

## Article

# Good Queen, Bad Queen: Gender, Devotion, and Mythmaking in Women's Histories

Sundari Johansen Hurwitt 

Department of Philosophy and Religion, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA 94103, USA; sjohansen@ciis.edu

**Abstract:** How do we remember and write about powerful women and the impacts they have had on history? Who tells their stories, and to whose advantage are those narratives constructed? And what happens if we look carefully and acknowledge that when they enter historical narratives, many of these “women” are not adults, but actually relatively young girls? Rani Rasmani Dasi (1793–1861) and Bar-rajā Phuleshwari Kunwari (also known as Phulmati and Pramateshwari) (d. 1731) are each remembered as powerful women influencers of popular religion in South Asia, though in very different ways. These two “queens” were each remarkable women who variously defied, upended, and upheld common assumptions and narratives about caste, gender, power, and religion in Hindu society in early modern India. This study critically investigates the work of Rasmani and Phuleshwari’s many chroniclers, biographers, and hagiographers, questioning received narratives and attempting to construct a glimpse of them as living girls and women. What do we actually know about them, about their activities and motivations? And what can we know, when so much of the evidence is unreliable? Thrust into unfamiliar social, political, and religious environments as young girls, they grew into deeply religious women who used their considerable influence and resources to promote their own visions of divine power. They also became full participants in and beneficiaries of problematic power structures of domination and exploitation. But with closer investigation, it appears that much of what we think we know about these women is incomplete or, in the case of Phuleshwari, completely unreliable.

**Keywords:** Rani Rasmani; Phuleshwari; women in Hinduism; girlhood; women and religious history; children and religion; historiography; history of religion; Shaktism; Tantra; Assam; Bengal; South Asia



**Citation:** Johansen Hurwitt, Sundari. 2023. Good Queen, Bad Queen: Gender, Devotion, and Mythmaking in Women's Histories. *Religions* 14: 954. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14080954>

Academic Editors: Antoinette DeNapoli and June McDaniel

Received: 9 May 2023  
Revised: 17 June 2023  
Accepted: 19 June 2023  
Published: 25 July 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

How do we remember and write about powerful women and the impacts they have had on history? Who tells their stories, and to whose advantage are those narratives constructed? And what happens if we look carefully and acknowledge that when they enter historical narratives, many of these “women” are not adults, but actually relatively young girls? Rani Rasmani Dasi (1793–1861) and Bar-rajā Phuleshwari Kunwari (also known as Phulmati and Pramateshwari) (d. 1731) are each remembered as powerful women influencers of popular religion in South Asia, though in very different ways. These two “queens” were each remarkable women who variously defied, upended, and upheld common assumptions and narratives about caste, gender, power, and religion in Hindu society in early modern India.<sup>1</sup> This study critically investigates the work of Rasmani and Phuleshwari’s many chroniclers, biographers, and hagiographers, questioning received narratives and attempting to construct a glimpse of them as living girls and women. What do we *actually* know about them, about their activities and motivations? And what *can* we know, when so much of the evidence is unreliable? Thrust into unfamiliar social, political, and religious environments as young girls, they grew into deeply religious women who used their considerable influence and resources to promote their own visions of divine power. They also became full participants in and beneficiaries of problematic power

structures of domination and exploitation. But with closer investigation, it appears that much of what we think we know about these women is incomplete or, in the case of Phuleshwari, completely unreliable.

In searching for the historical Rasmani and Phuleshwari, I became fascinated by their hagiographies and popular histories and by how the intense social, religious, and political climate of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries created the architecture for these narratives. What became clear is that the stories told of Rasmani and Phuleshwari are not just about the women themselves, but reflect nationalist values and discourses in Bengal and Assam within the larger struggle for independence.

At first glance, these two remarkable “queens” appear to share many synchronicities. Both were born into impoverished, non-dominant-caste families, lost parents at a young age, and were married as children to much older, wealthy, and powerful men. Both are closely associated with the worship of potent goddesses and the patronage of important goddess temples and related religious traditions. In their rise to power, they showed deference to and enforced brahmanical norms, ostensibly supporting their upward social mobility. Both left records of significant philanthropy. They exercised power against those they saw as political, cultural, and economic threats, though with very different reputational consequences. These similarities end, however, in how they are actually remembered. While Rasmani has been canonized in public opinion as a saintly, even semi-divine figure, Phuleshwari has been villainized as a power-hungry zealot who brought down an entire dynastic empire with her imperious, intemperate actions.

The earliest biographical sources, almost all of which are written by men, establish narratives of our two queens that center relationships with the men in their lives, both before and after marriage. That legends of Rani Rasmani’s early life have been constructed with such clarity and persistence in the narrative record is a testament to her enduring power as a cultural and spiritual icon. Narratives about the early lives of Rasmani and Phuleshwari cannot effectively be corroborated: their popular histories and hagiographies routinely provide few or no citations. Much of what has already been written about these women in the scholarly literature focuses on their lives and activities after marriage, and so the first portion of this study briefly reviews popular, relatively late, constructed narratives about their childhoods, including their pre-marriage lives and young adolescent (and perhaps pre-adolescent) encounters with their future husbands. As Uma Chakravarti argues, the makers of myths, legends, and histories have often ignored the childhoods of girls, preferring to focus on their marriages, when their reproductive lives are about to begin. (Chakravarti 2018, p. 45) In addition, as I have noted elsewhere, the scholarly discourse around “women” and religion in South Asia tends to adhere to problematic constructs that erase adolescent girl children, particularly in discussions of sexuality that involve wives, Tantric consorts, and sex workers. (Johansen Hurwitt 2022) As a result, the experiences of girls are frequently overlooked and effectively marginalized, but also often impossible to know, creating significant tension between the desire to unearth their stories and the plausibility of doing so in any historically meaningful way. A dearth of reliable information about the early lives of Rasmani and Phuleshwari prior to marriage creates such a problem. If we are to investigate their lives as girls, we cannot exclude their marital relationships. In addition to glimpses of their lives before marriage, we must interrogate and problematize the narratives constructed around their experiences of courtship and early marriage by intentionally reading Rasmani and Phuleshwari as girl children in these various early experiences, not as “women”. Such a perspective provides insight into the glossing over or romanticization of gender-based, institutionalized violence.

I will also discuss significant events associated with their adult lives for which these women are best known, which solidify their popular legacies into what I am calling “good queen” and “bad queen” narratives. While I will be reviewing the veracity of a few historical claims related to key elements of their lives associated with these popular narratives, this study is not interested in—nor does it have space for—proving or disproving every biographical or historical detail. Rather, in uncovering some of the omissions and fabrica-

tions in their biographies that have contributed to significant aspects of their notoriety, I identify some of the complex social, political, religious, and cultural factors that influenced narrative development and create space for further inquiry.

## 2. Rani Rasmani

The first woman to establish a Kālī temple in colonial Bengal—the Dakshineswar Kālī Temple in Kolkata—Rani Rasmani Dasi<sup>2</sup> has been the subject of a number of popular hagiographical biographies, including a 1955 biopic and a recent popular television series, which give details of her early life.<sup>3</sup> While it is difficult and, in some cases, impossible to untangle fact from fiction, these sources agree on a number of details. Rasmani was born in 1793 to a non-dominant-caste family of modest means.<sup>4</sup> The youngest child of Harekrishna Das and Rampriya Devi, she also had two older brothers. According to biographers, her mother named her “Rani” (queen) at birth and, after visitation by the god Kṛṣṇa, a beloved avatar of the god Viṣṇu, in a dream, added the name “Rasmani.”<sup>5</sup> Rampriya died when Rasmani was eight years old.

Rasmani is universally described as an uncommonly beautiful and miraculous girl (Gupta 1964, p. 6), whose sincere devotion to Raghuvīra or Raghuvīr (a name for Rāma, a popular avatar of the god Viṣṇu) had the power to heal severe illness.<sup>6</sup> Rasmani’s childhood Vaiṣṇavism endured into her adult life, both in her personal home temple, where she continued her worship of Raghuvīr or Rāma, and in the construction of a Viṣṇu temple within the Kālī temple complex at Dakshineswar. She is described in a mid-twentieth-century devotional poem to Kālī as “one of Rādhā’s eight companions who came to earth for fun”, again reflecting her close connection with Kṛṣṇa even after she constructed the Kālī temple (McDermott 2001, p. 271). While we do not know what specific rituals Rasmani participated in as a child, we can imagine that she participated in typical Vaiṣṇava traditions of the time. She likely sang popular devotional songs and performed simple daily rituals to Raghuvīr, along with participating in broader village ritual and festival life. In her biographies, Rasmani’s personal appearance as a child is often compared to the goddess Lakṣmī, the devoted wife of Viṣṇu popularly associated with wives, the maintenance of a healthy and prosperous household, and personal wealth and success in business. As a girl, she was said to experience miraculous visions that indicated her future as a wealthy, famous queen.<sup>7</sup> Her biographers describe intense devotional and visual experiences with various forms of the god Viṣṇu and the goddess Kālī.<sup>8</sup>

It is unclear, however, when Rasmani’s devotional relationship with Kālī actually began. Popular portrayals of her early life do not suggest a strong devotional attachment to Kālī, but rather suggest that she was fiercely protected by the goddess, who, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, had experienced a devotional renaissance in Bengal in which she was portrayed as a loving mother and protector with a ferocious appearance but a soft and kind heart (Kinsley 2003, p. 32). Rachel Fell McDermott (2001) argues that it was *zamindar* culture that drove the flourishing of Śākta (goddess devotee) culture in Bengal, as they sought to identify themselves with royalty (pp. 30–33). Although they sponsored various religious institutions, traditions, and temples, Śāktism had long been associated with power (*śakti*), along with royal power, and the sponsorship of Śākta temples aligned zamindar families with this “royal identity and power” (p. 32). According to McDermott, “by and large the zamindars of the districts immediately west and east of the Hooghly River were Śākta or Śaiva in leaning . . . Some even held a certain antipathy toward Vaiṣṇavas.” (p. 33) This suggests not only that Rasmani’s famed devotion to Kālī as well as Durgā may have developed *after*—and perhaps even as a direct result of—her marriage into a zamindar family but also that Rasmani’s construction of a temple to Kālī was motivated at least as much by her desire to cement her personal and professional legacy by influencing local religious culture as it was by personal devotion.

At the age of eleven, Rasmani married Rajchandra Das, the twice-widowed, twenty-one-year-old son of Pritiram Das, a wealthy zamindar (landlord).<sup>9</sup> Rasmani’s early marriage to Rajchandra is idealized and heavily romanticized in nearly every biographical source. In

these stories, Rasmani has two independent meetings, one with Rajchandra and one with Pritiram, Rajchandra's father. Shifting chronology changes the implications and impact of each narrative version. In several biographies, such as Annapurna Devi's *Rani Rasamani* (1967) and Pratyot Gupta's *Rani Rasamani* (1964), it is Pritiram who first discovers Rasmani while walking along the Ganga (Devi, pp. 26–27; Gupta, pp. 23–24). Upon first seeing her, Pritiram experiences the child as a vision of the goddess Lakṣmī. This prompts him to arrange her marriage to Rajchandra, who, being doubly widowed, resists the arrangement, eschewing any further marriages. His father is certain that Rajchandra will agree as soon as he sees the girl, and so he arranges for Rajchandra to take a boat ride along the Ganga near Rasmani's home at the time and place that Rasmani typically bathes. When Rajchandra sees the girl, he immediately agrees to marry her. This story heavily emphasizes the apparently divine presence of Rasmani and the role of the patriarch in finding her and arranging the match, in line with orthodox norms.

However, it is another version of the story that I have heard most often when visiting Rasmani's Dakshineswar temple in Kolkata. This version of the story heavily romanticizes the first meeting of Rajchandra and Rasmani and suggests that their marriage was not only arranged but also a fated love match. Popularized in the 1955 film *Rani Rasamani*, as well as some written biographical sources, the version of this story presented in the first episode of the 2017 Bengali serial *Karunamoyee Rani Rasamani* is typical. A young Rani—played by 14-year-old Ditipriya Roy—takes her beloved *mūrti* (sacred image, typically a sculpture) of Raghuvīr (Rāma) to the local *ghāṭ*—a combination of a harbor and steps into the water for bathing access. Dressed in a red and white sari, she walks down the steps of the *ghāṭ* into the water and immerses herself fully in the river. She then erupts from the water with elation, splashing and smiling, just as the dashing and kind Rajchandra—played by Gazi Abdun Noor—drifts by on a boat. He is singing and masterfully playing a song on the *esrāj* (a bowed stringed instrument) when he sets eyes on the beautiful, joyful Rani and is instantly transfixed. In most of these stories, Rajchandra finds out who she is and where she lives and then works with his father to arrange the marriage. When meeting Rasmani for the first time, Pritiram then has a vision of her as Lakṣmī. The vision confirms the divine ordination of the match.

The story of a wealthy and handsome young man happening upon an impoverished young woman while bathing in the river, followed by them immediately falling in love and getting married, is an undeniably romantic tale. Whenever I have visited the Dakshineswar temple in Kolkata, numerous people have been eager to tell me this invariably romantic story of love and fate. Rasmani is always characterized in these oral tales as a beautiful, impoverished young woman—not as a child. In reality, Rasmani was merely eleven years old when Rajchandra saw her in the river. He was in his early twenties—a decade older, sexually experienced—and two young wives had already died. Whether they died of disease or childbirth is not known.

This age gap troubles overtly romantic narratives of Rajchandra's sexual and spiritual attraction to Rasmani, particularly for a modern audience, including the tendency of some authors to cryptically sexualize her pre-pubescent body.<sup>10</sup> For example, although film versions depict Rasmani as somewhat older and fully dressed in the river, Annapurna Devi's 1967 description of this encounter suggests that Rajchandra admires Rasmani's barely pubescent nude body, which is compared to a naked idol.<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, it is not mere sexual attraction implied in these mid- to late-twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century narratives. Rather, they construct a kind of transcendent, spiritual attraction that is also intimately tied to physical attraction. This is a triple match—a divine one of body and soul, a parental one of appropriate caste, as well as a love marriage—manufacturing the combined romantic and religious ideal and navigating a very modern hybrid cultural discourse influenced by both traditional Hindu and modern European cultural values and reflecting a particularly Bengali ideal. Read or viewed closely, it is actually Rani's ecstatic devotion and emanation of divine presence—presented as in-

separable from her physical beauty—that captures Rajchandra’s attention together with his heart. Such an approach seems at least somewhat conscious of the reality and the problem of child marriage, as it is mitigated and normalized as a kind of divinely ordained spiritual romance. That she is a child becomes immaterial, because her child personhood does not fully exist in a divine narrative. Identified with the goddess, Rasmani is ageless, and her adolescent child body cannot be idly objectified because it must be viewed and worshipped. As Partha Chatterjee argues regarding the nineteenth-century nationalist development of the ideal Indian woman, “the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home.” (Chatterjee 1989, p. 630) In the case of the young Rasmani, it is the sexual personhood of the vulnerable human adolescent girl child that is effectively erased.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Phulmati

While there are many biographies discussing stories of Rasmani’s early life, exploring Phuleshwari’s girlhood is much more complicated, as sources are few. Phuleshwari does not enjoy the same popularity as Rasmani. As I will demonstrate, most of what we know about her was developed in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, a century after her death. Much of the modern understanding of Phuleshwari can be traced to the work of beloved twentieth-century Assamese historian Suryya Kumar Bhuyan (1892–1964), who edited and published several *buranjis*, or historical chronicles, along with popular histories and scholarly articles promoting the history and unique cultural heritage of Assam.

Focusing on Phuleshwari’s early life requires some untangling of multiple narratives. In this section, I will focus on two competing legends of her early life, entry into royal service, and eventual marriage, not only to critically assess conflicting stories and the evidence for them—or lack thereof—but also to demonstrate how when we center the experience of Phuleshwari as a girl child and compare it with that of Rasmani, a historical pattern of violence experienced by young girls emerges, particularly for those marginalized by caste and poverty. We also glimpse the ways in which these narratives closely tie physical attractiveness and compliance with male authority to one’s capacity for social mobility and spiritual power.

*Buranjis* were one of the primary forms of historical documentation of the Ahom era (1228–1826). Two primary categories of *buranji* are those written and maintained as official royal chronicles by the state and those commissioned by various wealthy and influential families. The tradition of composing *buranjis* persisted well after the fall of the Ahom dynasty in 1826, lasting several decades into the colonial era and becoming an important assertion of cultural independence, collective memory, and pride (Gupta 2018, p. 268). Many *buranjis* have been lost or intentionally destroyed over the centuries, and those that have been published and remain available to the general public today are often compilations—a mix of earlier and later works—or else newer compositions of the mid-nineteenth century and later.

Bhuyan is most closely associated with the modern compilation, publication, and promotion of surviving *buranjis*, having edited numerous volumes during his career, and is largely responsible for popularizing the most well-known narratives of Phuleshwari’s life and influence. His 1927 book, *An Assamese Nur Jahan: Or, a Sketch in the Life of Queen Phuleswari Devi*, was the first—and only—comprehensive monograph on her life and, as the title indicates, argues that the eponymous queen was the Assamese equivalent of the seventeenth-century Mughal empress, poet, and polymath Nur Jahan. Bhuyan mythologizes Phuleshwari in this ostensibly historical work, outlining her competing origin stories, chronicling her rise to power, and critiquing her subsequent alleged abuses of neo-Vaiṣṇava communities. Throughout the book, Bhuyan cites as his sources various *buranjis*, magazine articles, oral histories, and legends.

Phuleshwari was, according to Bhuyan, originally named Phul or Phulmati and born into a poor non-dominant-caste family (p. 23). Bhuyan cites two conflicting legends of her childhood, which includes her early adolescence. In the first story (pp. 24–25), Bhuyan



describes her father as a *nāt* or musician. Contextually, this means that Phuleshwari should be understood as a *nāṭī*, which, in medieval and early modern Assam, was similar to a *devadāsī*—traditionally non-dominant-caste girls and women married to a male deity as young girls and placed in life-long service of that temple (Barua 1951, p. 121; Das 1972, p. 132). The temple *nāṭī* tradition goes back to at least the ninth century in Assam and was also practiced by the Ahoms (Barua 1951, p. 120; Das 1972, p. 127). *Devadāsīs* trained as highly skilled dancers and were also, in some cases, important ritual participants. Although some sources suggest that *nāṭīs* were strictly celibate, other sources suggest that their ritual service may have included acting as sexual consorts for priests and other male practitioners in Tantric ritual.<sup>13</sup> Without royal temple patronage, *nāṭīs* became increasingly associated with prostitution, and the tradition eventually died out.<sup>14</sup> The association of Phulmati with the *nāṭī* tradition by Bhuyan subtly begins an association with impropriety.

Bhuyan says that while tending cows in a field with her sister, the young Phulmati sees Shiva Singha's chief officer riding by on a horse and boldly tells him that her name is Phul ("flower") and that they are orphans. The girls are very beautiful, so he takes the girls as a gift for the chief queen, named Ratnakanti. Phul's birth year is never mentioned in *buranjī* sources, but the sisters were almost certainly quite young, perhaps just reaching puberty at age nine or ten. When Phul enters palace service, she is renamed Phulmati, and she and her sister Draupadi are made the queen's *ligirīs*. Bhuyan translates this term as "handmaiden" (Bhuyan 1927, p. 24), obscuring the *ligirī*'s unspoken but expected additional role as a sexual servant of the male monarch, at his discretion (Baruah 2006, p. 286). The *ligirī*'s body was not her own, but owned entirely by the royal household. While it may be ahistorical to ascribe modern terms to historical events and contexts, we would today describe Phulmati's experience as child sex trafficking.<sup>15</sup>

*Ligirī* is also sometimes translated in the English-language historical literature as "dancing girl" (Bose 1989, p. 45), a term that is also occasionally used to describe Phuleshwari (Gogoi 2016, p. 57). *Ligirīs* may not have been dancers, however, and the image of the "dancing girl" is often coded language indicating a titillating and licentious performer who "commands and conquers men" (Spencer 2004, p. 48). This also obscures the unique social mobility of the *ligirī*. According to Baruah (2006), if the *ligirī* conceived and bore the king's child, she would be promoted to the position of second queen (p. 286). The *ligirī* thus has multiple roles as a servant and companion to the queen and a ready sexual slave or eventual concubine for the king in a time when death from childbirth was alarmingly common.<sup>16</sup> Phulmati did not bear any children before becoming queen, suggesting in this version of events that the *ligirī*'s position was even more fluid and could be promoted to queen without children simply for being a favorite.

According to Bhuyan, once the young Phulmati enters service in the palace, she catches the king's eye. We are not told the details of their sexual encounters, and as may be expected, there is no discussion of Phulmati's consent and no pregnancy is mentioned, but the king eventually makes her second queen. According to Bhuyan, Ratnakanti's jealousy grows, and she arranges for the girl to be spirited away to a secret and distant location. Fearing that Phulmati will be assassinated, the man entrusted with this task informs the king, who moves Phulmati to his own palace and promotes her to chief queen. Ratnakanti is usurped and, rather curiously, not mentioned again.

This story of abduction, exploitation, and eventual rise to power is all rather compelling and exciting. But how reliable is it? Bhuyan provides almost no evidence for this tale. He cites only second-hand oral sources for the legends of Ratnakanti and her tense relationship with Phulmati.<sup>17</sup> While oral histories should not necessarily be considered automatically unreliable, Queen Ratnakanti is virtually unmentioned throughout the historical record as the first queen of Shiva Singha. While it is not uncommon for Ahom queens to remain unnamed, it is uncommon in the case of Shiva Singha's three queens, each of whom had coins struck in their names. The only evidence for Ratnakanti, according to Bhuyan, is a colophon of an unnamed portion of the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* (BP) translated into Assamese by Ahom court poet Kaviraj Chakravarti (Bhuyan 1927, pp. 24–25). But

Bhuyan also names Phuleshwari as the sponsor of translations of this same work, and he provides translations of Chakravarti's praise of her in both his rendering of Kalidasa's *Śakuntalā Kāvya* and translation of the *Ṣaṃkha-cūḍa-badha*, a chapter of the *BP*.<sup>18</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, historians—including Bhuyan himself—had decided on a different narrative, eliminating Ratnakanti as a separate historical person. In his 1953 *Aspects of Early Assamese Literature*, for example, Banikanta Kakati (1953) names Phuleshwari (as Pramatheshwari), “also known as Ratnakāntī”, as the subject of this colophon (p. 292). By the mid-1960s, Bhuyan drops all references to Rantakanti as a separate queen and names Phuleshwari as Shiva Singha's first queen, indicating a change of view.<sup>19</sup> More recently, Swarna Lata Baruah named Phuleshwari as the only sponsor of Chakravarti's translations of the *BP*. Given all of this, it appears that this first narrative of Phuleshwari's early life and persecution by Rantakāntī is probably based on fabrications by Bhuyan and others (Sharma 2011, pp. 223–25).

The second origin story places the young Phulmati as a servant in the royal household—this time the *ligiri* of the foster mother of Shiva Singha, whose name is not recorded. Bhuyan says that this woman raised the young prince from infancy after the death of his mother, presumably in childbirth (Bhuyan 1927, p. 27). She is renowned as an exceptionally beautiful and charming girl, and she catches the eye of Shiva Singha. His foster mother has young Phulmati removed from the royal household, but after her death, Shiva Singha brings Phulmati back to the palace, where Bhuyan says she is immediately made second queen and named Phuleshwari, eventually becoming chief queen.

In some ways, this version of the story seems more plausible, but it still has some significant plot holes. For example, Dhai Ali (“Nurse Road”) was constructed at Sibsagar during Shiva Singha's reign, which suggests that this nursemaid both existed and was important in the king's life. Bhuyan attributes the road's naming to Phuleshwari, but there seems to be scant evidence to support this (p. 31). Phulmati is said to be promoted to second queen after the nurse's death, but curiously, there is no mention of a chief queen in this narrative. Padmeswar Gogoi claims, without supporting evidence, that the nurse was actually the king's first consort, but this also appears to be speculative, perhaps conflating the two narratives.<sup>20</sup> Later scholarly consensus based on archaeological evidence strongly points to Phuleshwari as the first queen.

As I will soon discuss in more detail, the *buranjīs* from which Bhuyan sources Phuleshwari's biography appear to have been composed and first published during Assam's colonial period (1826–1947) in the mid- to late nineteenth century. They were then edited and published by Assamese historians in the early twentieth century, with most being edited by Bhuyan himself as part of his work with the Assam State Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Gauhati (later Guwahati). Bhuyan's strategy in compiling and editing the *buranjīs* was explicitly in service of constructing a seamless, timeless portrait of Assam and its people, calling them “our strengthening tie to bind us with the past, maintain the solidarity of the Assamese people, and protect us from any threatened erosion of our nationalism”. (Bhuyan 1934, p. 4) But while his scholarship could often be quite meticulous, his methodology for editing the *buranjīs* was extremely problematic. As Bodhisattva Kar (2008) notes,

“The editorial work was enormous, laborious, demanding—but hardly innocent. Collation of texts and correction of ‘errors’ left enough room for the editor to present the *Buranjīs* as a singular, indivisible unity frozen in the condensed centuries classed as the Ahom period. The construction of this stately pre-British archive under the aegis of the British government was possible only by determinedly overlooking its fractures and crucially underplaying its inconsistencies”. (p. 26)

Bhuyan's chronicles offer compiled, typically uncited narratives that suggest a creative mix of fact and fiction, with legends of Phuleshwari becoming more detailed and dramatic over time. But virtually no details of her early life appear in early chronicles. For example,

Bhuyan's *Tungkhungia Buranji* (1933)—compiled from a *buranji* composed in 1803 and augmented by Bhuyan, with additional material from unnamed sources—simply introduces Phuleshwari as “a dancing girl, named Phulmati, daughter of a *nat* of Chinatali. She was made the Barkuanri or chief queen and named Bar-raja” (p. 40). The *Āsām Buranjī* (1962)—a history written in the style of Ahom *buranjis* and published in Bengali in 1829 by a young Assamese intellectual living in Bengal named Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan (1962)—simply describes Phuleshwari as a servant (*dāsī*) in the royal household, and there is no mention of a first queen other than her (p. 40). The most comprehensive description of Phuleshwari is found in the late-nineteenth-century *Assam Buranji* of Harakanta Barua Sadar-Amin (1930), also edited by Bhuyan, who explicitly describes her as Shiva Singha's first wife (p. 69). It is also this last account that Bhuyan appears to draw on most for his descriptions of Phuleshwari and accounts of her intemperate and abusive influence as queen on popular religious groups in Assam. It appears that Bhuyan relies primarily on scant oral sources and a great deal of creative, elaborate storytelling to construct Phuleshwari's early life. Bhuyan's affinity for these later *buranjis* includes their nationalist undertones, which I argue would come to influence their various portrayals of Phuleshwari and her alleged role in Assam's tumultuous history. However, there are clues in her later life that can be used to perhaps better understand some elements of her childhood, possibly including the focus of her early devotional life.

#### 4. Storying the Good Queen and the Bad Queen

In exploring the narratives constructing the early lives of Rasmani and Phuleshwari, we can see a number of common threads. But it is after their respective marriages that the ways in which they are characterized begin to sharply diverge, and the contours of power become more apparent. Both Rasmani and Phuleshwari, for example, rose from marginalized backgrounds as a result of unique circumstances and eventually exercised substantial social, economic, religious, and political power in ways that were most often denied to members of non-dominant castes—especially women. Both demonstrated devotion both to their husbands and to their deities, sponsoring temples and becoming disciples of renowned holy men. But while Rasmani exerted her power to resist British encroachment on her authority, in a move seen as protecting her tenants and in alignment with nationalist goals, Phuleshwari is infamous for persecuting politically powerful members of devotional Vaiṣṇava groups whose beliefs and practices threatened her own religious authority.

After their marriage, Rasmani and Rajchandra had five children—four daughters and one son who died at birth—and appear to have genuinely supported each other. They were fairly active philanthropists, building public facilities to benefit the poor and working class in the performance of daily religious ablutions as well as death rites. Rajchandra appears to have been a fairly progressive husband for the time, influenced by the Bengali reformer Rammohan Roy (Pal 2018, p. 119). He is described as an honest man who is generous to the community and intelligent in business and who does not make money by cheating others (Dash 2013, p. 30). Although Rajchandra and Rasmani were extremely wealthy and well known, and Rasmani would later be considered quite influential due to her association with Ramakrishna, because of their shared non-dominant-caste background, they were not considered by their contemporaries to be among Calcutta's elite, culturally dominant families (Chatterjee 1993, p. 43).

After Rajchandra's death in 1831, Rasmani personally took control of the family lands and businesses, with significant support from her trusted son-in-law, Mathuramohan Biswas.<sup>21</sup> While Rasmani's resistance to colonial power and philanthropy as a zamindar has been well-documented, her essential function and efficacy as a zamindar has not been significantly examined. Rasmani's country was controlled in large part by the East India Company, a massive corporation founded in the seventeenth century in England to control global trade. The Company colonized India in the mid-eighteenth century and ran it as what P.J. Stern (2011) calls a kind of Company-State for the next century, until 1858 when the Company was dissolved and the British government began direct rule in the



subcontinent.<sup>22</sup> Zamindar families were granted permanent private property rights by the East India Company as part of the 1793 Land Settlement Act. In exchange, they constantly collected large amounts of revenue from tenants and transferred nearly 90 percent of it to the Company-State. This made zamindars significant economic pillars of the colonial enterprise (Bose and Jalal 2004, pp. 55–56).

Those who defaulted on revenue payments to the colonial government had their lands seized and sold to other zamindars. Under constant pressure to produce revenue, zamindars were notorious for their extremely shrewd business dealings and often coercive methods for collecting payments from their tenants (p. 56). Rasmani retained her property and maintained a significant amount of personal wealth, so we can assume that she was an effective landlord. In addition to inheriting generational wealth, she generated a huge amount of income for herself and the Company-State. And she was clearly aware of this and used it to her advantage to resist new laws that negatively impacted her income, directly through cuts to revenue or indirectly through increased economic pressure on her tenants. What made Rasmani—and Rajchandra before her—different from many other zamindars was her positive reputation despite her role in this notoriously exploitative system. Her biographers make their disdain for both foreign colonizers and zamindars clear, and Pratyot Gupta (1964) describes Bengal in this period as being under the tyranny of foreigners, landlords, and bandits (p. 22). Rasmani, however, is described by all of her biographers as genuinely compassionate, and the various philanthropic projects funded by her and her husband reflect an awareness of their ability to use their wealth for a positive and public impact.

As the legend goes, while planning a pilgrimage to Varanasi, Rasmani had a vision of the goddess Kālī, who directed her to stay in Calcutta and build a grand temple instead. Rasmani had been a Vaiṣṇava her entire life, so why focus her considerable wealth and influence on constructing a temple for Kālī? This vision was a remarkably convenient one. As previously mentioned, the zamindars of this area aligned themselves with Śākta traditions as a way of appropriating royal influence and power, and many looked down on Vaiṣṇavas. By building a grand Kālī temple complex—which included a Viṣṇu temple that houses Rasmani’s family śālagrām or natural stone representing her beloved Raghuvīr,<sup>23</sup> as well as images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, along with a Śiva temple—Rasmani would not only gain the favor of the all-powerful mother goddess that protected her marital zamindar family but also assert that family’s legacy for generations and cement her status as a true “queen”. Ground was broken in 1847, and the Dakshineswar Kālī Temple was completed in 1855.

But as Akshay Kumar Sen describes in his hagiographical biography *A Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna (Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi)*,<sup>24</sup> all would not go smoothly. Although she was extremely wealthy and comparatively influential, Rasmani was also a non-dominant-caste widow. Cultural convention mandated not only the subordination of non-dominant castes to dominant castes but also the ritual and social separation of non-dominant castes from dominant castes. As a result of these dynamics, this impressive new temple was broadly shunned by brahman devotees, which bothered Rasmani. She was challenged in the courts by powerful local brahmins who tried to stop temple construction because she was a śūdra widow (Dutta 2022, p. 40). This also made it difficult to secure any brahman priests to serve and thus legitimize the new temple. Rasmani finally found two brothers, Ramkumar and Gadadhar Chattopadhyay, who agreed to work with her. While the elder Ramkumar became the head priest, the younger Gadadhar was at first quite reluctant to work with Rasmani due to her caste (Kripal 1995, p. 60). According to Sen, Ramkumar, citing scriptural loopholes, convinced Rasmani to sign ownership of the temple and its land over to the brothers, as gifting the temple to brahmins would purify it of its śūdra associations and thus eliminate issues of caste. As the story goes, Rasmani agreed and arranged for the transfer shortly before her death in 1861. Soma Dutta (2022) contests this legend, arguing that the transfer of the temple to a Debottar Endowment, which included her own daughters as administrators, rendered such an arrangement historically impossible.

Upon Ramkumar's untimely death in 1856, the eccentric young Gadadhar, known by now at the temple almost exclusively by his formal name, Ramakrishna (Kripal 1995, p. 342f21), became the head priest (61). He would eventually become known as a legendary saint. Rasmani visited the temple and Ramakrishna often, offering worship to Kālī in public while generally maintaining her Vaiṣṇava worship in her private home.<sup>25</sup>

Despite her own remarkable personal courage, spiritual devotion, compassion, political savvy, business acumen, and high intelligence, these are ultimately only secondary factors in Rasmani's canonization. Her six-year association with Ramakrishna is a primary catalyst for her continued renown. Ramakrishna is widely beloved throughout India and considered one of India's greatest modern religious philosophers, and Rasmani is characterized as having been quite devoted to Ramakrishna.

However, Rasmani's life cannot be reduced to her brief but intense relationship with a famous male saint, nor to her religiosity. Rather, she was a complex, deeply religious, and intelligent woman who experienced both marginalization and extreme privilege. She was privately a life-long Vaiṣṇava who also found personal, professional, and political fulfillment in her very public worship of the goddesses Durgā and Kālī. It was zamindar culture that brought to Kolkata the over-the-top religious pomp and spectacle of Durgā Pūjā during Navarātri and Kālī Pūjā during Divālī, and Rasmani was renowned for her spectacular and lavish public observances of these major festivals at her home in Janbazar in Kolkata, now a historic landmark. The establishment of the Dakshineswar Kālī Temple, in many ways, brought together the various aspects of her devotional and professional life, establishing formal temples to both of her beloved deities, along with others, and creating an important hub for the worship of several locally important deities that demonstrated her influence and magnanimous non-favoritism as a "royal" *zamīndārī*.

A wonderful illustration of Rasmani's unique brand of devotion is found in Elizabeth Harding's popular book *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar* (1993). According to legend, three months after the temple's dedication, a priest drops the stone *mūrti* (divine image) of Kṛṣṇa, breaking its leg off. Brahmanical tradition dictates that a broken image must be destroyed, but the devoted, ever-practical, and frugal Rasmani still sees the *mūrti* as genuinely full of life. She insists on its repair, comparing this to taking an injured man to a doctor. Ramakrishna is said to have repaired it himself. Although this was a controversial move, this same *mūrti* is reportedly still worshipped at the temple today, and the story is shared as an example of Rasmani's exceptional devotion and the superiority of simple, pure devotion to brahmanical rules—a common philosophical hallmark of Vaiṣṇava devotionalism (pp. 150–153).

The primary ways in which Rasmani's story is told, however, situate her within a romanticized Hindu and specifically Bengali nationalist narrative that celebrates her contributions to Bengali culture and her struggles against colonization, while actively minimizing or entirely ignoring her active role in the colonial system that perpetuated violence on its people. However remarkable she was, it is unlikely that Rasmani would have become a household name if she had not been such a useful figure in these kinds of narratives. I do not seek to detract whatsoever from Rasmani's many accomplishments or her kindness, philanthropy, and personal devotion. That being said, her many hagiographical narratives obscure the rather complex and contentious relationship that Rasmani had with the colonial state and the religious hegemony of her time. A closer investigation of these more tangled threads highlights not only her tremendous courage and acuity but also the necessity of compromise and the acceptance of abuse and violence as a woman of a non-dominant caste in colonial Bengal.

Her apparently savvy deference to caste and gender norms despite being a woman of certain privilege and power in the name of spiritual and social good was likely one of the keys to her success and sometimes grudging acceptance among her contemporaries, but these qualities have also contributed to her status as a nationalist icon. As Partha Chatterjee (1989) argues, Indian nationalist ideology promoted the selective cultivation of "the material techniques of modern Western civilization while retaining and strengthening

the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture,” (pp. 623–624) which was viewed as inherently superior to Western spiritual culture. As Mrinali Sinha (2008) notes, Indian women in the colonial period were understood as holding a kind of communal spiritual essence, defined and regulated by dominant religious communities that were implicitly male by default (pp. 8–9). In this emergent nationalism, men were to adapt to Western materialism, and women were to take responsibility for maintaining what was seen as the indigenous spiritual quality of national culture (Chatterjee 1989, pp. 626–27). Rasmani was by any measure a sophisticated and intelligent woman and understood the strategic necessity of tempering her material privilege with the performance of spiritual and social subservience to established orthodoxies. But in portraying her purely as exceptionally religious and heroic, the stories surrounding the canonized Rasmani reify elite cultural norms. In normalizing and romanticizing Rasmani’s child marriage by strategically divinizing her and suggesting that this was divinely ordained, a rhetorical buffer is constructed against the realities of violence and discrimination that Rasmani faced from dominant-caste Hindu society due to both her gender and her caste.

Similar dynamics are at play in the construction of historical narratives regarding the later life of Phuleshwari. Among her many known activities for which there is substantive material evidence are royal commissions of religious poetry and translations of Sanskrit literature and notable patronage of education, religion, and the arts (Bhuyan 1927, pp. 32–33). She and her husband sponsored the translation of several works of Sanskrit into Assamese, and they are effusively eulogized at the ends of these various works.<sup>26</sup>

But it is her alleged exhibitions of power and forceful attempts to influence popular religion in the Ahom kingdom for which she is most infamous. Bhuyan portrays her husband, King Shiva Singha, as weak and gutless, and ultimately unwilling or unable to control his power-hungry wife.<sup>27</sup> Shiva Singha’s relatively peaceful reign is, to Bhuyan, a sign that he could not live up to the glory and expansionist ambitions of his father, the mighty Rudra Singha. As the story goes, when Shiva Singha is told by his court astrologers that he will meet an untimely end if he remains king, it is decided that his wife Phuleshwari will be made regent (*bar-rajā*), essentially a female substitute king, and rule in his place. She is renamed Pramatheshwari to fully expunge what Bhuyan calls her “plebian” past. Coins are struck jointly in the names of Shiva Singha and Pramatheshwari to commemorate the move. She begins to flex her power in various ways inconsistent with gender norms, such as riding elephants—an activity restricted to men—and becomes deeply unpopular. Increasingly fanatical in her devotion to the goddess and the Śākta religion espoused by her guru, she begins a religious rampage, personally overseeing the destruction of beloved temple *mūrtis* (living icons), which are thrown into the river, and replacing them with those of her own design. She instituted and enforced brahmanical norms, forbidding the Ahom burial traditions and mandating cremation (Bhuyan 1927, pp. 37–38).

Bhuyan is most critical of what he calls Phuleshwari’s “imperious acts” against Vaiṣṇava leaders. Assam has, since the sixteenth century, been home to numerous neo-Vaiṣṇava groups based on the *bhakti* (devotional) movement of the fifteenth- to sixteenth-century poet-saint and social reformer Shankardev. While they were ostensibly founded on the same principles and practices, neo-Vaiṣṇava groups could be surprisingly diverse. Some groups were composed exclusively of brahmins and rejected non-dominant-caste members, while others totally rejected orthodox brahmanical norms such as the *varṇāśrama* (caste) system. Most rejected older forms of external worship, practicing newer, congregational forms of worship largely characterized by singing devotional songs. Not all were vegetarian, but regardless of their dietary practices, they could not participate in the killing of animals for food and rejected animal sacrifice and consumption of sacrificial meat, practiced by Śāktas (Sarma 1966, p. 143). The movement was incredibly popular among common people, particularly among non-dominant-caste agrarian groups, and that popularity persists today, with *nāmghars* still plentiful everywhere throughout the state.<sup>28</sup> In her most notorious incident, Phuleshwari asserts her power by compelling several Vaiṣṇava leaders, including the head of the Mayamaras, to attend a sacrificial ritual for the

goddess Durgā, forcing them to wear garlands sprinkled with the blood of the buffalo and forcing them to take a *tilak* (sacred mark) of blood on their foreheads. Bhuyan (1927) blames this incident in particular for the later Mayamara rebellion, weakness against Burmese invasions, downfall of the Ahom dynasty, and fall of Assam to colonial rule.

... the insult and affront which she offered to some of the Vaishnava spiritual leaders brought about a terribly destructive civil war in the country which continued down for half a century, thereby undermining the strength of the country to such an extent that the once redoubtable Assamese nation ... became an easy prey to the first touch of the Burmese spear. (p. 40)

All of this paints a picture of Phuleshwari as an imperious oppressor. But what evidence exists to support these stories? The *buranjis* are universally referenced by both Bhuyan and other scholars as their primary sources, but it is worth looking at these and other texts in some detail. In *An Account of Assam*, first compiled in the early nineteenth century between 1807 and 1814, Francis Hamilton (1940) describes finding several coins with the names of queens, including several with the name of Phuleshwari, dated between 1723 and 1725 CE, and several with the name of Pramatheshwari, dated 1729–1730 CE. He relates the story of Shiva Singha's astrological fate and the decision to place the kingdom in the hands of the queen. Hamilton mentions only that she reigned for three years and then died in childbirth, making no mention of her more nefarious activities (pp. 8–9). This story of emergency power transfer is repeated in a few important *buranjis*, but they are all quite late. With thorough reference to both *buranji* literature and material evidence, Jai Prakash Singh (1986) convincingly argues that the story of the king's astrological burden and subsequent naming of Phuleshwari as ruler has little evidentiary basis and was likely a theory constructed by later chroniclers upon encountering coins and other material evidence bearing her name. There are other possible, perhaps more plausible explanations, Singh argues, such as the desire of the king to honor his queens in some way.

Of the *buranjis* that describe Phuleshwari's later offenses against the Mayamaras, all were composed quite late. Dutiram Hazarika's *Asamar Padya Buranji* (1932), which was compiled after 1858 and edited and published by Bhuyan in 1932, discusses many of these key episodes (pp. 65–68). He describes the king's warning from astrologers, the naming of Phuleshwari as Bar-raja, her broad enforcement of śākta worship, and the arrest of Vaiṣṇava mahants who refuse to follow Phuleshwari's sectarian demands. He also says that she is told by a *śūdra mahant* (non-dominant caste holy man, presumably a Vaiṣṇava leader) that she will give birth to a malformed child who will be stillborn and that she will die in childbirth. The prediction comes true, and after a protracted period of suffering, she dies. However, Hazarika (1932), whom Barpujari notes was a staunch Vaiṣṇava, makes no mention of the episode regarding the blood sacrifice and the Mayamaras.

One of the most influential *buranjis* is Kasinath Tamuli Phukan's (1906) *Assam Buranji*, which was written in 1835 and first published in 1844. It appears that this text is the first in which the story of Phuleshwari's mistreatment of the Mayamara leader emerges. According to Phukan, Phuleshwari forces several śūdra mahants to attend a sacrificial ritual for the goddess Durgā and then forces them to receive on their bodies the blessings of the ritual, which includes sindoor (red powder), blood, and sandal paste (pp. 50–51). Harakanta Barua Sadar-Amin (1930) describes his *Assam Buranji* as an expansion of Phukan's work. Sadar-Amin subtly places Krishnaram Bhattacharyya—the guru reputedly brought from Bengal by Rudra Singha and who is said to have initiated both Shiva Singha and Phuleshwari into Śākta (probably also Tantric) traditions, but about whom very little is actually known—at the center of many actions in this story. It is he who suggests giving Phuleshwari the throne, and it is under his influence that Phuleshwari becomes a religious fanatic, insisting that everyone in the kingdom follows her guru's traditions. This is perhaps what led historian Swarna Lata Baruah (2005–2006) to blame him for Phuleshwari's actions, sympathetically (if problematically) portraying her as a young and easily manipulated queen and arguing that she was “used as a weapon by the royal priest to achieve his end” (pp. 273–74).



Ultimately, the story of Phuleshwari's treatment of the Mayamara leader appears to have emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Stories of her zealotry were developed by Phukan and Sadar-Amin, popularized by British civil servant Edward Gait (1906) in his highly influential and much-referenced *A History of Assam*, which relied heavily on *buranjī* material (pp. 177–78), and then eventually promoted most robustly by Bhuyan. It is unclear where and with whom this story originated prior to Phukan's first publication, but it does not seem to appear in published sources prior to the 1830s.<sup>29</sup>

While *buranjīs* as a whole are undeniably invaluable historical and cultural resources, modern historians remind us that they are also extremely biased and conflicting and can thus be notoriously unreliable when it comes to documenting historical facts (Gupta 2018, p. 268). They are best understood as representing the biases, values, and perspectives of their authors and patrons, not as faithful depictions of historical events, and particularly more recent compilations incorporate into their narratives what Sudeshna Purkayastha (2016) refers to as “fictive imagination” (180). Many *buranjīs* have been accidentally or intentionally destroyed over the centuries or otherwise lost, but it is curious that stories of Phuleshwari's placement in charge of the kingdom as well as her rabid anti-Vaiṣṇava crusade only appear quite late. Given the dearth of corroborating contemporary evidence for the bulk of these narratives and the tendency of Bhuyan and others to creatively and robustly elaborate into fictional territory, it is reasonable to question this entire narrative *as history*. It might be better categorized as folklore.

The values and motives of early-twentieth-century Assamese historians such as Bhuyan clearly impacted their narrative choices. Most were neo-Vaiṣṇavas and Assamese nationalists, and it was not uncommon for them to harshly judge and mischaracterize Śākta traditions and practitioners in otherwise meticulously researched volumes.<sup>30</sup> Bhuyan's overall strategy was not necessarily *just* history. He was most interested in compiling and editing the *buranjīs* to construct a seamless, timeless portrait of Assam and its people. He explicitly recruited the *buranjīs* in service of Assamese nationalism (Bhuyan 1934, p. 4). As Sharma (2011) argues, in the worthy cause of supporting the preservation and promotion of Assamese culture, as well as resistance to and independence from colonization, they employed questionable tactics that they viewed as an acceptable means to an end, including the uncritical and often unmarked incorporation of fictional narrative into historical scholarship (p. 224). The construction of historical narratives seems to have included a conscious combination of history and fiction, and Bhuyan himself produced quasi- and entirely fictional works in the style of *buranjīs* without any acknowledgment of their partial or total fabrication (pp. 223–24). The image of a Śākta seductress—a former “dancing girl”, no less—taking over the kingdom at the insistence of a Bengali brahman and thus bringing Ahom civilization to its end was an irresistibly convenient scapegoat for men who were actively working to differentiate and distinguish Assamese culture as distinct and superior. Yet despite various attempts in more recent scholarship from Assam and elsewhere to poke holes in this characterization of Phuleshwari, it remains stubbornly persistent in the popular imagination and current academic literature.<sup>31</sup>

However, she has not only lived in the popular imagination as a “bad queen”: although something of an outlier, Uttam Barua's 1972 play *Barrajā Phuleswarī* depicts her as a woman of the people who stands up against Ahom autocracy, quite the opposite of her more common characterization (Goswami 2004, p. 124)! In the hands of modern storytellers and mythmakers eager to tell the stories of powerful women, she may yet be re-storied into a feminist icon.

So, what did happen? Who was Phuleshwari, really? Whom did she worship, and how? What characterized her devotional and ritual life? While it is difficult to determine what, exactly, Phuleshwari believed and practiced throughout her life, we can piece together some evidence to construct a rough sketch. Contemporary material evidence, such as royal inscriptions and state-sponsored poetry, is as problematic as later *buranjīs*, in that it was produced under royal patronage to assert a particular narrative and establish a curated legacy. But these various sources, though few, paint a picture of a starkly different queen



who was devoted to her husband, the arts, education, and spirituality. Her establishment of a school for girls indicates a progressive attitude toward education for her time. We also know that her husband included her name in coins and inscriptions, though, as Singh (1986) argues, we do not actually know why, as stories of her husband's bad horoscope seem to have arisen fairly late and appear to be entirely speculative, with no material evidence to support them (p. 47).

We can also glimpse far more spiritual complexity in contemporary sources than later *buranjis* and their twentieth-century editors suggest. However, we must proceed cautiously, with the caveat that, as we see with Bhuyan and others, evidence is open to interpretation. Most significant, perhaps, is that works commissioned by her do not suggest exclusive religious fanaticism for the goddess. Instead, they describe a queen devoted to Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the goddess, perhaps with a particular personal affinity for Kṛṣṇa.<sup>32</sup> Together with her husband, she sponsored the translation of at least three important Vaiṣṇava works, including Kalidasa's *Śakuntala Kāvya* and portions of the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, which was especially popular in Assam. In his translation of the *Śaṅkha-cūḍa-badha*, sponsored by Phuleshwari, court poet Kaviraj Chakravarti describes her as "very much devoted to the feet of Sri Krishna." (Bhuyan 1927, p. 35) Her enthusiastic sponsorship of major Vaiṣṇava texts and contemporary descriptions of her devotion to various forms of Viṣṇu suggest a stronger personal attachment to or affinity for Vaiṣṇavism than is typically acknowledged by scholars. Rarely mentioned in the historical literature is the Kambaleśvara temple that Phuleshwari had constructed at the Kamakhya temple complex in Guwahati, which according to locals is dedicated to a combined form of the gods Śiva and Viṣṇu.<sup>33</sup>

Aside from displaying at least some degree of non-favoritism and religious tolerance necessary as a queen, we might also consider some of this evidence in light of the few consistent details of her early life found in earlier *buranjis*. If she was born into a śūdra family, for example, it seems likely that she would have been exposed to and participated in popular Vaiṣṇava devotionism and ritual as a child. If the (historically questionable) stories of her being born into a non-dominant-caste nāṭ family, and even working as a nāṭī, are true, then a personal affinity for Kṛṣṇa and professional devotion to Śiva, later developing Śākta praxis in connection with her husband, would have been entirely plausible. This Kambaleśvara temple she built is not only the traditional site of worship during the festival of Kṛṣṇa's birthday (Śrī Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭhamī), but it has been used, though not by any means exclusively or primarily, by local priests as a site for the formal recitation of the *Devī Mahātmyā*, an important Purāṇic hymn to Durgā. If we were to speculate as creatively as her earlier biographers, we could consider this a reflection and integration of Phuleshwari's own devotional journey from an attachment to Viṣṇu (and possibly also Śiva) formed in childhood to her royal duty to serve the Devī. We know that she was a proponent of Śāktism in part from the other major work she sponsored, the *Ananda-Lahiri* of Ananta Acharyya, an Assamese translation of Śaṅkara's famous work with additional material praising the queen as a veritable incarnation of the great goddess and her husband as Śiva (Acharyya 1983, pp. 59–62). In this same passage, she is also described as devoted to Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the Devī. According to Pratap Choudhury and Biswanarayan Shastri, in addition to the more well-known texts, Shiva Singha and Phuleshwari sponsored "a galaxy of court *paṇḍitas*, who produced volumes of Assamese literature and contributed immensely to the enrichment of art-cum-literary treasures, including architecture, sculpture, painting, and dramas." (Acharyya 1983, pp. x–xi).

As already discussed, later *buranjis* describe Phuleshwari as the fanatical disciple of the Bengali Śākta mahant Krishnaram Bhattacharyya, and a few historians suggest it was Bhattacharyya who brought the brahmanical codes of the sixteenth-century Bengali scholar, poet, and reformer Raghunandana to Assam.<sup>34</sup> But as already discussed, these *buranjis* are so unreliable that it is difficult to use them as actual historical references. Śāktism and Śākta Tantra were established much earlier as an important legitimizing source of power for Assam's various royal dynasties going back to the mythical Naraka, and textual and archaeological evidence suggests that these were important traditions to, for example,

the powerful Koch and Ahom dynasties (Shin 2018, p. 287). Although there is very little reliable evidence to make strong assertions, Phuleshwari's patronage of Śākta literature, her construction of various temple works, and her possible support of Bhattacharyya would have constituted a significant influence on the development and formation of Śākta Tantric traditions after the eighteenth century. Bhattacharyya is considered the progenitor of the current group of Śākta Tantric gurus as well as their Tantric lineage tradition that is at the heart of the historically and culturally important Kāmākhyā temple complex, and the Bhattacharyya family who hold lineage and initiatory authority in that tradition are still known as the *rājgurus* (royal gurus, or gurus of the king). There is, however, no reliable evidence to support the argument that she was a religious fanatic who destroyed temple icons and insulted Vaiṣṇava leaders. Until stronger evidence emerges, we must consider these late narratives to be possible fabrications.

Phuleshwari in some ways paralleled Rasmani in her rise from humble beginnings, dedication to her husband, and deference to brahmanical authority. But her reputation as a devotee of the goddess, initiation by a Bengali guru and thus rejection of neo-Vaiṣṇava values, unusual prominence in material evidence, and arguably also her gender made her the natural target for what seems to be the construction of a dramatic historical fantasy. Meanwhile, Rasmani's discovery and patronage of Ramakrishna were seen by her Bengali biographers as a vital contribution to and, more importantly, potent symbol of a major pillar of modern Bengali culture, for which she was effectively canonized—despite her significant material support of the colonial state.

This brief investigation demonstrates the importance of questioning received narratives about historical women. There is much left to be uncovered, however, and many questions remain unanswered. This study has primarily focused on the problematic nationalist narratives that constructed popular understandings of major female historical figures and provides a foundation for further research to uncover even more complexity in the history of such mythmaking. It also leaves room for new discoveries regarding the contributions of these women toward the formation of the religious traditions that they so clearly influenced. Rather than reify popular but problematic histories and hagiographies, we must instead work to locate their voices and the contours of their actual lives while acknowledging the logistical difficulty—and sometimes the impossibility—of doing so. In addition, we must reframe our lens when thinking about “women” in South Asian religious histories, because this obscures the lives and experiences of young adolescent girls. Rasmani and Phuleshwari were still quite young when they met and married their husbands. We must question the normalization of marginalization and violence and ask where the girls are in “women's” stories. What terms do we use to describe them? Why do we say “women” when the reality is so much more complex? And who is telling the stories that we have received, and why? This kind of self-reflexivity and historiographical reflection is necessary to locate and better see girls in history and, where necessary, correct their records.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data sharing not applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** My gratitude to Arunjana Das at Georgetown University for sharing research in progress on Mayamara literature, and to Rajib Sarma of the Foundation for History and Heritage Studies in Guwahati for years ago suggesting I publish my research on Phuleshwari, as well as for kindly verifying my translation of *buranjī* materials.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The English term “caste” is derived from Portuguese and is inexact. It may refer to any of the specific hereditary groups (*varṇa*)—the four enumerated in Vedic literature are *brahmaṇa* (priests), *kṣatriya* (warriors and kings), *vaiśya* (merchants), and *śūdra* (servants)—or smaller hereditary communities or subgroups (*jāti*), which are based on various intersections at birth, including *varṇa* and traditional family occupation. I refer to *śūdra* communities, to which Rasmani and Phuleshwari belonged, as a “non-dominant caste” to indicate their relatively marginalized status as a *varṇa*, avoiding the typical, more value-laden terms “high caste” and “low caste.”
- <sup>2</sup> I have chosen a simple transliteration of the names of individuals and places, but phonetically, the Bangla pronunciation is closer to “Rashmoni”.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, see *Rani Rasmani*, directed by Kali Prasad Ghosh (1955) (Chalachchitra Pratisthan), 2:35:21; Pratyot Gupta (1964), *Rani Rasamani* (Calcutta: Chakraborty & Co.); Annapurna Devi (1967), *Rani Rasamani* (Kolkata: M. Devi); Bankima Candra Sena (1973), *Lokamata Rani Rasamani* (Kalikata: Prakasha Bhabana); Amolendu Kumar Dash (2013), *Rani Rasamani O Tanra Jibadarsana* (Dhaka: Milan Nath, Anupam Prakashani); and *Karunamoyee Rani Rashmoni*, produced by Subrata Roy and Zee Bangla (Roy and Bangla 2017–2022). Biographical and historical details of Rasmani in regard to her relationship with Ramakrishna are also recorded in Ramakrishna’s hagiographical literature, for example, Akshay Kumari Sen (1998), *A Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1998).
- <sup>4</sup> The details that follow are fairly consistent across her various biographies, already referenced above.
- <sup>5</sup> The name “Rasmani” is closely associated with Kṛṣṇa.
- <sup>6</sup> Numerous sources relay this story, for example, Devi, *Rani Rasamani*, p. 25.
- <sup>7</sup> Several sources describe her seeing a fig tree flowering when no one else could see flowers on the tree. See, for example, Gupta, *Rani Rasamani*, p. 7, and Das, *Rani Rasamani*, p. 21.
- <sup>8</sup> For a robust discussion of the historical, devotional, and textual relationships between Kālī and Kṛṣṇa in Bengal and beyond, see David Kinsley (2000), *The Sword and Flute: Kālī and Kṛṣṇa* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- <sup>9</sup> Rajchandra and his family were wealthy, but like Rasmani, they were also members of a non-dominant śūdra caste. Late-nineteenth-century accounts describe them as *Kaibartas*, which is identified with the historically upwardly mobile *Mahishya* caste. The family is associated with the names Das and also Mar or Marh in contemporary accounts, both names associated with the *Kaibarta* caste. See Jogenda Math Bhattacharyya (1896), *Hindu Castes and Sects* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.), p. 281. It is also worth noting that in the late 18th century, a movement began to elevate the status of *Mahishyas*, and today they are one of the most numerous jāti groups in West Bengal. See Kenneth Bo Nielsen (2016), “The Politics of Caste and Class in Singur’s Anti-Land Acquisition Struggle”, in *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, pp. 125–46 (London: Routledge), p. 138.
- <sup>10</sup> For example, see the description of her body and beauty in Dash, *Rani Rasamani*, pp. 26–27.
- <sup>11</sup> Devi, *Rani Rasamani*, p. 33. In Devi’s version of events, Pritiram sends Rajchandra to spy on Rasmani bathing in the river in order to convince him to marry the girl, and the plan works.
- <sup>12</sup> Although Rasmani was personally involved in promoting a few progressive social causes for women, notably widow remarriage, she died before the Age of Consent Act was passed in 1891, which raised the legal age for marriage from 10 to 12 years of age. I have been unable to locate any late-nineteenth-century sources that employ a discussion of Rasmani’s early marriage in campaigns either for or against the practice.
- <sup>13</sup> There are numerous references to dancers as ideal Tantric ritual actors in Assamese and Bengali Tantras (Urban 2009), particularly in regard to rituals involving the *kanyā*, a term most often used in Tantric literature to refer to a post-menarche female of varying age whose menstrual blood was sought after for ritual use, and who was often associated with sexual rituals. This is not to be confused with the *kumārī*, a pre-menarche virgin girl not engaged in sexual rituals. See Johansen Hurwitt, “By Means of Her Body”, and Sundari Johansen Hurwitt (2019), “The Voracious Virgin: The Concept and Worship of the Kumārī in Kaula Tantrism”, PhD Diss. (California Institute of Integral Studies), pp. 152–74. Frédérique Apffel-Marglin also describes the historical Tantric ritual roles of *devadāsīs* in Odisha/Orissa in *Wives of the God-King*, documenting the persistence of these practices in the mid- to late twentieth century. See, for example, Frédérique Apffel-Marglin (1985), *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 195–97.
- <sup>14</sup> Required to remain otherwise unmarried, but lacking the traditional financial support of heterosexual marriage relations, *devadāsī* or *nāṭīs* may have also been engaged in various kinds of sex work, including as part of their service to the deity, in order to support themselves. This is still the case in the modern era. For a robust and insightful study on a modern community of *devadāsīs* in South India, see Lucinda Ramberg (2014), *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
- <sup>15</sup> Given her age and the significant power differential between the young Phulmati and Shiva Singha, I note that, from a modern perspective, it would not have been possible for her to give uncoerced, informed consent to this arrangement.
- <sup>16</sup> It is worth noting here that in the Ahom system, the monarchy did not pass automatically from father to eldest son. Although kings were required to be of royal lineage, they were elected by the nobility. This led to a great deal of bloodshed, as potential candidates were murdered or mutilated (and thus rendered unfit for the top job) in power struggles among ambitious rivals. The

Ahom princess Jaymati (or Joymati) is famous for her courageous refusal to disclose the whereabouts of her husband, Gadapani (later Gadadhar Singha, who ruled from 1681 to 1696). She was interrogated and tortured to death while pregnant, thus saving his life and enabling him to eventually become king. Her death led to important political reforms to discourage further violence, and she is still considered a national hero in Assam. See Baruah, p. 271. Gogoi (1986) and others, however, have argued that there is little reliable evidence to substantiate the legend of Jaymati, and it may have been legendary or a later fabrication. Lila Gogoi, *The Buranjis, Historical Literature of Assam: A Critical Survey* (Assam: Omsons Publications), p. 58.

Bhuyan names as his source “Srijut Benudhar Sharma of Gaurisagar, Assam, who had heard it from a great Ahom Authority in historical matters, the late Srijut Tirtheswar Buragohain of Sibsagar”. The surname Buragohain also suggests an ancestral link to the role of one of the chief ministers of the Ahom kingdom. Bhuyan, *Queen Phuleswari*, p. 26.

Bhuyan, *Queen Phuleswari*, pp. 33–35. For example, a transcription of the colophon from the *Sankhachura-Badha* that references Pramatheshwari (Phuleshwari) can be found in Hemachandra Goswami (1924), *Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki or Typical Selections from Assamese Literature, Vol II, Part III* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta), pp. 1146–50.

For example, see Suryya Kumar Bhuyan (1965), *Studies in the History of Assam* (Gauhati: Shrimati Laksheshwari Bhuyan), pp. 69–70.

Padmeswar Gogoi (1968), *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms* (Gauhati: Gauhati University), p. 510. Gogoi provides extensive references for many of his other claims throughout the book, which makes the omission of evidence in this case more striking.

Mathuramohan was originally married to Rasmani’s third daughter, but after her death, Rasmani arranged for him to marry her fourth daughter so as to keep him within the family. Dash, *Rani Rasamani*, p. 41.

For more on the history of the East India Company and its Company-State governing structure, see P.J. Stern (2011), *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundation of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

An image of this deity in situ can be found in Elizabeth U. Harding (1993), *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar* (Lake Worth, FL: Nicolas-Hays), p. 141.

Sen completed the first edition of his *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi* in 1895. Originally in Bengali, it was eventually translated into English in 1998. For the account of Rani Rasmani, her founding of Dakshineswar, and her relationship with Ramakrishna, see Sen, *A Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna*, pp. 57–71.

Although she was known for hosting lavish public Śākta festival observations at her home, her house deity is given by biographers as Raghunāth (Raghunātha) or Raghuvīr (Raghuvīra). The Raghunāth or Raghuvīr śāligrāma that is currently housed in the Dakshineswar Viṣṇu temple (also known variously as the Rādhākānta [‘Beloved of Rādhā’], Kṛṣṇa, or Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa temple) was given to Rajchandra and Rasmani by a wandering sadhu who came to their home. See, for example, Dash, *Rani Rasamani*, p. 41.

For example, see the final section of Ananta Acharyya, *Ananda-Lahiri* (Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti, 1983), pp. 59–62.

He colorfully compares Shiva Singha with Nur Jahan’s husband Jahanagir, calling them “imbecile” monarchs compared to their respective fathers. Bhuyan, *Queen Phuleswari*, p. 21.

Even at the site of the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, one of the most important sites of Śākta and Tantric worship in South Asia, there are several *nāmghars* used daily by members of the community. Locals have told me that this is a symbol of the traditional pluralism espoused by the community.

Mayamara sources that mention Phuleshwari appear to originate in the mid-nineteenth century, which suggests that they, too, may have been influenced by sources such as Phukan and Sadar-Amin. Arunjana Das, personal communication, 18 April 2023.

For example, Nagendra Nath Vasu’s *The Social History of Kamarupa*, originally published in 1922, is full of salacious, speculative, and entirely unsubstantiated claims about śākta worship at the Kamakhya temple. Banikanta Kakati had little first-hand experience of worship at the site but described rituals involving women at the temple as “reeking of gross sensuality (Taid and Goswami 1988) “See Nagendra Nath Vasu (1998), *The Social History of Kamarupa* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre); Banikanta Kakati (1948), *The Mother Goddess Kāmākhya: Or, Studies in the Fusion of Aryan and Primitive Beliefs of Assam* (Gauhati: Lawyer’s Book Stall), p. 47.

A 2023 publication from a major academic publisher includes the fictional Phuleshwari story presented as historical fact, with heavy reference to Bhuyan and Gait, for example.

“[B]oth the rulers [i.e., Shiva Singha and Phuleshwari] protect their subjects as their own sons, making no differences . . . they continue worshipping Hari-Hara-Durga steadfastly”. Ananta Acharyya, *Ananda Lahiri*, p. 62.

A rock inscription names Shiva Singha and Phuleshwari as the patrons of this temple, completed in 1728—three years before her death.

The connections made between Bhattacharyya and Raghunandana, and the influence attributed to Bhattacharyya on Assamese culture, are all tenuous at best, and no authors discussing these connections provide solid evidence. See, for example, Rajmohan Nath, who blames Bhattacharyya, Shiva Singha, and Phuleshwari for destroying Assamese culture with Bengali brahmanism. R.M. Nath, *The Back-Ground of Assamese Culture* (Shillong: A.K. Nath, 1948), p. 146.



## References

- Acharyya, Ananta. 1983. *Ananda-Lahiri*. Gauhati: Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti.
- Apffel-Marglin, Frédérique. 1985. *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Barua, Birinchi Kumar. 1951. *A Cultural History of Assam: Early Period, Volume 1*. Nowgong: Shri K. K. Barooah.
- Baruah, Swarna Lata. 2005–2006. State, Patriarchy, and Women in Medieval Assam. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 66: 264–95.
- Bhattacharyya, Jogenda Math. 1896. *Hindu Castes and Sects*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.
- Bhuyan, Suryya Kumar. 1927. *An Assamese Nur Jahan: Or, a Sketch in the Life of Queen Phuleswari Devi*. Gauhati: Suryya Kumar Bhuyan.
- Bhuyan, Suryya Kumar. 1934. *Bulletin No. 2, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam*. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam.
- Bhuyan, Suryya Kumar. 1965. *Studies in the History of Assam*. Gauhati: Shrimati Laksheshwari Bhuyan.
- Bose, Manilal. 1989. *Social History of Assam: Being a Study of the Origins of Ethnic Identity and Social Tension During the British Period, 1905–1947*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Bose, Sugata, and Ayesha Jalal. 2004. *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*. New York: Routledge.
- Candra Sena, Bankima. 1973. *Lokamata Rani Rasamani*. Kalikata: Prakasha Bhabana.
- Chakravarti, Uma. 2018. Did Girls Have a Childhood in the Past? Mythologies, Ideologies, Histories. In *Childhoods in India: Traditions, Trends and Transformations*. Edited by Tharakad S. Saraswathi, Shailaja Menon and Ankur Madan. London: Routledge, pp. 44–62.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1989. Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India. *American Ethnologist* 16: 622–33. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Das, Jogesh. 1972. *Folklore of Assam*. New Delhi: National Book Trust.
- Dash, Amolendu Kumar. 2013. *Rani Rasamani O Tanra Jibadarsana*. Dhaka: Milan Nath, Anupam Prakashani.
- Devi, Annapurna. 1967. *Rani Rasamani*. Kolkata: M. Devi.
- Dutta, Soma. 2022. Conflicts and Contestations at Sustaining a ‘Feminine Space’ at Dakshineswar Kali Temple, Kolkata. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 11: 40–49.
- Gait, Edward. 1906. *A History of Assam*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.
- Ghosh, Kali Prasad, dir. 1955. *Rani Rasamani, 1955*. Calcutta: Chalachchitra Pratisthan.
- Gogoi, Debo Prasad. 2016. Bar Raja Phuleswari Kunwari: The Centre or the Periphery in Case of Moamoaria Rebellion—A Study from Gender Perspective, and Some Issues. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities, and Management Studies* 2: 55–60.
- Gogoi, Lila. 1986. *The Buranjis, Historical Literature of Assam: A Critical Survey*. Assam: Omsons Publications.
- Gogoi, Padmeswar. 1968. *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*. Gauhati: Gauhati University.
- Goswami, Hemachandra. 1924. *Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki or Typical Selections from Assamese Literature, Vol II, Part III*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.
- Goswami, Pranati Sharma. 2004. *Female Characters in Assamese Drama (1857–1977)*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Gupta, Pratyot. 1964. *Rani Rasamani*. Calcutta: Chakraborty & Co.
- Gupta, Swarupa. 2018. *Cultural Constellations: Place-Making and Ethnicity in Eastern India, c. 1850–1927*. Leiden: Brill.
- Hamilton, Francis. 1940. *An Account of Assam*. Edited by Suryya Kumar Bhuyan. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.
- Harding, Elizabeth U. 1993. *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar*. Lake Worth: Nicolas-Hays.
- Hazarika, Dutiram. 1932. *Asamar Padya Buranji*. Edited by Suryya Kumar Bhuyan. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.
- Johansen Hurwitt, Sundari. 2019. The Voracious Virgin: The Concept and Worship of the Kumārī in Kaula Tantrism. Ph.D. dissertation, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA, USA.
- Johansen Hurwitt, Sundari. 2022. By Means of Her Body, Which Is Yoga Itself: Interrogating the Child Body in Kaula Tantrism. Paper presented at American Academy of Religion National Meeting, Denver, CO, USA, November 20.
- Kakati, Banikanta. 1948. *The Mother Goddess Kāmākhya: Or, Studies in the Fusion of Aryan and Primitive Beliefs of Assam*. Gauhati: Lawyer’s Book Stall.
- Kakati, Banikanta. 1953. *Aspects of Early Assamese Literature*. Gauhati: Gauhati University.
- Kar, Bodhisattva. 2008. The Tragedy of Suryya Bhuyan. *Biblio: A Review of Books* 13: 26–27.
- Kinsley, David. 2000. *The Sword and Flute: Kālī and Kṛṣṇa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kinsley, David. 2003. Kālī. In *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, In the West*. Edited by Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 23–38.
- Kripal, Jeffrey J. 1995. *Kali’s Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McDermott, Rachel Fell. 2001. *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Kālī and Umā in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nielsen, Kenneth Bo. 2016. The Politics of Caste and Class in Singur’s Anti-Land Acquisition Struggle. In *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*. Edited by Uday Chandra, Geir Heierstad and Kenneth Nielsen. London: Routledge, pp. 125–46.
- Pal, Supriya Banik. 2018. Two Women Reformers: The Brahmani of Kaushika-Dharmavyadha Legend in the Mahabharata and Rani Rashmoni of Calcutta; A Comparative Study. In *Colonial Transformations and Asian Religions in Modern History*. Edited by David W. Kim. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 110–39.



- Phukan, Haliram Dhekiyal. 1962. *Āsām Buranjī*. Edited by Jatindra Mohan Bhattacharjee. Guwahati: Moksha Pustakalor.
- Phukan, Kasinath Tamuli. 1906. *Assam Buranji*. Calcutta: Majumdar Press.
- Purkayastha, Sudeshna. 2016. The Story of Jayamati's Humiliation and Death: Reworking the Indigenous Sources in Assamese Historiography of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. In *Literary and Religious Practices in Medieval and Early Modern India*. Edited by Raziuddin Aquil and David L. Curly. London: Routledge, pp. 163–90.
- Ramberg, Lucinda. 2014. *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Roy, Subrata, and Zee Bangla. 2017–2022. *Karunamoyee Rani Rashmoni, 2017–2022*. Kolkata: Zee Bangla.
- Sadar-Amin, Harakanta Barua. 1930. *Assam Buranji or A History of Assam*. Edited by Suryya Kumar Bhuyan. Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam.
- Sarma, Satyendranath N. 1966. *The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*. Gauhati: Gauhati University.
- Sen, Akshay Kumar. 1998. *A Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna*. Kolkata: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture.
- Sharma, Jayeeta. 2011. *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Shin, Jae-Eun. 2018. *Change, Continuity, and Complexity: The Mahāvidyās in East Indian Śākta Traditions*. London: Routledge.
- Singh, Jai Prakash. 1986. On Chhatrabhanga Yoga and Barajarā Phulesvari. In *Studies in the History of North-East India: Essays in Honour of Professor H.K. Barpujari*. Edited by Jayanta Bhusan Bhattacharjee. Shillong: North-Eastern Hill University Publications, pp. 45–51.
- Sinha, Mrinalini. 2008. *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Spencer, F. Scott. 2004. *Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, and Women of the Cloth: The Women in Jesus's Life*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Stern, Philip J. 2011. *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundation of the British Empire in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taid, Tabu, and Ranjit Dev Goswami. 1988. *Banikanta Kakati, the Man and His Works*. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
- Urban, Hugh. 2009. *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality, and the Politics of South Asian Studies*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Vasu, Nagendra Nath. 1998. *The Social History of Kamarupa*. New Delhi: Northern Book Centre.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.