the property primarily vesting in the deity and intended to benefit it. (Sontheimer 1965 50-51).

This conception of *debattar* as a redistributive process dictated by the discretionary powers of the *sebaits* was transformed under colonialism, resulting in a rupture that shifted the locus of *debattar* from the benefit of a deity to the proper ritual worship of it by its human *sebaits*. As Dirks (1996) cautions in the course of his own ethnohistorical work, it is imperative to recognize the conceptual and institutional rupture between the colonial and the pre-colonial. Records are often slippery objects, eliding their context and giving the impression of unbroken continuity. Says Dirks:

> in reading these records we must reconstruct and recombine the integral relations of certain "subjects" juts as they are being separated and reordered in new taxonomies. Second, we realize that much of what we wish to analyze has already disappeared from the sedimented survivals at our disposal. (Dirks 1996, 324)

It is important to keep this injunction in mind when examining the concept of *debattar*. Although *debattar* itself has a long precolonial history, the earliest colonial formulations starting at the time of Warren Hastings, accepted the notion that a deity could be recipient and owner of land, conceding to popular practice. However, in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this understanding was revised, and interpreted through the Roman Legal concept of "juristic personality." Involving English, Roman, Muslim as well as "Hindu law" as defined by the Dharmaśāstras, along with "British and Indian jurists and the Indian litigants whose disputes supplied the instigation for the development of new legal principles," (Davis 1999, 249) *debattar* materializes as something that uses the linguistic signifiers of "tradition" while remaining thoroughly a product of the colonial "modern." With the antipathy towards image worship demonstrated by both the elite Hindu textual traditions and the colonial authority, these shifts effectively undermine the propriety rights of the deity, taking, as Richard Davis (1999) notes,

> recourse in such interpretive qualities as 'imaginative' or

> ‘figurative’ ownership and ‘secondary’ reception of gifts. A gift presented to a god is [now] really given to the Brahmins who minister the rituals and it is only in secondary or non-essential sense that one might call it a ‘gift to god,’ transforming the deity “from a divine person to a personification (Davis 1999, 250)

Disallowing the notion that an inanimate image could be a sentient, if “sacred” person under the law, the term ‘juristic personality’ became widely used as an acceptable concept with precedence in the West where a non-human entity could be seen to possess certain legal rights normally given only to humans. Though a loaded legal term, “juristic personality” has a certain aural resonance with the notion of deity-as-sentient being, and one would think that the implementation of this idea would be satisfactory from the perspective of both traditional landholding individuals as well as the new judicial process. In actuality, however, this move shifted the legal focus away from the figure of the deity to the intention of the donor and the *sebaits*’ fulfillment of religious duties, and the courts now possessed the authority to intervene if they determined that *sebaits* were not using *debattar* for its intended purpose. They were vigilant to make sure that “all that [a *sebait*] could have been entitled to would have been a share in the surplus revenues, if there should have been surplus, after due provisions have been made for the worship of the idol” and that “the idol should be kept up for the benefit of heirs in perpetuity” (Davis, 1999 250). Rani Sankari took pains to account for this legal condition in her will, saying

> And the minors [and subsequent generations] on their attaining majority and on getting delivery of all the properties to their satisfaction shall in accordance with the above-mentioned terms apply themselves to the worship of the deities in the aforesaid manner and shall… have their respective names registered in the place of the name of the Shebaits…And being engaged in the worship of the deities from generation to generation shall carry on the worship of the deities, and the feeding of chance guests and the annual festivals, and Sradh ceremonies and other rites and keep in tact the properties. (RSW 1852 3).

The endowment of *debattar*, in the context of pre-colonial *zamīndāri* culture, was an integral part of traditional patronage networks and redistributive and reciprocal

responsibilities to both deities and human subjects. However, with the colonial decimation of these relationships and the swift punitive measures *zamīndārs* could expect to face for defaulting on revenues, *debattar* was uprooted from its deep ritual and economic contexts and was transformed into a method by which desperate landowners could retain their assets.

Rani Sankari, aware that she was compelled to explicitly demonstrate her "piety" in order to qualify as *sebait* in the eyes of the colonial legal system, made sure to enumerate in detail her attention to the religious rituals expected of *zamīndārs* and her continued commitment to these rituals:

> After having the Goddess Sree Sree Hanseswari Thakurani registered and my name substituted in place of the Shebait in respect of the said Zemindaries etcà in the District of Hooghly standing in the name of Sree Sree Sayambhuba Thakurani; and shall perform the worship of the deities and feeding of guests and the Durgā Poojah, Dole festival and the Sradh Ceremonies etc. and rites and ceremonies, out of the profits of the rent free lands and the Zemindaries on payment of the Sadar Malgurazi (Revenue) in respect of the same, the late Kailash Deb Roy or his heirs shall not be competent to interfere with the same. (RSW 1852, 1)
>
> you shall defray the prescribed expenses of the daily worship of the deities, have been installed and are existing Viz. Sree Sree Hanseswari Thakurani, Sree Sree Sayambhaba Thakurani, Sree Sree Basudeb Thakur, Sree Sree Krishna Radhika Thakur Thakurani, Sree Sree Shiv Thakur and Sree Sree Salagram Thakur and shall carry on the Saradiya Poojah and Shyama Poojah and Rash and Dole festivals and the feeding of chance guests and shall perform Sradh Ceremonies and other rites. (RSW 1852, 3).

Rani Shankari repeats this particular set of ritual duties five times in the three-and-a-half-page document, underlining how essential ritual is to the identity of the Bansberia *zamīndāri*. The pragmatic interests of Rani Sankari are of clearly evident in her will even as she speaks of the centrality of ritual to the *zamīndāri*. This is not necessarily a contradiction, given the traditional ties between political will and religiosity. Under colonial law, however, this organic relationship was incongruous with post-Enlightement logic of course, giving rise to an uneasy relationship between politics and religion. This meant that although "Hindu" religious rights were protected, *zamīndāris* were compelled

to "prove" their devotion to the deity or risk losing their rights as *sebait*. "Colonialism," says Dirks (1996) "did not usher in modern institutions and ideologies, instead curiously blending its own forms with those of the old regime." (Dirks 1999, 354) This had the effect of codefiying ritual as the main raison d'etre of a *debattar*, guaranteeing the *sebait's* rights of "trusteeship" only as long as she or he could prove her or his dedicated service to the deity and that the finances of the *debattar* were used mainly towards the worship of the deity. Commenting on one of many colonial *debattar* cases, Sontheimer (1965) remarks that

> We notice that the judgment relies heavily on Western notions of dedication to pious uses and considers the essence of the gift to the deity to rather the facilitation of worship. It does not contemplate the deity as the actual object of the gift. We have indicated that the popular attitude is to 'impress' the deity with the gift and the object of the gift is not the general purpose of worship as such. (Sontheimer 1965 44)

As previously mentioned, under colonial law, *sebaits* were required to prove their faultless devotion to the deity in order to retain *debattar*.

The spike in numbers of *debattar* endowments during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the frequency with which donors named not Brahmins, but themselves and their families as *sebait* of the *debattar*[4] and lastly, by the large number of women who either endowed land as *debattar* or defended their *debattar* properties. The nineteenth century cases speak for themselves on the first and second points. However, it is the third point is the most relevant to our discussion. For *bhadramahilā* like Rani Sankari who existed in the unstable nexus between emergent nationalist and legal discourse, the possibilities for enacting one's agency were fairly limited. The nineteenth century was a turbulent time for *zamīndāris* both politically and economically; fortunes were made and destroyed in a matter of a single generation. In the dichotomy of the material *bahir* and the spiritual *ghar*, it was religion that proved a complex discursive framework within which various individuals and groups found it possible to mobilize their interests. Although in real numbers, more men were involved in *debattar* claims

[4] See Davis (1999) for more on this trend.

cases than women, considering the extensive and gendered discourse on *ghar* and *bahir* and the character and place of the upper-class *bhadramahilā*, there was a disproportionate number of high-profile cases that featured women, ready to litigate in the foreign system in order to protect their interests at home. Rani Saraswati of Dinajpur, Rani Bhabani of Natore, Rani Rasmani of Dakshineswar, Jagat Mohini and Sukhamoni Dasi, Bijoya Debi and Annapoorna Debi, Komal Bibi, Maharani Shibesuri Debi, Prasannamai Dasi, the list goes on. In the legal battle for what are ostensibly religious rights, the *ghar* and *bahir* distinctions are evidently transcended without much fuss. Amongst the rubble of a former system and within the conceptual framework of a new order, very real economic and political battles were being fought - and won. The assumed piety of the *bhadramahilā* was a powerful advantage in their determined mission to "defray the costs of worship to the deities" (RSW 1852, 2) and, as an added bonus, save their families' lands. The endowment of *debattar* for the performance of religious duties may have been functional for complex interests and motives, but it was not necessarily disingenuous. The maintenance of deities and temples and the cost of various rituals were often provided for by whatever profits the *debattar* lands accrued[5]. However, the very reformulations and colonial legislations that were meant to codify and thereby regulate religious activity were, in this case and many others, reappropriated by individuals to their advantage. Creative strategies for survival under foreign rule allowed indigenous groups to find empowerment in the very policies that were meant to control and order them. Rani Sankari, appreciating her circumstances, had this to say even as she seemingly divested her descendents of their birthright and placed everything at the feet of Haṃseśvarī Devī:

> Now I am laid up with serious illness and knowing that my life is in

[5] In the words of Rani Sankari:

> and you shall defray the prescribed expenses of the daily worship of the deities ...you shall carry on the repairs of the temples and of the buildings on the deities etc. every year shall keep in tact the same. You shall purchase for the purpose of the Sheba of the deities, properties in their names but of the surplus that will be left after meeting the aforesaid expenses. The Devattar property meant for the worship of the deities of its income has never been spent on any other account and you too shall not do so (RSW 1852, 3).

> danger and realizing that if heaven forbid anything untoward happens to me in the meantime it will be very difficult, my great grandsons being minors to keep intact after my death all these properties... You shall meet the expenses of the health and education of my great grandsons...out of the profits and income of the Devatter Properties within...and shall see that the minors become well educated and be of good health. (RSW 1852 3)

The anxieties of a *zamīndārinī* aware of the difficulties her descendents were to face in an uncertain colonial social climate are palpable in this document. Ritual was to be the anchor that guaranteed the viability of this economically and politically weakened *zamīndāri*, reconstituted within the changing dynamics of the colonial order.[6]

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[6] It is interesting to note that Raja Kailasdeb, the adopted son of Rani Sankari and Raja Nrisinghadeb, who enthusiastically attended *nautches*, is treated with uniform disapproval by historians who write of Bansberia. As a result, Raja Kailasdeb is written out of Bansberia's history – all the attention is instead focused on his Tantrika father, his dutiful and capable mother and his grandson who epitomized the ideal of a responsible and compassionate *zamindar*. All we are told about Raja Kailasdeb is that he squandered his family's money on frivolous pursuits. Raja Kailasdeb served as a cautionary tale for other *zamindars* of Bansberia who did not take their ritual duties seriously.

The key issue here is not the thrift of the *zamīndār*, but rather, his commitment to approved ritual duty. Both Rani Sankari and Rani Kasiswari had *tūla purūś dān* performed, in 1814 and 1895 respectively. According to *The Statesman* newspaper:

> The other day the *Tula Purush Dan*, or the weighing in a balance with counterpoise of precious jewels, gold and silver, of Rani Kasiswari, mother of Rajah Purnendudeb Rai Bahadur, was performed with considerable *éclat*, and over ten thousand rupees were distributed among the Brahmans assembled. Hundreds of eminent Sanscrit scholars and Professors from all the centres of Sanscrit learning, such as Nadia, Bhatpara, Vicrampore, Mulajore and Calcutta, were present, and lively discussions on many leading social questions took place. Thousands of poor and needy were clothed and fed. This was an unique spectacle never witnessed before in this part of the country. (*The Statesman* 23rd October 1895 as quoted in Dey 1908, 74).

According to Dey, Rani Sankari's *tūla purūś dān* was an even grander affair. These displays, also highly social and ostentatious, are, unlike *nautches,* are praised by Bengali historiographies. They seen as examples of *zamīndārs* fulfilling their redistributive duties and asserting their rightful place of power, all within the prescribed language of religious ritual.

The residence of the Debroys in Bansberia is still known to locals as the *gaḍhbaḍhi* or sometimes, even, the *rājabaḍhi*. Although vastly reduced in resources and wealth, signs and reminders of the past exist everywhere within the large moated compound. Only a small portion of the *chōṭo taraf* continue to live in Bansberia's *gaḍhbaḍhi*; the *bara taraf* and *mejo taraf* having turned to ruins in the past fifty years. Most of the Debroys live in Calcutta, in homes that were also protected as *debattar* by Rani Sankari's will. A large portion of these homes are, in fact, on a street in Bhavanipur in Calcutta called Rani Sankari Lane, an urban reminder to a rural family's long history. Although physically scattered today, ritual continues to bind this family, bringing them together in order to fulfill their duties as joint *sebaits* of the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple.

Rani Kaisiswari, Rani Sankari's grand daughter-in-law, had three minor sons; Purnendudeb (c.1843-1896), Surendradeb (c.1849-1897) and Bhupendradeb (c.1851-1890). As the eldest, Purnendudeb became Raja and became head of the Bansberia *zamīndāri* upon reaching majority. It is at this time that the family was split into three *tarafs* – *baro*, *mejo* and *chōṭo*. Although the title of Raja was passed on from eldest son to eldest son only, all three *tarafs* became joint *sebaits* of the Bansberia *debattar*. Under the law, land declared *debattar* trumped *zamīndāri*, therefore ensuring that *debattar* property was inalienable by even the *zamīndār*. The descendents of these three brothers, as joint *sebaits*, have, therefore, had to cooperate with each other closely in order to fulfill their ritual duties to the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* and thereby retain their claim to the land. Each *taraf* continues to contribute a percentage of the revenue generated by its portion of the estate (mainly through rents and some agricultural produce) to the ritual expenses in the *gaḍhbaḍhi*.

Although there was a consistent decline in wealth in the fortunes of the Bansberia Raj, there was a particularly dramatic rupture after India's independence. Under the various land-reform acts in the 1950s, most land belonging to *zamīndāris* had to be surrendered to the West Bengal government, leaving the Debroy family only the land that Rani Sankari had declared *debattar*. With the abolition of privy purses, *zamīndāris* were further divested of their wealth; coupled with the equal claim to *debattar* land by all Debroy *sebaits*, it was no longer enough to sustain them economically.

The remainder of this chapter will examine contemporary rituals as sites of remembering the past. Often evocative of a bygone life and lifestyle through traces that continue to remain for symbolic purposes, these rituals have also, necessarily, changed within a single generation.[7] Through interviews with members of the *chōṭo taraf* and the priests of the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*, I document how the enactment of ritual ignites nostalgic reflections on history in the imagination of those who remember the past.

"When We Were Boys": The Last Days of the Bansberia Raj

Today, there are only seven or eight family members who live in Bansberia in the *chōṭo taraf* home permanently – a huge drop from what was once a bustling joint-family. Although no longer living at Bansberia, many members of the family will return especially at the time of Durgā and Kālī *pūjās* to participate in the festivities [Figure 15]. The three *tarafs* are also financially tied to the ritual life in Bansberia as each *taraf* is responsible for financing one year of *pūjā* every three years. General maintenance of the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* and its surrounding gardens is provided for by the Archeological Survey of India and the livelihood of the priests is financed by generous donations. However, the *taraf* whose *bhāga* or *pāla* (share or responsibility) it is that year will continue to sponsor the goat sacrifices (*balidāna*), Durgā *pūjā* and contributes to the cost of *pūjās* in general. I was fortunate to be in Bansberia during the autumn of 2006 during the time of Durgā and Kālī *pūjās*. These large Śākta festivals are especially sentimental times in the *gaḍhbaḍhi*, and most people who remember the past will talk about it spontaneously. It was also the *chōṭo taraf's bhāga* to sponsor the *utsavas* that year, adding to a sense of excitement around the *chōṭo taraf* home.

Drubendra Debroy is the eldest surviving member of the the eldest surviving brother of the *chōṭo taraf*, and the head of the entire Debroys family as its eldest member.

[7] In their ethnography of Rajasthani peasants, Anne Grodzins Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar (2002) recount their experience in contemporary Rajasthan and the impossibility of escaping the persistent presence of the erstwhile kings of the area. Memories of the kings are inscribed in the physical monuments they have left behind such as palaces and forts, and in the living memory of the peasants Gold and Gujar have worked with. Memories of life under royalty continue to inform the relationships the peasants have to their own histories, to each other, and to their land.

Born in 1917, he remembers a time when life in the *gaḍhbaḍhi* was very different. "When we were boys," begins Drubendra Debroy,

> we lived like princes. We celebrated everything with a lot of pomp. The *pūjās* especially were celebrated with large fireworks, lights, oil lamps, candles and *diyās*. Many, many people lived in the *gaḍhbaḍhi* and we used to travel in automated and horse drawn carriages to collect taxes from the villages. At Governors' Durbars, our family was always seated in the first seat in the first row. That's how much power we had even when I was young. The family used to celebrate all together at any religious festival. There was barely any conflict between the *tarafs* because the property was so well-divided, there was nothing to fight over. (Personal Communication with Drubendra Debroy November 5, 2006)

Royal ritual and religious ritual are inseparable in the memory of the *zamīndāri* and this relationship continues to be visible today. Durgā *pūjā* continues to be sponsored by the *tarafs* in a *pandal* constructed on a permanent stone structure for this purpose, located in the area where the three *taraf* homes once stood. Durgā *pūjā* at the *gaḍhbaḍhi* begins with a *bali* (animal sacrifice) in front of the Haṃseśvarī *mandir* for the benefit of both Haṃseśvarī and the Mahiṣamardinī who resides in the temple alongside the main deity. According to Alokendra Debroy (1924-2007), the youngest member of the *chōṭo taraf*, this is a family tradition and commemorates their departure from Patuli during the time of Raghab Dutt Ray Chaudhuri. "The story goes that it was just before Durgā *pūjā* that the family had to escape Patuli suddenly. They feared this was to be their last *pūjā* and offered a *balidāna* before they left. Ever since then, it's been tradition here to always offer a *balidāna* before the *pūjās* can begin." (Personal Communication with Alokendra Debroy August 22, 2006). Even during Durgā *pūjā*, an abbreviated *pūjā* is first performed at the Haṃseśvarī temple for the figure of the Mahiṣamardinī before it is repeated at the *pandal*. "She is our permanent Devī and we must honour her first," said Tapan Thakur.

"When we were boys," said Drubendra Debroy,

> Durgā *pūjā* in this region could not begin until ours did. There were very few of them in the area back then, and everyone around here used to come to ours to see the *zamīndār*, including Muslims and Saotals who brought with them their unique songs and dancing. People were close to the *zamīndāri* family, even those who were Scheduled Castes in this area would come to this *pūjā*. There was

> no caste distinction and none of the Hindu-Muslim tension you see today. Durgā *pūjā* was very exciting for our family too. Only that *taraf* whose turn it was to finance the *pūjā* would cook and we would all gather there for every meal. There were dozens and dozens of us. (Personal communication with Drubendro Debroy November 5, 2006).

Although this is no longer true, given that the *mejjo* and *baro tarafs* are largely absent during Durgā *pūjā*, the meat from each *balidāna* (except for the *bali* on the night of Kālī *pūjā*) is still sent to the sponsoring *taraf.* The eldest woman of the household receives it as *mahābhoga* ("great [sanctified] food") and, reminiscent of the shared meals of the past, divides it among visiting family members and dependents in the *gaḍhbaḍhi* [Figure 16].

A Contemporary Dilemma: *Bali*

I examine the ritual of *balidāna* in detail here because perhaps no other ritual in Bansberia straddles the past and the present as precariously as does the practice of animal sacrifice. Although illegal in West Bengal today, it is an open secret that it still continues in the *gaḍhbaḍhi* is an open secret. *Paśubali* (animal sacrifice) has been integral to the worship of Haṃseśvarī and has been commissioned fervently by the Ray Mahasay family as a part of their adopted Śākta identity [Figure 17]. Although modified in recent years, *balidāna* continues to be essential to the identity of the religious culture and familial identity at Bansberia. The sacrifice of goats has been fundamental to the worship of Kālī throughout eastern India. As Suchitra Samanta notes,

> Sacrifical offerings of vegetables and/or animals are textually prescribed and mandatory in Kālī's worship and for Śākti goddess in general...Offerings in sacrifice are described as a 'gift' (*bali*), a term that is synonymously used for the rite itself...The compound *balidan* means the 'offering of a gift'... Several Tantra as well as Purana texts list appropriate animals and vegetables (and humans) which may be offered in sacrifice. (Samanta, 1994, 780)

Vegetable (gourd) sacrifice has been substituted for animals in many Śākta temples across Bengal,[8] which itself represents a compromise between Tantric rituals and the hegemonic Brahmanic sensibilities of the modern middle-class. Given that the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple, despite its overt Tantric imagery and symbolism, is run by Brahmin priests and by a high-caste family with once strong Vaiṣṇava ties, it is fair to say that its practices are also largely Sanskritic. Daily rituals at the *mandir* are, in fact, Brahmanic, with binaries of purity/pollution, auspiciousness/inauspciousness strictly maintained as per the codes of orthodox Bengali temple worship. Despite this, there is a continued enthusiasm for blood sacrifice among most individuals involved with the temple. There seems to be a general rule that at a Śākta temple, only *bali* can adequately honour Devī[9].

Anil Thakur (b. 1925) is the father of Tapan and Basan Thakur, Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir*'s current priests. I interviewed him at home on the day of Kālī *pūjā* when he was too weak to visit the temple himself. "I have been a priest at the *mandir* since I was thirteen years old. My father was the priest there before me. "In my day," said Anil Thakur shaking his head,

> we used perform *balidāna* of twenty-one goats. Now we only sacrifice four during Durgā *pūjā* and barely any throughout the rest of the year. During Durgā *pūjā* perform *balidāna* of two in front of Haṃseśvarī – one on *śaṣṭhī* before Durgā *pūjā* begins, and then one on *navamī.* Then we perform *balidāna* of two in front of the Durgā *pandal* on *aṣṭamī* and during *sandhi pūjā*. (Personal Communication with Anil Thakur October 21, 2006)

This decrease is due both to the changing economics of the temple and to the sensibilities of Tapan Thakur. Although the Debroy family continues to finance a large portion of the *pūjā* supplemented with donations to the temple, the price of goats has risen significantly. "Goats used to be Rs.8-9 a head when I was young," said Anil Thakur, "now they are about Rs.500 a head." (Personal Communication with Anil Thakur October 21, 2006)

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[8] This process has been discussed by several scholars of religion in Bengal, including Akos Oster (1980).

[9] For a theological explanation and detailed description of the rituals of *balidan* to Kālī, see Samanta (1994).

Coupled with this is Tapan Thakur's reluctance with regards to *pasu* (animal) *bali.*[10] "I had become a vegetarian," said Tapan Thakur "seeing *bali* used to haunt me and I would have nightmares of blood everywhere, with the legs of goats attacking me in my sleep. I wasn't even able to eat fish." However, the daily *bhog* or sanctified food at the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* is required to include something non-vegetarian – usually a piece of fish. This *bhog* is cooked at the temple and may be purchased by those who wish, on a daily basis. "I used to catch tiny fish from the pond – just as a token to fulfill my duty," he said. But one day, he had a change of heart:

> I met a senior priest one day who chastised me. 'How can you call yourself a priest at a Śākta temple and not even have good quality fish in Mā's *bhoga*?' he said. I realized he was right so I slowly got over my disgust. Now I do not mind anymore. However, I have reduced the numbers of *pānṭhābali* [goat sacrifice] to the bare minimum. Now *balidāna* is only performed four times during Durgā *pūjā,* and once each at Kālī *pūjā*, *dola*, and *prāṇapratiṣṭhā*. (Personal Communication with Tapan Thakur, October 21, 2006).

All these goats are black males, apparently Kālī's favourite. However, until the middle of the twentieth century, a white goat was *balidāna* to Haṃseśvarī Devī during Lakṣmī *pūjā* – subverting the strict vegetarianism that is usually observed on that day. Does Tapan Thakur hope to stop the practice altogether? His brother, Basan Thakur speaks up: "Not as long as the senior Debroy [Drubendra Debroy] is alive. He will not allow it." Tapan Thakur adds, "I have realized Mā is peaceful, but sometimes she desires it. I still do not like it, but I do not mind it." (Personal Communication with Basan and Tapan Thakur, October 21, 2006). In *The Camphor Flame* (1992), C.F. Fuller makes the

[10] Tapan Thakur brings complex perspective to his work as a priest. Formerly a passionate Marxist, he had abandoned his family practice when he was younger. Although he returned to his vocation as a priest, Tapan Thakur now identifies strongly with neo-Vedāntic philosophy and is a dedicated follower of the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. A Sanskrit scholar, he teaches at a college in Calcuctta during the day, leaving the running of the temple to his brother Basan. Tapan Thakur clearly remains the most powerful figure in the temple however, and is central to the evening *ārati* ritual and his presence is critical at all major festival days. On important days such as Kali or Durga *puja* when the crowds are usually crushing and the temple is short-staffed, some other, younger priests are recruited to lend a hand with the priestly duties at the temple. This includes Jesu (named for his birthday on December 25th), Tapan Thakur's son who is usually away at school pursuing a degree in computer science.

point that in Śākta temple culture, even *saumyā* goddesses may be offered blood. Goddesses may not be perceived as demanding blood, but may nevertheless be pleased to accept it. Unlike "fierce" deities who may be propitiated and asked to "cool" or leave by offering them blood, the presence of the goddess is always desired and she is offered *bali* in order to petition "her protection, not her departure" (Fuller 1992, 87).

"When I was younger," continued Tapan Thakur, "people used to come with their own goats offer *balidāna* to Mā throughout the year as a *vrata* for something they would like to thank her for. But I stopped that as well. If you would like to thank Mā, doing *pūjā* to her is enough. Now we only allow the public to bring in goats for *bali* during Kālī *pūjā*." This change in attitude to *bali* is not Tapan Thakur's alone. There has been, a "pendulum swing," as McDermott puts it, between Tantra and Bhakti and in contemporary Bengal, and popular religion has moved in the general favour of Bhakti (McDermott 2001, 299-303). Samanta also addresses the issue of *bali* specifically in this changing environment:

> The contemporary devotional (Bhakti) emphasis in Hinduism has provided a historical change in perception from Sakti, the powerful Śākta Tantra Creatrix, to Kālī, the loving (though fearsome and arbitrary) Mother. This has had significant effects on the mind of people who offer *bali* today. The literate, urban, middle-class Bengalis among whom I worked were more circumspect about the rite, citing on the one hand, their reluctance to offer a loving Mother-goddess the blood of one of her own creation. On the other hand, modern considerations of humaneness and the awareness of a changing India that looks upon the awareness of a changing India that looks upon such rites as relics from a less-enlightened past were used as arguments against the violent killing that *bali* involves (although all my informants were nonvegetarians, and ate goat meat on a nonritual basis)... Nevertheless, despite their reservations, I generally found that most of my own informants held a deep, often implicity belief in the power and the efficacy of *bali*, attested to by their (sometimes secret) offerings of *bali* in times of crisis (Samanta 1994, 783).

This points to the fact that in our context, despite Haṃseśvarī's unique features and Nrisinghadeb and Rani Sankari's efforts to build a complex and distinctive temple, the *mandir* cannot escape the larger discourses of its times. Through her partial identification with Kālī and with Sanskritized rituals, Haṃseśvarī Devī is implicated in

these social debates. In post-colonial India, the practice of *bali* appears incompatible and indeed irreconcilable with the image of a "modern," "global" nation.

For the eldest surviving members of the Debroy family however, to do away with *bali* is unthinkable, given how much meaning this practice holds for them at a personal level. But even they have had to compromise with popular contemporary sensibilities. In addition to the number of *balis* being reduced during Durgā *pūjā*, some *balis* have been erased from the ritual program altogether. This includes the Lakṣmī *pūjā bali* of the white goat, as already mentioned, the *bali* on Vijayā Daśamī before the immersion of the Durgā image, *sanjātrā*, *banna pūjā*, *dolarātri pūjā* and *chōṭomase,* and, most significantly, the *mōṣabali* or water buffalo sacrifice on *navamī* (Personal Communication with Anil Thakur October 21, 2006).

The practice of *mōṣabali* was once fairly common during Durgā *pūjā* but has dwindled in recent times as has the *pānṭhābali*. Both Alokendra and Drubendra Debroy as well as Anil Thakur spoke of the *mōṣabali* with a good deal of nostalgia. "Those were different times," Alokendra Debroy said, "it was a day for a lot of fun. Most of us were intoxicated on *bhang* and after the *mōṣa* was *balidāna*, we would smear ourselves in its blood as if it was *prasāda*" added Alokendra Debroy (Personal Communication with Alokendra Debroy, August 22, 2006). There is of course, an evocative, visual link between Durgā and a slain water buffalo. However, possibly given the water buffalo's close association with what has now become an emblematic symbol of Hindu revivalism – the cow – the sacrifice of buffalo is seen as even more problematic that that of the goat[11] and the practice of *mōṣabali* has been abandoned here since the mid-twentieth century as well.

There is a permanent *balipīṭha* directly in front of the Haṃseśvarī Devī *mandir* so that she may see it being done. A forked *bali* post is stuck deeply into a large mound of wet clay in preparation. After the performance of a number of rituals, the priests gather around the post while they recite *mantras* and consecrate the post with Gaṅgā water. A helper brings the chosen goat – which has a red hibiscus placed on his head – to the post

[11] See Richard Brubaker's "The Untamed Goddesses of Village India" (1983) for an exploration between the possible relationship between village goddesses and *mosa bali* in South India.

and arranges its head between the fork, its chest lying on the clay mound. A member of the *kamar* (iron-working caste) waits with a long sword, a red hibiscus also tucked behind his ear. "He is doing *ma's* work," says Tapan Thakur in way of explanation. Tapan Thakur quickly reaches down, pulls the forelegs of the goat behind it while Basan Thakur grabs the goat's head. With a loud yell of "O *ma*!" the man with the sword immolates the goat in one quick swoop, cleaving a deep gash in the clay. Tapan Thakur quickly places the still-wriggling body of the goat on a large banana leaf and leaves it by the post for the various helpers to remove. Basan Thakur takes the head and walks quickly back to the image of *devi* where he places it on another banana leaf alongside water, rock salt, bananas, sugar, honey, flowers and a candle with the blood and flesh of the goat on a copper plate, at the goddesses' feet. The head is later given to the sacrificer as way of payment for his services. Basan Thakur takes the head and walks quickly back to the image of Devī where he places it on a banana leaf at the goddesses' feet. The head is later given to the sacrificer as way of payment for his services. The blood from the goat is left on the banana leaf at the site of the post where people take it to mark their foreheads. Even after the post has been cleaned of blood and the remnants of the sacrifice, the spot is marked by flowers from devotèes who will ceremoniously circumambulate the *pīṭha* along with the temples and images of the deities.

The body of the goat is then taken to a special room beside the temple, skinned and butchered for cooking. The meat is then given to the *taraf* who is responsible for financing that year's *pūjā* and it is cooked as *mahaprasāda* or "great *prasāda*," often without onions or garlic (usually omitted only in Bengali vegetarian food).

There is one exception to this, however. The *bali* that is performed on the morning of Kālī *pūjā* is retained by the Haṃseśvarī temple, and it is the only day that *pānṭhābali* is served at the temple. "This *bali*," says Anil Thakur, "is cooked at twilight without onions or garlic in the *bhoga* room attached to the temple. It is *somāṃsa* and is served at midnight along with five kinds of fried foods, two types of vegetables, including *cacari*, *panpar*, *misti dahi*, sweets, *lucchi*, *dal* and *chutney*. We used to serve it on banana leaves, but now we use *śāla* leaves." *Bhoga*, like *prasāda* is food that has been sanctified by the deity. Unlike *prasāda*, however, it is more often in the form of a

meal and either contains real or symbolic non-vegetarian items.[12] Those who wanted *bhoga* had to place their orders early on the day of Kālī *pūjā*. As Anil Thakur said, "We now take money from the public to help offset the cost of the *bhoga*. The *māliks* from the *chōṭo taraf* – the three surviving brothers – still contribute to the cost but the *tarafs* do not get as involved." (Communication with Anil Thakur, October 21, 2006.

Still Rājās' Pūjās?: Durgā and Kālī Pūjā in Contemporary Bansberia

I arrived in Bansberia on the morning of *saptamī*, the seventh day of Durgā *pūjā*. On the short cycle-rickshaw ride from the train station, we passed approximately five or six *pandals* or temporary shelters, housing Durgā during her stay. Despite Durgā *pūjā*'s upper-caste associations[13] and the fact that it is most often performed by a *Brahmin* priest, most Bengali Hindus (and, often, non-Hindus) participate in it by both attending and contributing to its. The history of Durgā *pūjā*, as discussed in the previous chapter, is significantly intertwined with that of *zamīndāri* identity and the legacy of colonialism. Today, Durgā *pūjā* is held by "youth clubs, political parties, associations and institutions, neighborhood groups, families, sects and individuals" (Ostor 2004, 53). However its *zamīndāri* connections are not forgotten.

Drubendra Debroy remembers a time when Durgā *pūjās* in Bansberia were very different from what they are today:

> There were very few Durgā *pūjās* when I was young, not like now where there is one on almost every corner. And people used to come to Bansberia during Durgā *pūjā* from all over in this area – it was a very important time. It was important for the *zamīndāri* – people used to come to see him. The local people had a very good relationship with him, and that included the Muslims in this area û there was no Hindu-Muslim tension. The Muslims used to come to the *pūjās*, and so would the Santal (tribal) groups. They had a beautiful relationship with the *zamīndāri* and used to come celebrate in their special way. (Personal Communication with Drubendrea Deberoy, November 5, 2006)

Although it may not draw the same kinds of crowds as it once did, given the number of neighbourhood *pūjās* that have been established throughout Bansberia,

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[12] See Suchitra Samanta (1994).

[13] Please see Masahiko Togawa *An Abode of the Goddess: Kingship, Caste and Sacrifical Organization in a Bengal Village*

substantial numbers of local residents continue to attend the *gaḍhbaḍhi*'s Durgā *pūjā*. As Akos Ostor observes of a contemporary "raja's *pūjā*" in Vishnupur,

> the importance of the rājā's *pūjā* is not due to its magnificence and magnitude. Rather, it is due to the structural position of the *pūjā* in the ritual scheme of the town, the position of the royal myths in the indigenous ideology, and the role of the goddess in that ideology (Ostor 2004, 57).

The shared sense of nostalgia among the older generations of the Debroy family and Anil Thakur for a time that is no more, reveals itself especially potently in their narratives of Durgā *pūjā*. According their accounts, contemporary Durgā *pūjā* cannot compare to the revelry and intoxication that accompanied the *pūjās* of their youth. This nostalgia is shared by many of those who attend the *pūjā* as well, who, despite the option of attending much more magnificent *pūjās* elsewhere, choose to attend Durgā *pūjā* at the *gaḍhbaḍhi*.

Members of the family, clearly aware of their important symbolic role of paternalistic head of Bansberia's ritual universe, behaved appropriately. Although they participated alongside the visitors although during the *puṣpāñjali*, they stood up on the platform, close to the feet of the goddess as a mark of there higher ritual status. Kunalendra Debroy, the son of Kanakendra Debroy, the middle brother of the *chōṭo taraf*, held the *kānsa* (metal disc) and sometimes took up the *ḍhola* (drum), while his father stood proudly at the head of the crowd and greeted people as they walked over to him to pay their respects.

Aṣṭamī is the most eventful day during Durgā *pūjā*. The morning ritual is longer than during any other day and most people fast until they have offered *puṣpāñjali*. There is a *balidāna* in front of the Durgā *pandal* and although some younger male members of the family were present for it, most of the crowd consisted of local visitors. The women of the family, choosing not attend, opted to instead watch from the second story kitchen window, although most looked away at the moment of the slaughter.

The time of transition between *aṣṭamī* and *navamī*, called *sandhi pūjā* is considered particularly important, both in the ritual calendar of Durgā *pūjā* and for Bansberia in particular. This liminal time, is short and precise and must be observed exactly. "When we were boys," says Drubendra Debroy, "we used to wait for the signal

from the priests then fire guns by the moat to signal the beginning of *sandhi pūjā* so that others could begin as well. Nobody could start before we did" (Personal Communication with Drubendra Debroy, November 5, 2006). Connected to the myth of the goddesses' victory over the *asuras* Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, *sandhi pūjā* celebrates the goddess as Cāmuṇḍā, one of her most ferocious forms. A mountain of *saris* and gifts are offered to the goddess, a hundred and eight lamps are lit and a hundred and eight lotuses are offered along with large amounts of other flowers. There is a build up to the moment of *sandhi* while Tapan Thakur performs the rituals and the sound amongst the crowd keeps building. At the moment of *sandhi*, although there are no longer gunshots, there is a culmulation of noise – drums are beaten, *śaṅkha* (conch) are blown and there is another *pānṭhābali*. According to Drubendra Debroy, *mōṣabali* was performed on this night, but, as we have seen, that practice has been abandoned.

The next morning is *navamī* which is perhaps the most animated day during Durgā *pūjā* at the *gaḍhbaḍhi*. The day's rituals at the *pandal* are fairly commonplace, and are shorter than they were on *aṣṭamī*. A *pānṭhābali* is offered at the Haṃseśvarī *mandir* to Mahiṣamardinī and the rest of the day passes without much incidence. In the evening, however, the excitement builds around the *pandal*. A shed beside the *pandal* that has been covered all these days is opened and a large image of a Śiva is revealed. This is brought out quietly and a *prāṇapratiṣṭhā* is performed to it. A group of young men from Bansberia along with a priest or two place the image on the back of a small truck and silently, they drive away from the *gaḍhbaḍhi* to the town of Majeswar, to visit the Kālī *mandir* there. The party from Bansberia is greeted by a group waiting for them at the *mandir* who celebrate their arrival with the beating of *ḍhola*, the sounding of *kānsa* and ululation. The party from Bansberia is invited to eat at the Majeswar *mandir* and the atmosphere is very festive. Then, with a lot of fanfare and noise, the men return along with their compatriots in Majeswar, bringing Śiva back with them, this time as a groom. The image is taken to the *pandal* where the celebrations continue as people greet the bridegroom who would like to marry their "daughter," Durgā. Water is sprinkled in front of the image of Śiva, or Mahādeva as he is commonly known, as he approaches Durgā and he is then set down on the platform in front of her. The three goddesses – Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Durgā have garlands in their hands in anticipation. However only Durgā

holds the special garland for *mālā badala*, the ritual exchange of garlands that signifies marriage.

After they have both been consecrated by water, a feast is laid out for them consisting of fruit, sweets and okra. A mixture of cooked rice and potatoes along with aubergines, *dal* and plantain is also laid out before them. An *ārati* is performed and only then can the nuptials can begin. The priest turns to Durgā first and asks, "Mā, which husband (*bara*) do you want?" He takes the garlands from all three Devīs' hands and puts them around Mahādeva's neck. He then asks Mahādeva "Which bride (*bahū*) do you want?" Mahādeva remains silent, so the priest must repeat the question and ask ôAlright then, which groom (*bara*) do you want? Do you want a *bahū* or a *bara*?" The crowd laughs and a *pūjā* is performed using a red *sari*. A mixture of *siddhi* and *ganja* (both cannabis derivatives) is ground up and placed on Mahādeva's head, on one of his fingers, and on the head of his snake. "Mahādeva loves to imbibe," said Anil Thakur, laughing. The officiating priest then says "Mā, Mahādeva wants all three of you! Mā Durgā he wants you, Mā Sarasvatī, he wants you, and Mā Lakṣmī he wants you." The Devīs will get angry, according to Anil Thakur, they will refuse to smoke the *ganja,* and then must be placated. Nonetheless, Durgā, Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī are asked if they will "do *nēśā,*" i.e. get high. Śiva is then asked in turn: "Mahādeva, will you do *nēśā*?" The three Devīs continue to refuse, angrily. According to Anil Thakur, the priests do not dare actually approach the Devīs again as they are disapproving and wrathful and could strike down the insolent with their *tejas*. They might, according to him, even rouse Mahiṣāsura to scare us if we dared. (Personal Communication with Anil Thakur October 21, 2006)

With a candle, the *siddhi* and the *ganja* are lit so that the smell can permeate the air. Then, some sweets are placed on the mouths of all the deities. *Prasāda* is handed out to everyone and there is quite a lot of intoxicated revelry. The smell of cannabis in the air is apparent as people smoke to celebrate the *śiber biye* or the marriage of Śiva to Durgā. From all accounts, however, this is a much more subdued version of the way *navarātri* night was once celebrated.

"In the olden days," says Anil Thakur, all day would be spent by the servants preparing *siddhi* for the *gaḍhbaḍhi*. "*Siddhi* is a delicious mixture," he said, "made with ginger, cardamom, raw sugar, milk, mashed bananas and of course, *siddhi*

bought from one of the special *siddhi* stores." The leftover from the Śiva *pūjā* would then be shared with everyone so as not to accumulate *doṣa* or fault and everyone would take part. "Even the women?" I asked. "Not usually they women, but all the servants, and the *bābus* and even the *purohitas*." (Personal Communication with Anil Thakur October 21, 2006). There used to also be another *pānṭhābali* that night, but it too has since been stopped.

The next day is *vijayā daśamī* when the presence of the Devī is said to depart the Durgā image and return to her home with Siva. The married women of the household anoint each other with *sindūra* during *sindūra khelā* and offer sweets to the mouths of all the various deities, *asura* and lion included. Once the presence of the Devī is dismissed, the image of Durgā is loaded onto a truck and taken to the Hughli river to be immersed. This day too was once marked by drinking *siddhi* and by a lot of revelry but that practice has died down at the *gaḍhbaḍhi* as well. "It's not just us who live here anymore, the temple is public property," said Kunalendra Debroy who lives at the *chōṭo taraf* home along with his family. "The gates are open to those that have rented out land to cultivate, to the tourists who come to see the *mandir* and the *pūjā* – we have to be a lot more careful and controlled about public revelry." (Personal Communication with Kunalendra Debroy October 1, 2006)

Along with Durgā *pūjā*, Kālī *pūjā* is also of course an immediately recognizable *zamīndāri* festival. On the morning of Kālī *pūjā*, there is a palpable excitement in the air. The crowds start arriving early that morning and there are people everywhere, some prepared to sit outside and wait all day for that night's festivities. Kālī *pūjā* in Bengal is the same night as Dīpāvalī elsewhere in India and here, there is a sort of amalgamation of the two events. Noise bombs go off in the distance and there is the sound of Hindi film music blaring somewhere to add to the din. There is a *pānṭhābali* in the morning to start off the day and the fresh blood of the sacrificed goat lies on the stone courtyard. Kunalendra Debroy hands out bags of sparklers and small firecrackers to children who come by the *chōṭo taraf's* home. "People used to expect much more from their *zamīndāri*," he says laughing "but it is only polite for us to give out something at least" (*Ibid.*). The redistributive role of the *zamīndāri* is maintained in these simple gestures.

Groups of women sit in the in the shade of the temple, preparing cotton wicks that they will dip in mustard oil and place on large brass lamps that night. Others are stringing garlands of marigolds in large piles. They are all volunteers who say they involve themselves in the temple's Kālī *pūjā* every year. Male volunteers are busy hanging the garlands around the temple and they have covered the fountain in the middle of the pavilion in tiny white flowers which is both decorative and a way to make sure nobody falls into it during the evening's festivities. As Masahiko Togawa observes,

> upper castes participate in [Kālī *pūjā*] at the level of household or lineage… on the other hand, among the Bagdi [and people of lower-castes], it is a personal ritual by the *deyasin*, or the corporate ritual of the entire locality which mostly relies on the personal intentions and donations. The contrast is clear: the former strengthen solidarity amongst kin, the latter unite the people of the locality beyond their blood relations (Togawa 2006, 125.)

In Bansberia, however, there is a compromise between the two models. While the semiotics of the *pūjā* are those of a high-caste household *pūjā*, given the exorbitant costs of the *pūjā* and the fact that the Haṃseśvarī *mandir* is now a public monument, owned by the Archeological Survey of India, it has become possible for a quite a lot of community involvement. Although there is a symbolic recognition of the Debroy family at the temple and during the *pūjā*, Kālī *pūjā* is nonetheless contingent on the support and engagement of those who have volunteered to participate from the outside. Haṃseśvarī Devī herself is covered under dozens of garlands made of roses and large red hibiscus. Marigolds loop around her thousand-petalled lotus, a flower *mukuṭa* or crown is on her head and she is wearing a gold *tikli* in the parting of her hair. Only Śiva's topknot is visible under her, the rest of him obscured by the massive wreathes laid out by her feet.

In 2006, Tapan Thakur decided to start the *pūjā* as early as possible; around eight o'clock. "These parts aren't safe anymore, and a lot of people get very drunk on Kālī *pūjā*," he said, "and people come from far away – often women – on their own. I want them to be able to leave here by eleven thirty." Anil Thakur agreed: "You see how rowdy the crowd gets. People think they are being very 'Tantric' by drinking a lot of alcohol. They don't know what they are doing." The afternoon was spent in preparation for that

night. Jute ropes were used to cordon off the temple pavilion so as to help with crowd control. The temple committee, a group of men and women, all wearing large red badges with a picture of Haṃseśvarī Devī in gold, arrived to help with crown control.

I asked Anil Thakur about a rumor I had heard that Tapan Thakur would neither deny nor confirm. "What happens to the skin from the *bali* on Kālī *pūjā*?" I enquired. "Oh that – they chop up the head into tiny pieces and then they bury the skin under the *campā* tree beside the temple," he said. Why do that, I wondered? "It is for Kālī. there are all sorts of unusual things are done today, like the *alakkhi pūjā*." (Personal Communication with Anil Thakur, October 21, 2006).

The *alakkhi pūjā* (> Alakṣmī *pūjā*) or "inauspicious *pūjā*" involves celebrating the antinomian. It is fairly simple and, judging from the fact that nobody in the family that I had asked had ever even heard of it, it was done fairly quickly and discreetly. Taking the husk of a banana trunk, some *gobara* or cow dung is placed in it along with some sweets, a little *sindūra*, and a candle is placed in it and lit. After some *mantras* are recited, it is taken and left by the *naubatkhānā* – the entrance to the *gaḍhbaḍhi* where musicians and soldiers once sat. Given the Brahmanic nature of the temple and Tapan Thakur's continuing reforms and his antipathy for Haṃseśvarī's "Tantric side," I asked Anil Thakur if this is still in practice. "Oh yes," he said "Tapaṇ and Basan take a broken tin can, ring it a few times and then they take the *alakkhi pūjā* out to the *naubatkhānā* and leave outside the threshold before starting Kālī *pūjā*." This almost secretive ritual is, according to Ralph Nicholas, typically done "before Kālī pūjā [and] belongs to the cycle of Devī worship followed by high-caste, Śākta-oriented families" (Nicholas 2003, 15) Julia Leslie has examined the propitiation of Alakṣmī during Dīpāvalī (which, as we have noted, coincides with Kālī *pūjā* in Bengal) in Sanskrit textual sources:

> In the ritual worship of Alakṣmī during the Dīpāvalī festival, the devotee pays homage to this ugly goddess (*kurūpā*) who lives in foul places (*kutsitasthānavāsinī*), likes poverty and discord (*dāridrakālapriye*), and destroys wealth (*dhananāśinī*) for two reasons: to divert her away from his own and family; and so that she will, in leaving, take all his inauspiciousness with her (Leslie 1991, 122).

By leaving the ritual offerings to Alakkhi (as she is known in Bengal) outside the threshold of the *gaḍhbaḍhi*, the goddess of misfortune is respected and her power acknowledged. There are also, of course, links between Kālī and Alakṣmī or Jyeṣṭhā, both of whom are powerful and contrary. To ignore Jyeṣṭhā during Kālī *pūjā* therefore, would amount to ignoring an honoured guest.

Anticipating a large crowd of people, I asked Anil Thakur if there was anything else during Kālī *pūjā* that I would not be able to see but that distinguished from normative, Brhamanic practice. "Yes," he said "Two bottles of alcohol will be brought in – one of them foreign and one of them domestic. The *zamīndārs* used to pay for it, but now it's the public that finances this. Basan touches these to Devī's feet along with some money and requests that she accept it. He offers her some sweets and then sprinkles some of the alcohol in the *caraṇāmṛta*." (Personal Communication with Anil Thakur October 21, 2006). Even if the Debroys are unable or unwilling to continue financing the bottles of alcohol for Kālī *pūjā* as they once did, the link between Kālī *pūjā* and its *zamīndāri* opulence is sustained. There is, clearly, a collective desire to maintain the rituals that represent the Kālī cult at its peak when *zamīndāris* engaged in revelry and festivities that have since then, become legendary.

When the doors to the *garbha gṛha* opened on the night of Kālī *pūjā*, a mask had been placed on Haṃseśvarī Devī, unequivocally transforming her to Kālī. Although made of silver, the mask is painted to match the blue of Haṃseśvarī Devī's complexion. With the mask, one sees Haṃseśvarī-as-Kālī's tongue protrudes slightly through an almost smiling mouth, her teeth showing. Kālī's eyes are wider than those of Haṃseśvarī, and unlike Haṃseśvarī, who is clearly meant to be aesthetically pleasing, Kālī is clearly not meant to be attractive. The transformation is remarkable and it is impossible to distinguish the mask from the rest of the image. Haṃseśvarī Devī's *sari* had also been changed, her flower crown exchanged for one made with gold and around her neck and her wrists – although barely visible for all the flower garlands that covered her – were gold ornaments. All her garlands had been replaced with new ones as well, and in the middle of the new *mālās* was a 108-lotus bud garland. "We used to have a solid silver 108-*muṇḍa* (skull) *mālā* and a silver skirt shaped like human arms for Kālī

pūjā," said Drubendra Debroy, "but they've disappeared over the years as has much of her more precious jewelry. The *tarafs* used to take turns keeping Mā*'s* ornaments. Many of the original ornaments came from the women of our family, who donated them to show their devotion. But a lot of these items were stolen over the years and sadly, various family members also sold a lot off when it was their turn to keep them in custody. All this has had to be made anew." (Personal Communication with Debendra Debroy November 5, 2006). Since the family has relinquished ownership of the *mandir*, Anil Thakur's family now has custody of the jewelry.

About ten men were on various drums such as *ḍholas* and *ḍhākās*, on *kānsa*, *śaṅkha*, creating a loud, rhythmic noise around the temple. The large crowds stopped most of the elder members of the Debroy family from coming down to the temple, who preferred watching the *pūjā* from their balcony as they lit candles and firecrackers. During the *pānṭhābali*, a passage leading from the *garbha gṛha* to the *balipīṭha* was created by cordoning off the crowd with jute rope. "This is a highly powerful space," Tapan Thakur said. "Nobody should cross it." There was almost total silence as the moment for the decapitation drew near. Two goats, one from the temple and one that a visitor had brought as a *vrata* offering, were carried in. The *bali* was carried out as all the others except a fire of coconut husks was lit before the immolation. The musicians began drumming and one of the priests ran quickly from the *garhba gṛha* sprinkling Gaṅgā water to purify the space immediately before the first immolation was complete. Basan Thakur quickly carried the head back to the *garhba gṛha* and placed it on the floor in front of the large lotus with the necessary elements. The body was quickly removed by the temple workers. The second sacrifice followed the same pattern except the head of the goat was immediately given to the *kamar* sacrificer as a part of his pay. The body of that goat lay on the courtyard for some time that night, guarded by the men who had brought it as a *vrata* for curing illness.

After the *puṣpāñjali* and *ārati*, those who paid for *bhoga* lined up outside the *bhoga* room where they were served a meal including meat from that morning's *bali*. "When we were younger," Drubendra Debroy said, we used to eat in the *bhoga* room at midnight. Kālī *pūjā* was the only time that goat meat was served at the temple."

(Personal Communication with Drubendra Debroy, November 5, 2006). Today, the large crowds only allow for a tiny, symbolic piece of meat to be included in each serving of *bhoga.* However, this unbroken connection between the *zamīndāri* home and the Kālī *pūjā bhoga* is imbued with special ritual meaning, even if the *zamīndāri* family no longer participates in the meal at the temple itself. What is maintained, however, is the redistributive role of the Debroy family in relation to those come to participate in the ritual universe of the *gaḍhbaḍhi.*

The place of ritual, always integral to the functioning of a *zamīndāri*, became especially to the significant after the writing of Rani Sankari's will. Ritual legitimized the Bansberia *zamīndāri* in a way that was unprecedented in its history. Although *zamīndāris* were always ritual theatres, the colonial legal system served to forever transform the role of religious ritual. By claiming reasons of faith and worship, individuals and institutions were able to protect their land from higher authorities that were anxious to appear to be protecting religious "rights". In post-Independence India, this claim of *debattar* continued to be honoured, further enabling *zamīndāris* such as Bansberia to maintain lands through their commitment to ritual. In recent generations, therefore, the figure of Haṃseśvarī Devī has become more prominent in the *gaḍhbaḍhi* than ever, as the very anchor around which the family and their associates organize their lives. The members of the Debroy family perform their role as *sebait* quite seriously, allowing them to maintain their links to a nostalgic past while surviving in the all-too real and volatile present.

Conclusion

The last time I left Bansberia, I boarded the crowded ladies' compartment of the train along with my grandmother and settled in for the two-hour journey ahead of us. The conversation around was sociable; people made friends easily on the train. Someone asked us where we were coming from. "Bansberia," we replied. This sparked an immediate, animated conversation about Rani Sankari and the Haṃseśvari Devī *mandir*. "The *zamīndār* was a Tāntrika, you know" someone informed me, "he rescued Rani Sankari from a boat of Muslim *ḍākāt* when she was just a little girl" she continued "he was passing by and knew that she was kidnapped. He rescued her and saw that she was beautiful. He brought her to his home and later married her."
Another woman joined in "I heard she was having an affair with the temple priest," she said. "Haṃseśvari Devī is said to look just like her. There used to be all kinds of Tantric activity at the temple," she said, leaving much unsaid.
A third woman responded "There are tunnels that lead from that temple all the way to the river and who knows where else. That way the women of the *zamīndāri* could escape if they were under attack or if they wanted to cross the moat and bathe at the river"

After three months of research in Bansberia, where I spent time attempting to locate the figures of Raja Nrisinghadeb and Rani Sankari within the history of the *zamīndāri*, this conversation struck me incredible. The Rani and her Tāntrika husband continue to exist as vivid, larger-than-life figures in the imaginations of locals in a romanticized mixture of half-truths, urban legends and hyperbole. The impact of these historical figures in the public imagination is disproportionate to the actual power they held when they were alive, the *zamīndāri* having barely any real economic and political viability by the time of Raja Nrisinghadeb. And yet, somehow the combination of Tāntrika landholder, a moated- *zamīndāri* residence, a strong-willed widow, an esoteric temple and the persistence of Śakta rituals served to create fertile ground for creating historical legends. Once again, it was the temple that imbued the *zamīndāri* with meaning for others. Without the Haṃseśvari Devī *mandir*, the Bansberia *zamīndāri* would have quite possibly quietly slipped into obscurity in the collective memory, the

legacy of their *zamīndārs* never being revisited in the contemporary imagination. Instead, they are resurrected and romanticized in conversations between strangers.

The role of religious ritual was radically transformed at the time of Raja Nrisinghadeb. In addition to his own interest in Śakta Tāntra, his decision to commission a marker of this passion allowed him a continued place of honour within nineteenth century *zamīndāri* culture. Today, history remembers Raja Nrisinghadeb as the visionary *zamīndār* whose religious commitment resulted in the unusual Haṃseśvari Devī *mandir*; not much else about him has survived, despite the fact that he never lived to see his temple. Rani Sankari, meanwhile, is imaged either a goddess or as an ideal mother. Stories of her activities as a *zamīndārinī*, are, curiously, much more widely circulated. In part, this helps construct the image of an almost-divine figure who at once managed her *zamīndāri* as a responsible woman would a well-run household while attending to the ritual injunctions left by her husband. That she, of her own will, further delineated and codified ritual in Bansberia, making it the focal point of the *gaḍhbaḍhi* only increased her appeal as a historical figure.

Both the descendents of Raja Nrisinghadeb and Rani Sankari and the larger public are, of course, aware of the pragmatic benefits of having converted the *gaḍhbaḍhi* to *debattar*. As long as they uphold their commitment to upholding religious ritual as laid out in Rani Sankari's will, the Debroy family has a rightful claim to their land. This role is clearly taken seriously, acknowledging the central role of the Haṃseśvari Devī *mandir* in their lives. The temple itself serves as a historic figure as well. The legends that circulate about it are also larger than the temple as well, rarely reflecting its material reality.

It can be argued that this reception of the *mandir* and of Haṃseśvari Devī is a distortion and that prevents them from being received the way in which it was once meant to, obscuring their true complex natures. The Haṃseśvari Devī temple has been, throughout its history, open to multiple receptions and a variety of meaning. Meant to be a monument to Raja Nrisinghadeb's Tantric knowledge, the temple has now come to monumentalize a range of programmes, ritual, legal, nostalgic and otherwise. Although diluted in recent years, the Tantric connections of the *mandir* are maintained through

evocative rituals that exist in the liminal space between flashes of the past and an awareness of the present.

The Bansberia Raj no longer exists as a viable political or economic entity and the *gaḍhbaḍhi* is now a shell of what it once was. Of the homes that housed the three *tarafs*, only the *chōṭo taraf's* - once the offices and reception hall of the Ray Mahasays - remains intact and inhabitable; the others are empty, crumbling lots overrun with a tangle of vines and trees, marked here and there with a freestanding, ornate pillar. Despite these obvious signs of the divestment of the *zamīndāri*, to enter the *gaḍhbaḍhi* is to step into the past – and that past is everywhere. Physically delineated from the current town of Bansberia by a large moat, the 30-acre land belonging to the Debroys is space within which one is immediately conscious of a world that continues to inform itself through royal life and royal ritual. In present-day Bansberia, ritual continues to index the *zamīndāri* past serving to link the present to the town's history. Religious ritual anchors the identity of the Debroy family within Bansberia and by cooperative gestures that reference the past, a *zamīndāri* idealized in the public memory continues to be revisited.

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Informants

Chattopadhyay Family
Chattopadhyay, Anil Kumar
Chattopadhyay, Basan Kumar
Chattopadhyay, Tapan Kumar

Debroy Family
Debroy, Alokendra Kumar
Debroy, Arati
Debroy, Drubendra Kumar
Debroy, Kanakendra Kumar
Debroy, Kunalendra Kumar

APPENDIX 2
Images

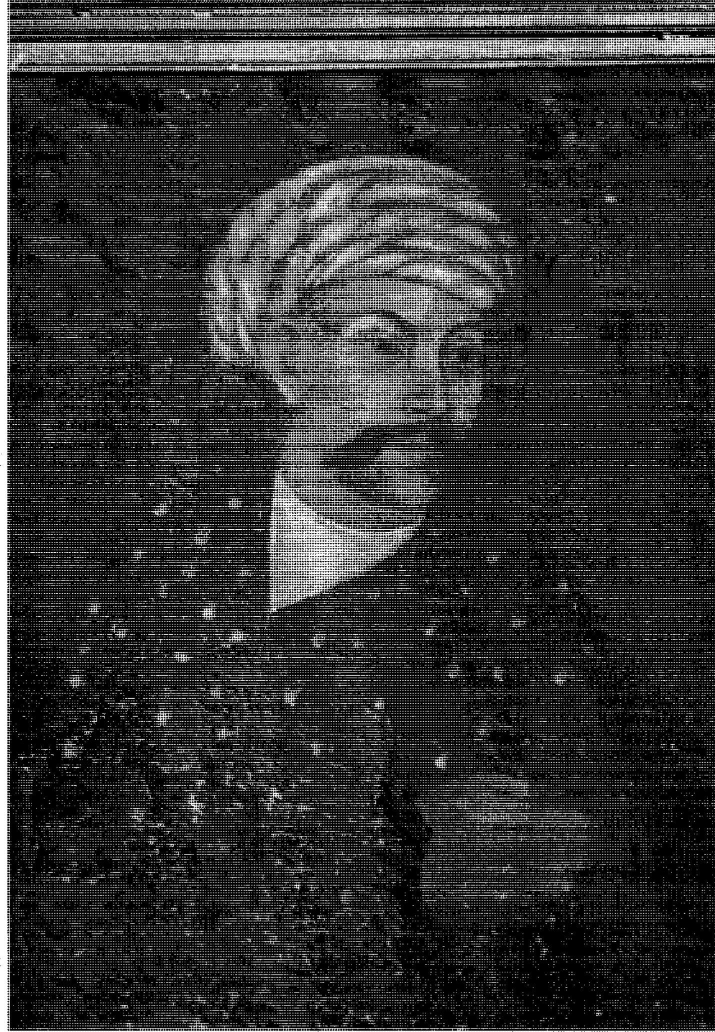


Figure 1

Portrait of Raja Nrisinghadeb Ray Mahasay (1741-1802), *chōṭo taraf* home, Bansberia
Photo by Alokendra Debroy

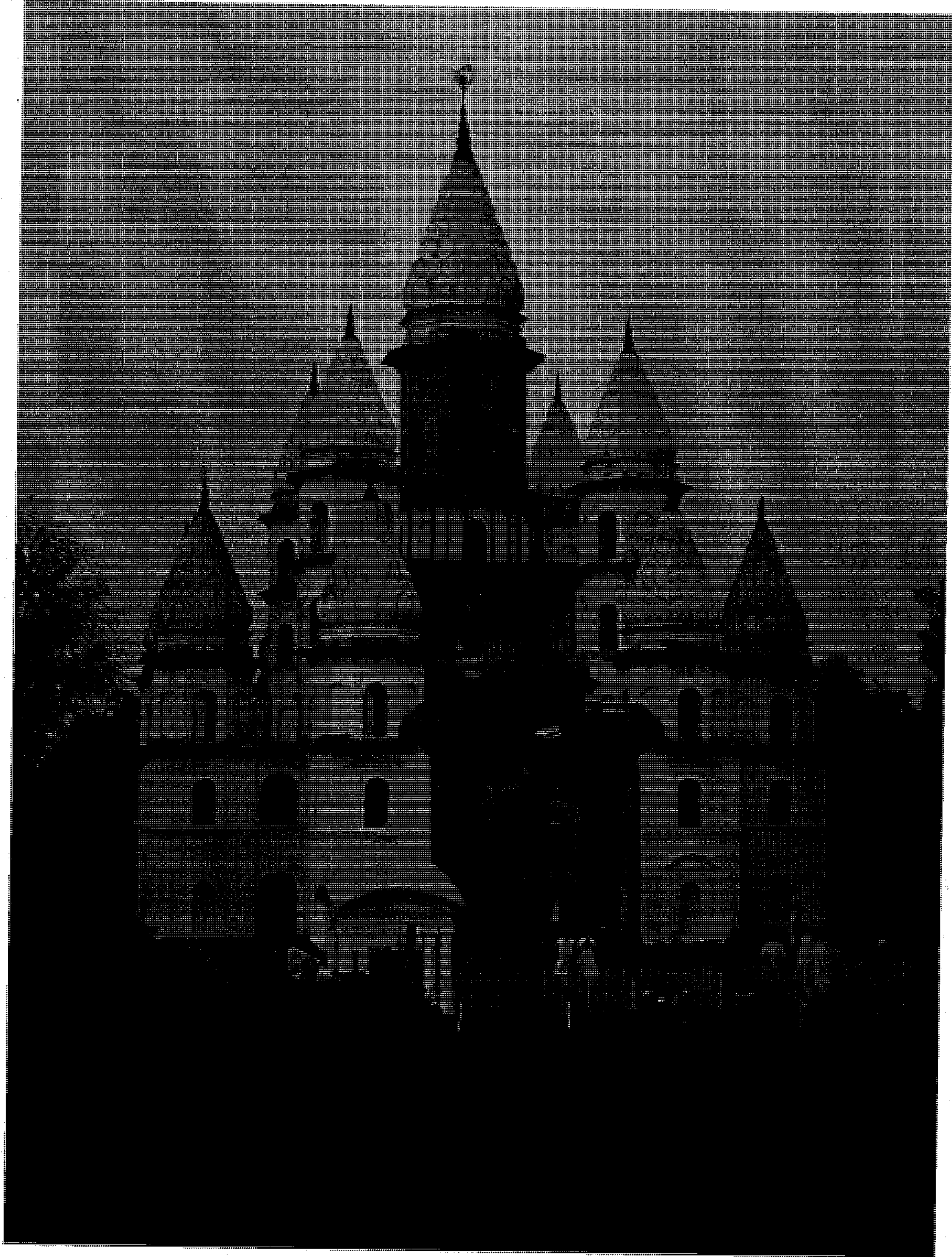


Figure 2

Haṃseśvarī Devī Temple, Bansberia, Hugli District, West Bengal
Photo by Author

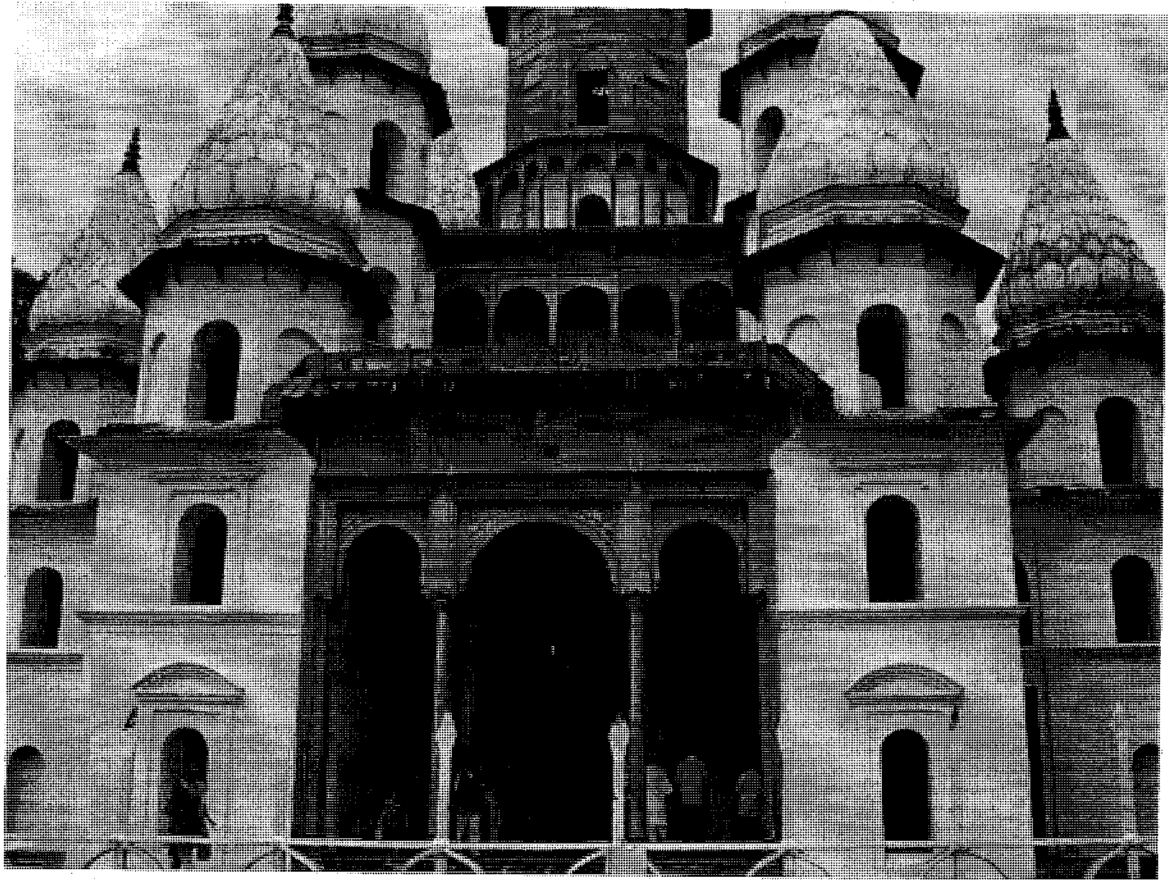


Figure 3

Detail of Haṃseśvarī Devī Temple, Bansberia
Photo by Author

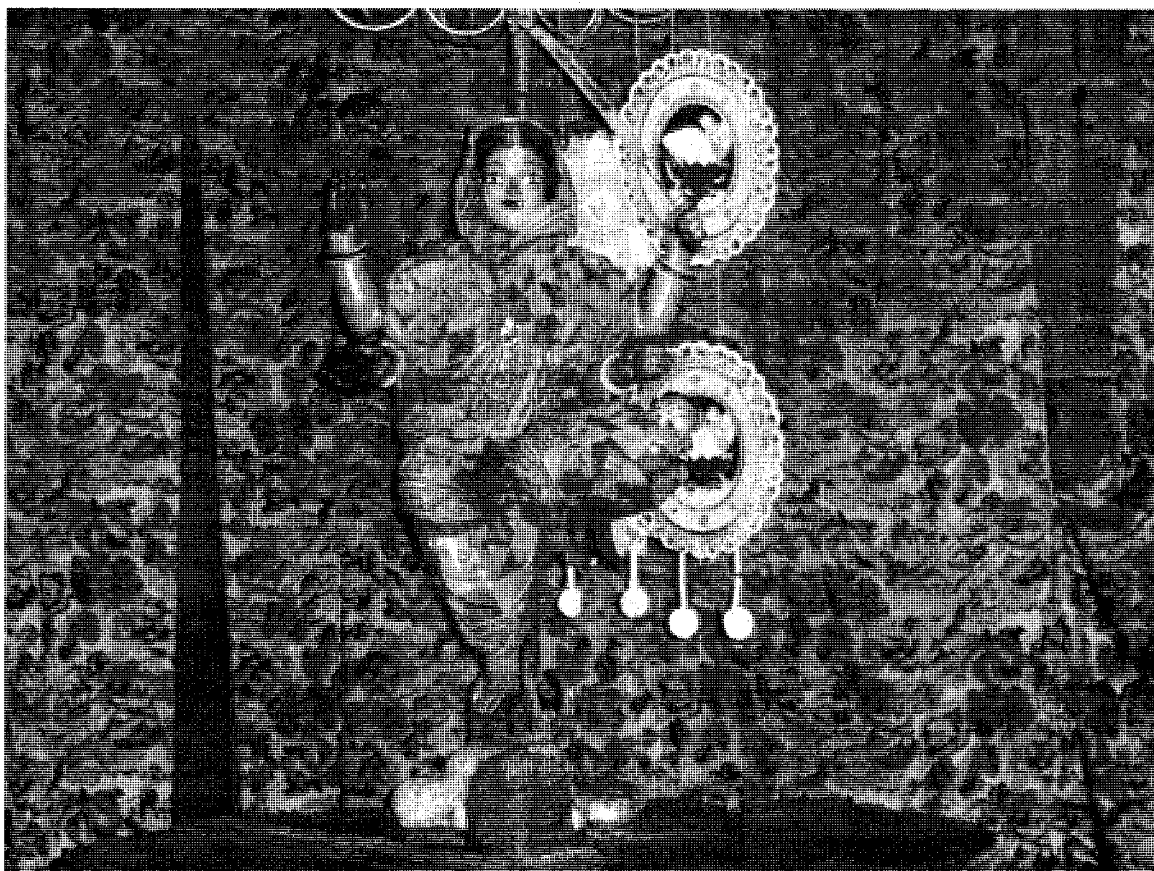
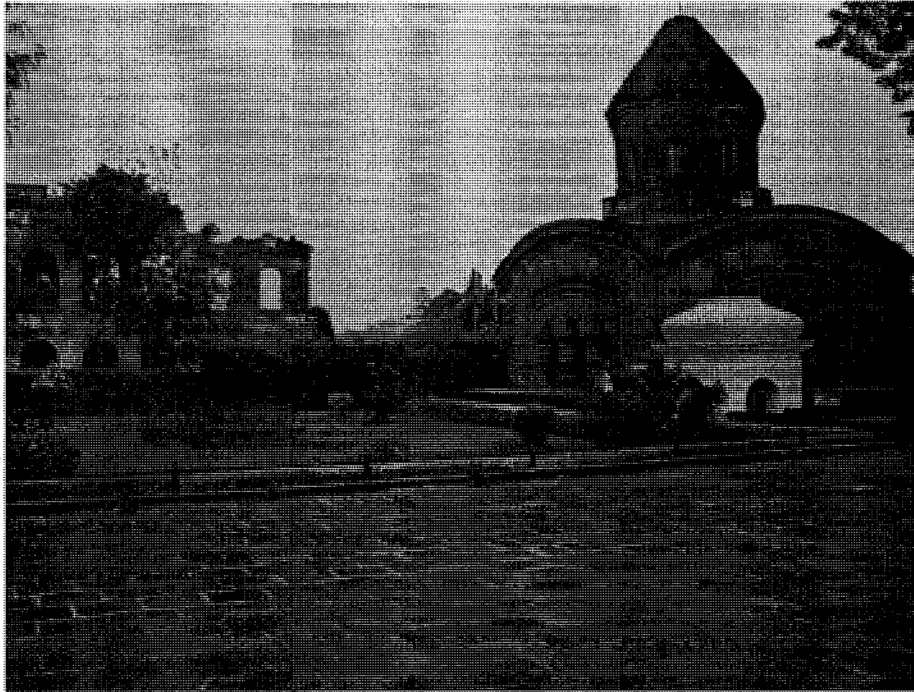
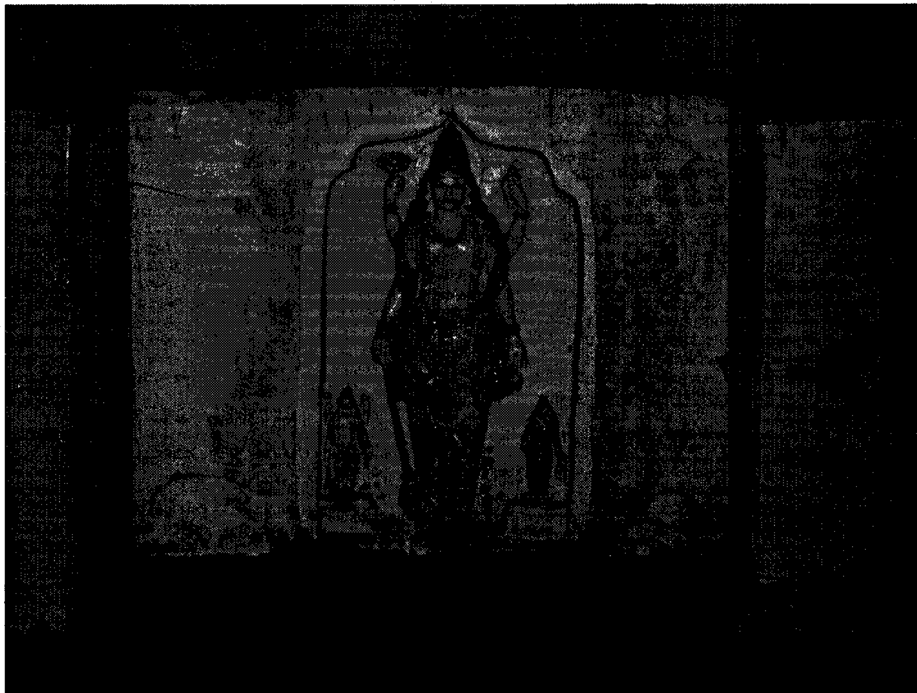


Figure 4

Image of Haṃseśvarī Devī inside the temple at Bansberia
Photo by Author





Figures 5a and 5b

4a (top): The Ananta Vāsudeva Temple, Bansberia

4b (bottom): The new image of Viṣṇu currently worshipped inside the Ananta Vāsudeva temple
Photos by Author

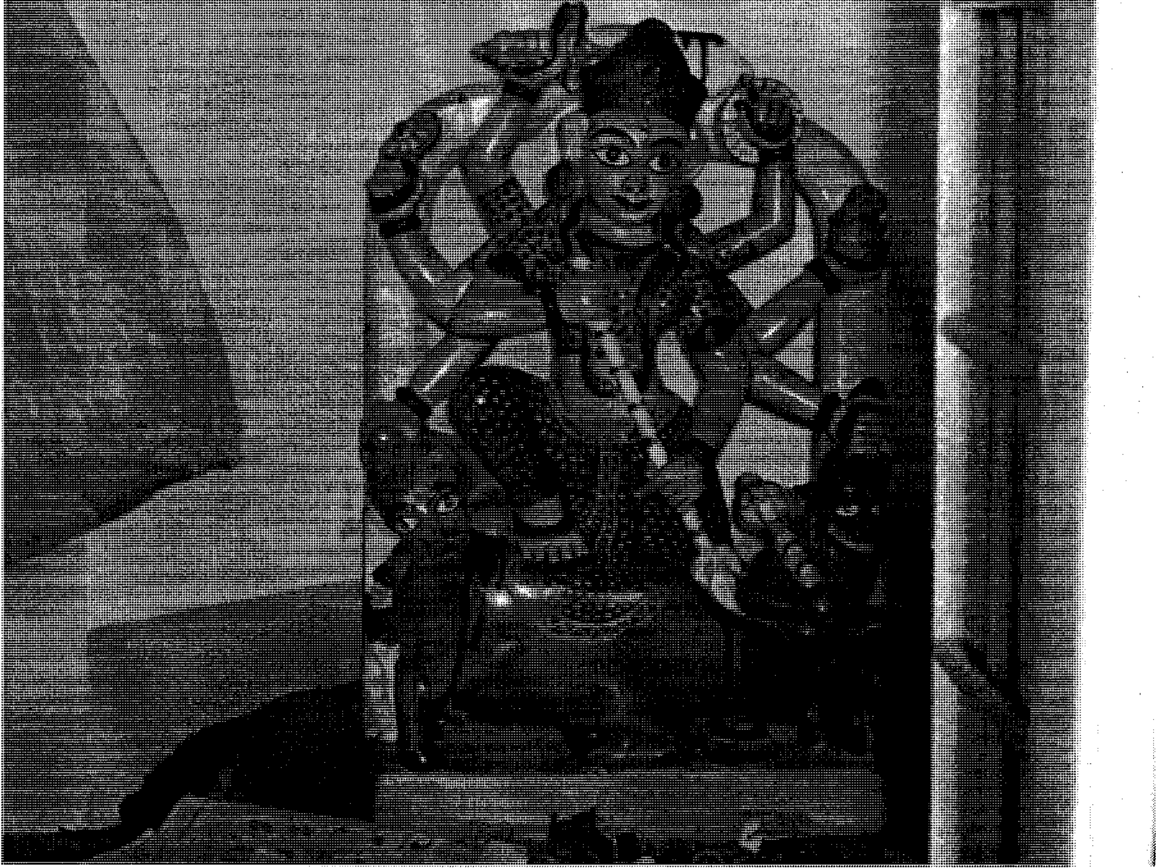


Figure 6

Image of Durgā-Mahiṣamardinī (Svayambhavā Mahiṣamardinī), currently housed in the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple.
Photo by Author

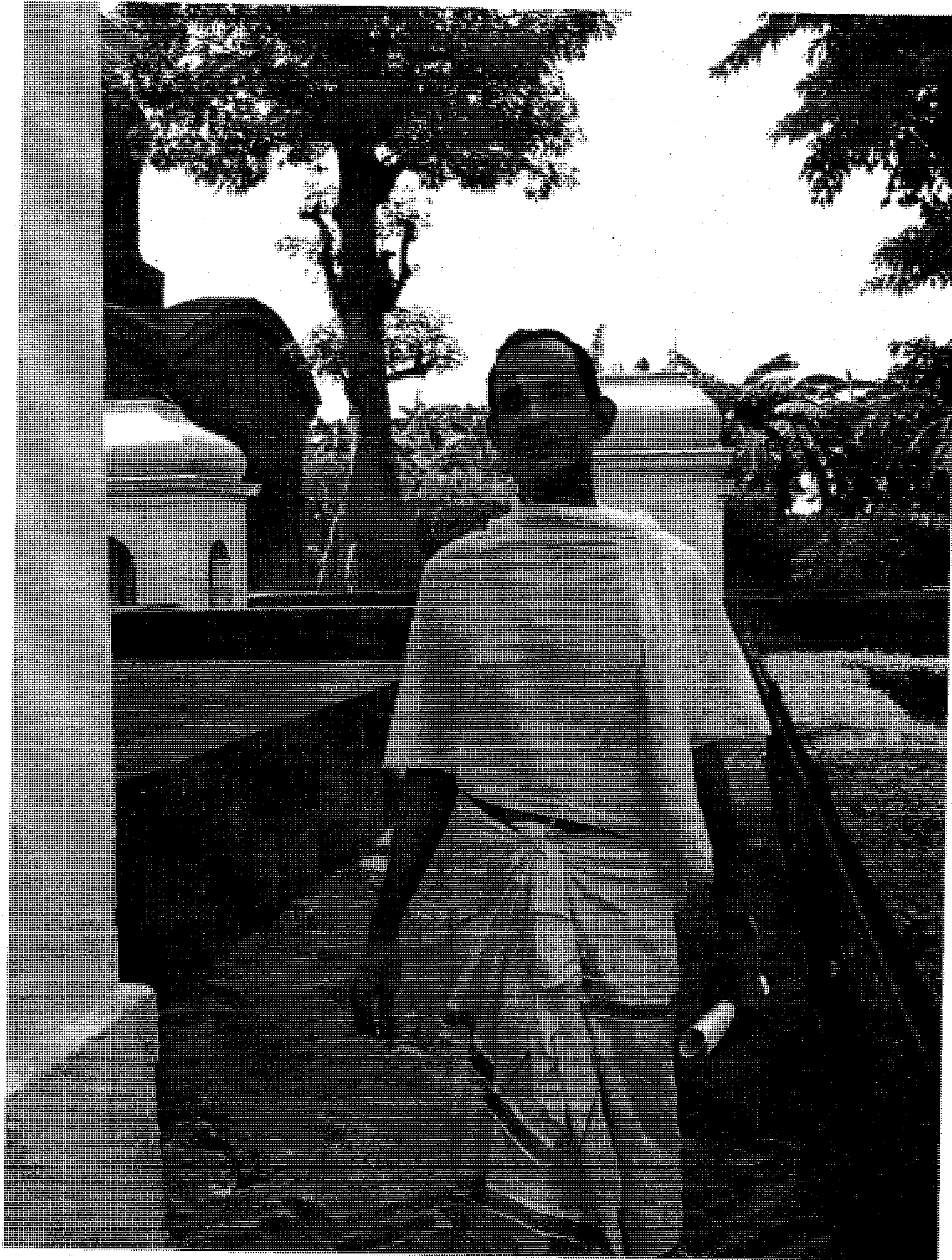


Figure 7

Tapan Thakur Chattopadhyay, current Head Priest of the Bansberia temple
Photo by Author

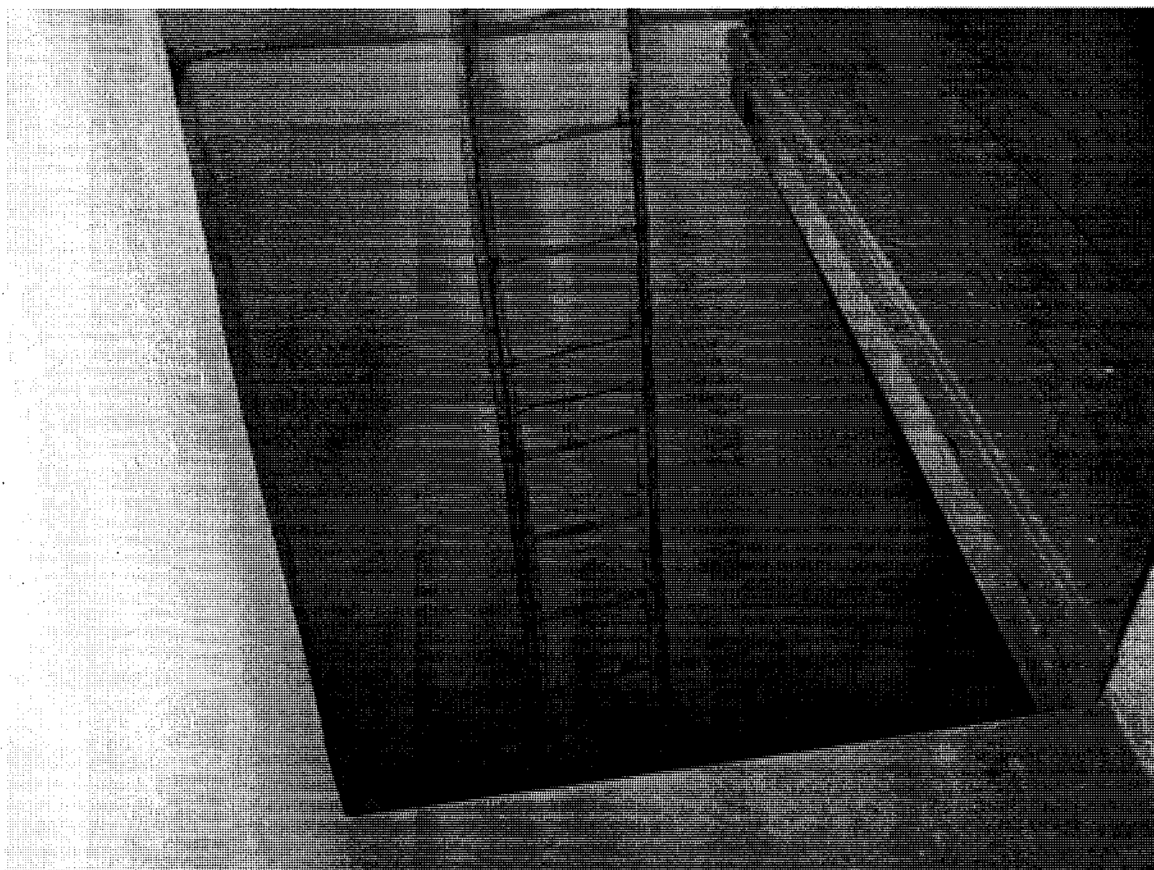


Figure 8

Wooden ladders representing the *nāḍīs*, *iḍā* and *piṅgalā* that run through the vertical axis of the temple, as seen from the second floor.
Photo by Author

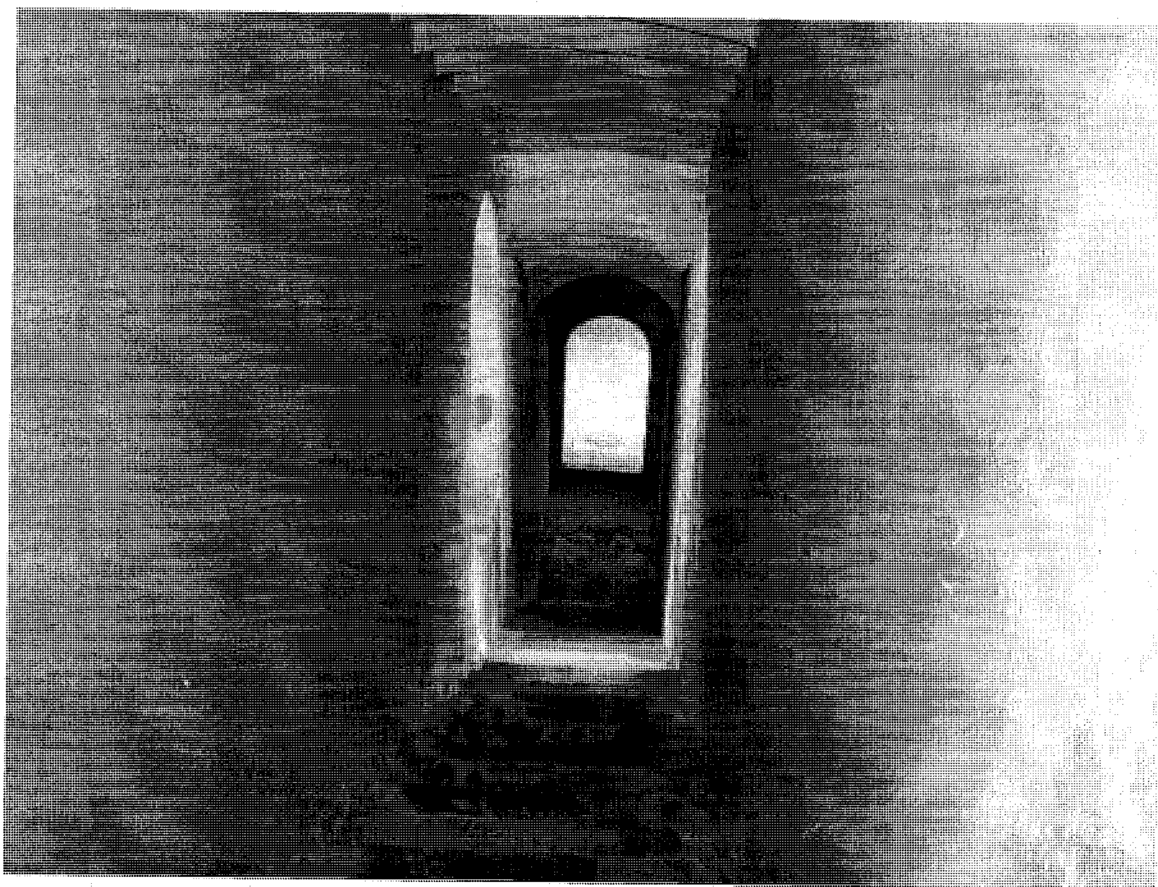


Figure 9

The "trick stairway" representing the "danger zone" in the *anāhata cakra* that prevents the *sādhaka* from reaching the *viśuddha cakra.*
Photo by Author

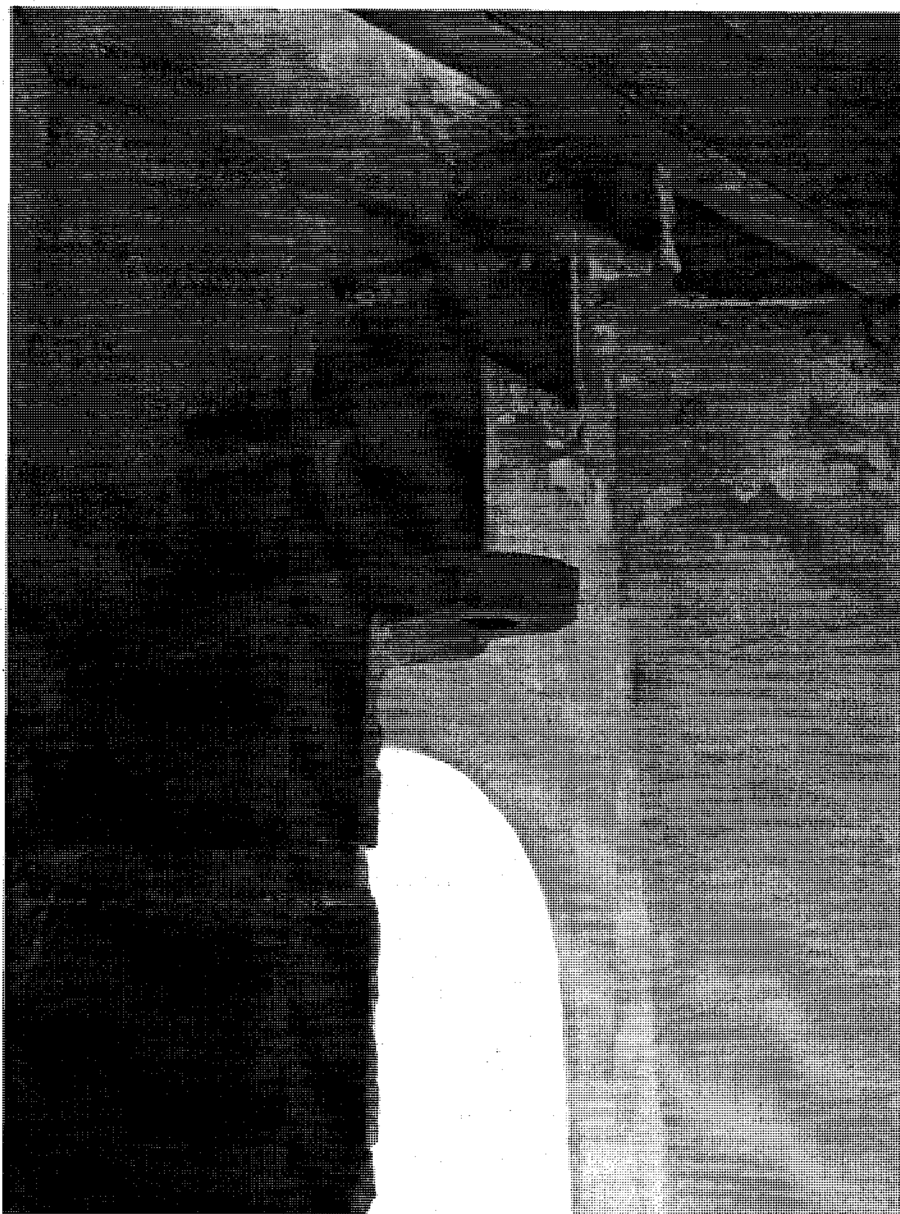


Figure 10

The stairs that lead from the *viśuddha* to the *ājñā cakra*, on the fifth level (third floor)
Photo by Author

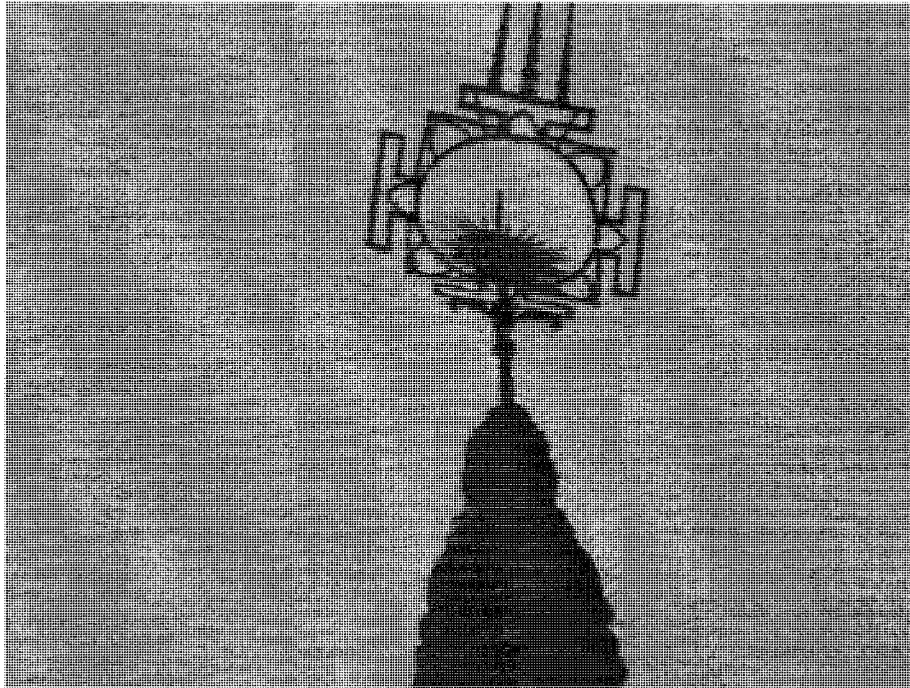


Figure 11

The peak of the highest *ratna* is adorned with a metal image of the sun inside a *yantra* that resembles the Kālī-*yantra*.
Photo by Author

Figure 12

Haṃseśvarī Devī seated on a twelve-petal lotus emerging from Śiva's heart. The Śiva image itself lies atop a Kālī-*yantra* mounted on a thousand-petal lotus pedestal.
Photo by Author

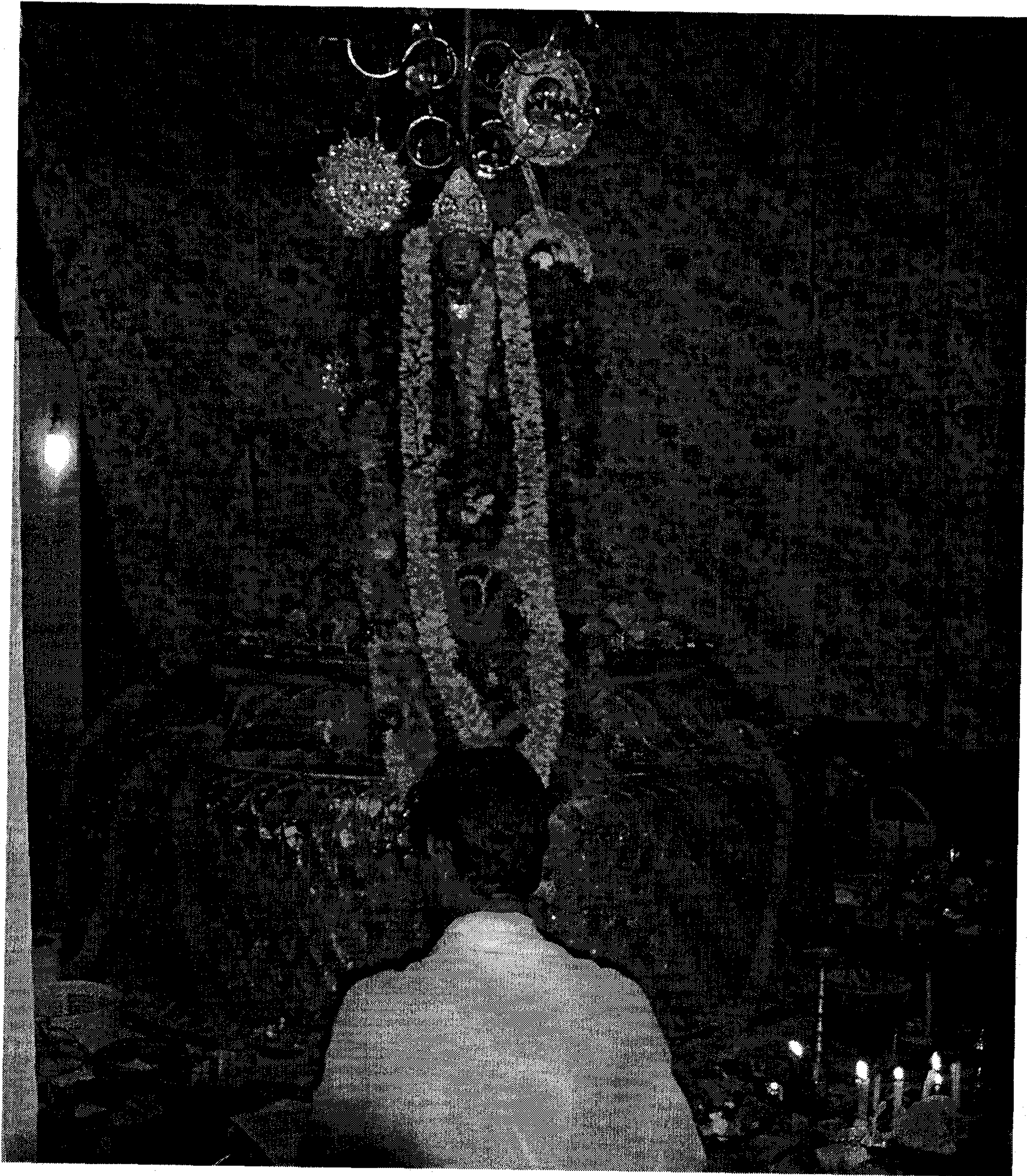


Figure 13

Image of Haṃseśvarī Devī with Kālī mask, adorned for Kālī *pūjā,* 2006
Photo by Author

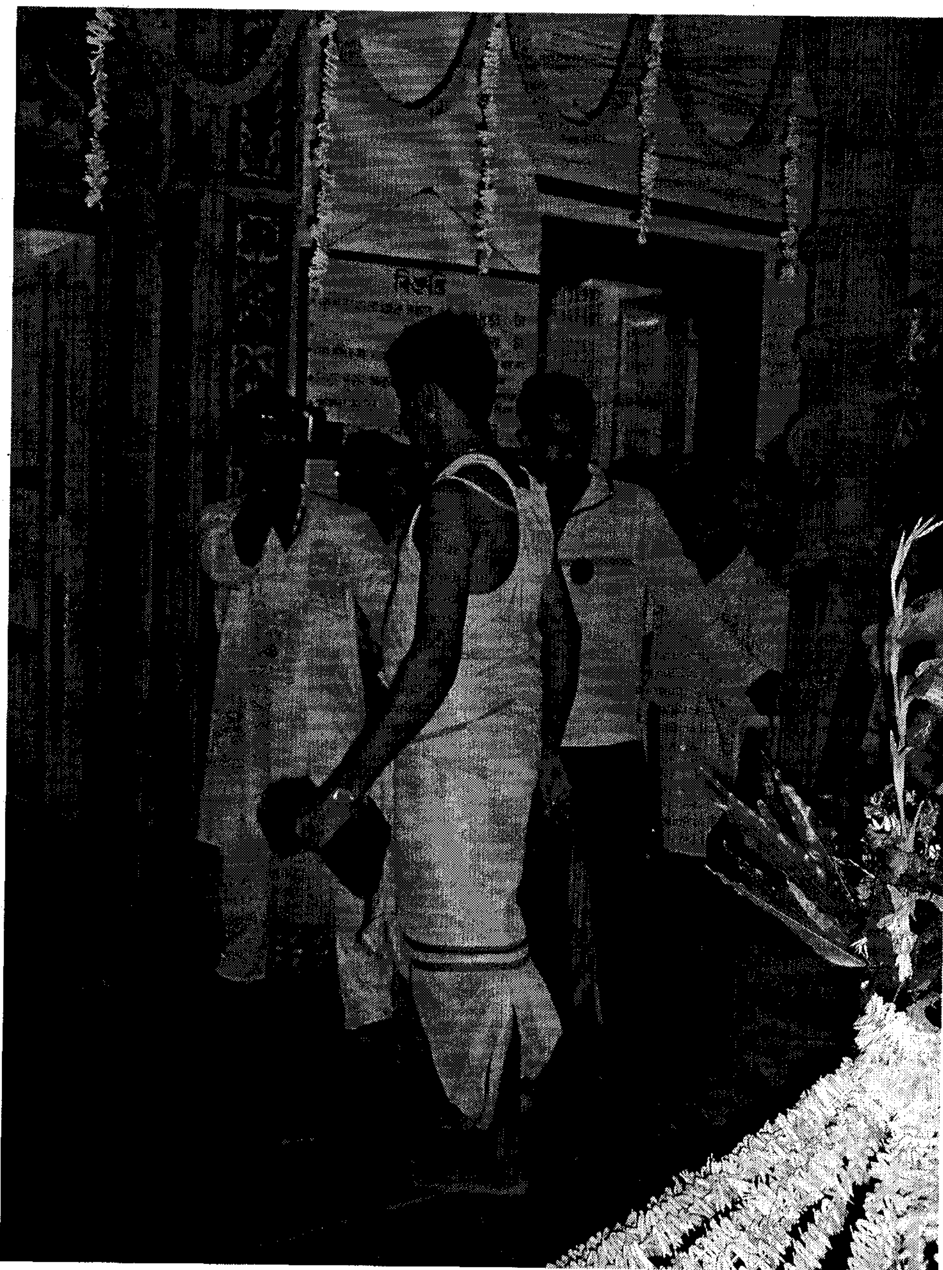
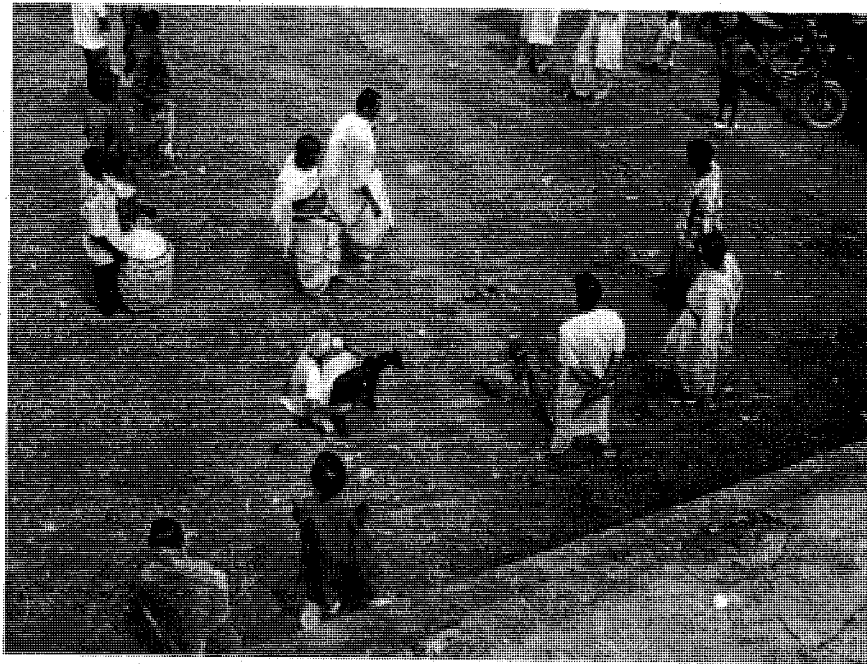


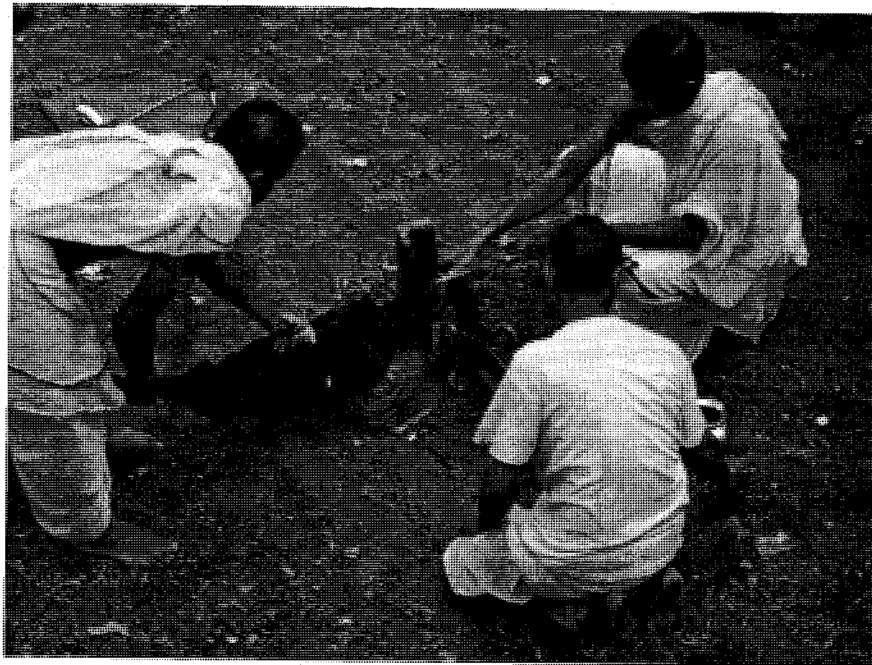
Figure 14

Basan Thakur entering the Haṃseśvarī Devī shrine holding the severed head of the sacrificial goat on Kālī *pūjā* night. The head is placed at the feet of Haṃseśvarī-as-Kālī. Photo by Author

Figure 15

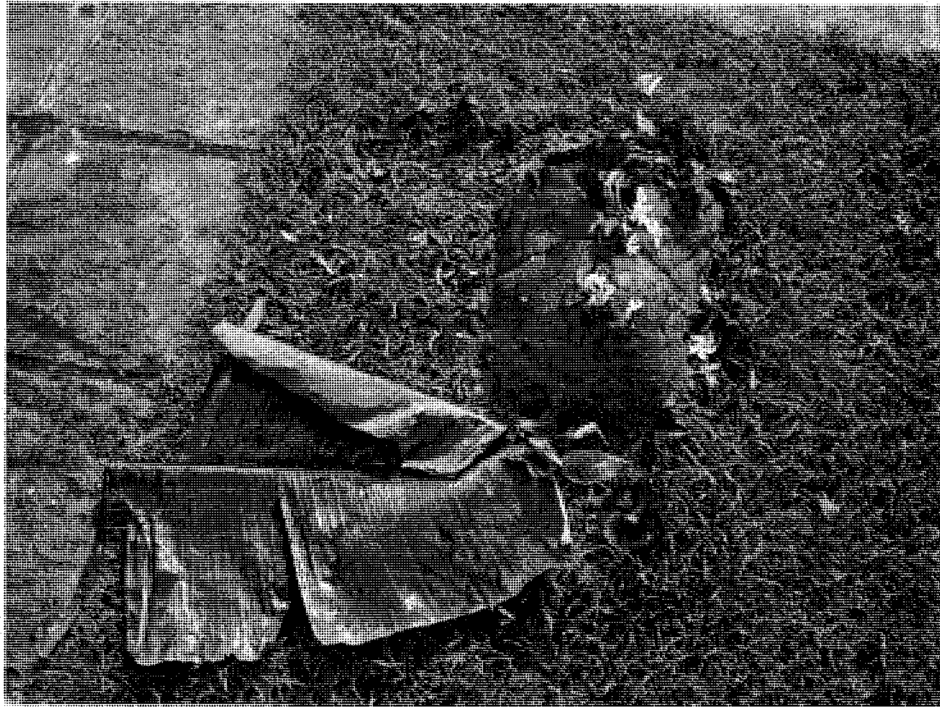
Pandal at Durgā *pūjā* celebrations in Bansberia, 2006
Photo by Author





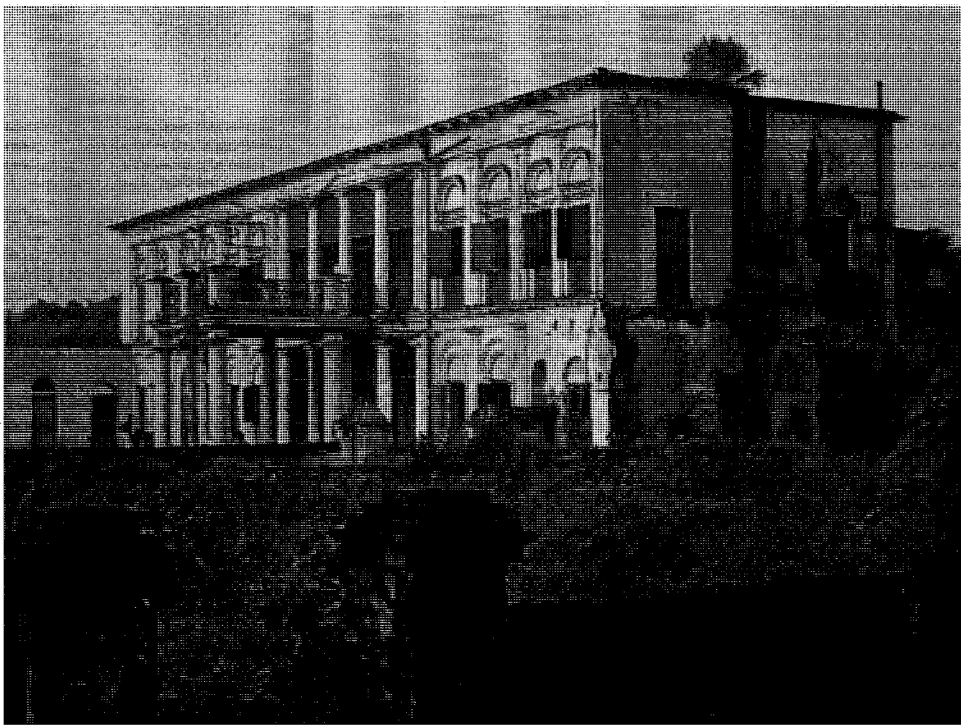
Figures 16a and 16b

Goat sacrifice (*bali*) for Durgā *pūjā* in front of the Durgā *pandal*, sponsored by the *chōṭo taraf* house, Bansberia, 2006
Photo by Author



Figures 17a and 17b

The *bali-pīṭha* outside the entrance to the Haṃseśvarī Devī temple. During Durgā *pūjā*, sacrifices are performed here in the name of Durgā-Mahiṣamardinī.
Photo by Author



Figures 18a and 18b
Images of the *chōṭo taraf* home, the only remaining intact property of the Debroy family in Bansberia
Photo by Author