

A marble statue of Ram Rasmani stands in Curzon Park near the Bus Terminus at Esplanade in Calcutta. The bicentenary year of her birth was observed recently on September 24, 1993. Yet most people know very little about the life and times of Rani Rasmani, an indefatigable champion of the cause of women and the poor in nineteenth century Bengal.

Destiny played a major hand in bringing Rasmani to the centre stage of the social reform movement in Bengal. The youngest of three children, she was born in the small village of Kona near Haliashahar on the eastern bank of the river Ganga, about 60 kilometres north of Calcutta. She was the only daughter of Harekrishna and Rampriya Das, a poor Kaibarta (a traditional fishing community of Bengal) family. Delighted to have this child after a lapse of many years, her mother began affectionately to call her Rani (queen) when she was only a year old. This prefix could not have been more appropriate for someone who later went on to capture many hearts by her crusade for the down-trodden and her intense spiritualism.

Early Years

Rasmani spent her early years in much the same way as any other child from a poor family: carrying food to the field for her father, helping her mother with the household work, and jicking vegetables from the garden. In one respect, however, Rasmani was privileged. Harekrishna, though a farmer, knew how to read and write Bengali. Rasmani, therefore, received a basic education in the language, and Harekrishna also had a gift for narrating stories from the traditional religious literature. As a village storyteller, he played a vital role in spreading mass education. In the evenings, the villagers would gather at his home and listen to his readings from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and the "uranas. These tales, combined with



Rani Rasmani

A Philanthropist and a Rebel

her parents' strong leanings towards Vaishnavism, sowed the seeds of her later religiosity.

The turning point in Rasmani's life came in 1804 when she left the poor, remote village of Kona to go to Calcutta as the third wife of Rajchandra Das. She was just 11 years of age at the time and Das was 21. Das, the son of a *nouveau riche* businessman, had first seen her accidentally while passing the bathing ghats of the Ganga in a boat. Initially, he had been reluctant to marry since his two previous wives had died soon after

marriage, but his parents were eager to see him married again. The decision to marry Rasmani, who was much lower down the social ladder was, however, entirely his own. Like many others of his generation, Das was influenced by the spirit of the Renaissance in Bengal and wished to break away from the traditional marriage with the usual considerations of social status and dowry.

Despite her rural background, Rani Rasmani's Janbazar Palace in Calcutta, renamed Rasmani House, Rasmani had

no difficulty in settling down to her new life in the city. Within a few years she had become the guiding spirit of the family's Janbazar estate. Even as most of the Bengali elite in Calcutta, especially the *nouveau riche*, were rapidly taking to a western way of life, Janbazar estate, under Rasmani's direction, uniquely synthesised old traditions and modern thinking and was at the forefront of social welfare and reform.

Rajchandra's father, Pritaram, had begun his career as a clerk in a salt distributing agency in Calcutta. He later started his own business in Calcutta. One of his enterprises was the supply of various commodities to the English ruling class, and in this way he developed a close relationship with them. He also bought many estates and became a renowned land-lord. When Pritaram died in 1817, his son, Rajchandra, inherited Rs 650,000 in cash and a vast amount of property.

Though Rasmani seldom came out in public as long as her husband was alive, she actively supported him in his social reform and philanthropic activities. Rajchandra Das' family had acquired enormous wealth through business and he was recognised as a big landlord, but he was very humane and compassionate. Defying the dis-approval of the conservative Hindu society, Das and Rasmani extended support to Raja Ram Mohan Roy's movement for abolition of *sati*. Das also initiated and established many social welfare institutions. Among them: an old age home built like a palace at Nimtala ghat in Calcutta, two bathing ghats in Calcutta, tanks for drinking water, and a gruel kitchen for feeding the flood victims of 1823.

Other contributions of Das to the city of Calcutta were the establishment of the first bank in 1829 (of which Das was one of the founder-directors), the donation of huge

amounts to educational institutions, the arrangement of free education for a number of students in the Hindu College, Calcutta, the construction of several roads in the city, including the erstwhile Babu Road (now renamed Rani Rasmani Road). Rasmani is also remembered for the construction of the famous Babu Ghat and Babu Road in 1830. After the floods of 1823, the ghat on the Ganges near her residence was uneven and dangerous and the road leading to it was unusable. Rasmani persuaded her husband to build both with the permission of the authorities. The family also gave a donation of Rs 10,000 to establish a library in Calcutta. Das also offered his land free of cost for the construction of a bridge over the Beliaghata canal and built up the Janbazar palace, now known as Rasmani House, at the cost of Rs 25 lakhs on one hectare of land at the heart of the city.

Rasmani and Rajchandra had four daughters, who received a traditional Hindu upbringing despite the family's affluence and exposure to western influence. Rasmani's life changed dramatically when her husband died at the age of 49. She began to rely

increasingly on one of her sons-in-law, Mathuranath Bishwas. From playing a behind-the-scenes role in her husband's work, she now assumed a leadership position in the Janbazar estate. This was a radical departure from the norm in the conservative, caste-ridden Brahminical society of the times, where widows were not expected to participate in any outdoor or even religious activity.

Carrying on from where her husband had left off, her charities and humanitarian activities in and outside Bengal became well known. She also immersed herself in working for the emancipation of women and the upliftment of the poor.

Rasmani spent a good deal of the wealth she had inherited in improving civic amenities and providing much needed social services. Among them were building a road from the western bank of the Subarnarekha to Puri, tanks for drinking water, a connecting canal to join the Nabaganga with the Madhumati for irrigation and sewage, and a number of bathing ghats, roads, and markets.

There are many interesting anecdotes that reveal Rasmani's



Rani Rasmani's Janbazar Palace in Calcutta, renamed Rasmani House

intelligence and tact. One of them revolves around her astute handling of Prince Dwarakanath Tagore who once suggested that he would help manage her vast estate. Rasmani was reluctant to accept this proposal but did not want to be rude to one of her husband's best friends. She, therefore, told him that though she thought it a good idea, she needed to first set her accounts in order. Since her husband had lent him Rs 200,000, she suggested that he first return this sum to her. Dwarakanath said he did not have any cash at that time, but he would hand over one of his estates, valued at over Rs 200,000. Rasmani accepted the property. On completion of the transaction, she told Tagore that since she was a widow and her property was not large, it would be discourteous of her to appoint him as her manager. Her sons-in-law, she pointed out, were the heirs of the estate and they would manage it.¹

Rasmani never lost her equilibrium even in face of grave danger. In 1851, on her way back from a pilgrimage to Gangasagar, Triveni, and Navadwip, her boat was attacked by robbers near Chandannagore. Rasmani's guards exchanged fire with them and one robber was wounded. She immediately ordered both sides to stop firing and spoke to the robber chief. The robber demanded enough money for his band of 12 men. Otherwise, he threatened, there would be terrible bloodshed. Rasmani told him that she didn't have any cash on her at that time, but she would send the amount the following evening. She said that if they were unwilling to accept the offer, she was prepared to give them her gold necklace and a few silver vessels. The robber accepted her offer, but told her that if they did not receive the money as promised, her journey would be stopped. Rasmani kept her word. The following evening a messenger handed over Rs 12,000 to the robbers.²

Crusader against Injustice

One of Rasmani's enduring legacies is the removal of oppressive restrictions and taxes on fishing in the Ganga. Calcutta at that time was surrounded by a number of rivers, rivulets, lakes and lagoons, in addition to the vast and fast-flowing Ganga. A large fishing community earned its livelihood from these waters.

To augment its resources, the East India Company suddenly imposed a tax on fishing in the Ganga. This move was resisted by the fishermen. The Company used force and did not allow the fishermen to carry on their occupation. Many fishermen were beaten and their nets destroyed. In desperation, the poor fishermen sought help from Rasmani. She assured them of all possible support in their struggle for their rights and also provided them with immediate relief for their sustenance.

Rasmani knew that it was not possible to resist the rulers by force, so she shrewdly devised a different strategy. Through her men she managed to get from the East India Company the lease of the approximately five kilometres stretch of the Ganga from Ghosuri to Metiaburj for Rs 10,000. As soon as she got the lease document, she gave orders to her men to overnight put strong iron chains across the Ganga at both the ends of the leased area. She also ordered all the fishermen to go fishing in the cordoned off area.

It was a memorable occasion when the elated fishermen went to the river with their boats and nets. The residents of Calcutta and the administrators were equally stunned to see that the river was chained at both ends of the leased area. Besides the iron chain with which Rasmani had barricaded the area, the fishermen had put their ropes along the river, preventing the movement of vessels. Many fishermen in their boats were

guarding the fence, while others were fishing. As the news spread like wildfire, thousands flocked to the bank of the Ganga and applauded Rasmani's courage and her defiant resistance of the British. She was summoned to appear before the Supreme Court and asked to remove the barrier so that cargo and other ships could move about freely. In her argument, Rani stated that as a lessee she had the right to manage the area in any way she chose and that in order to protect the fishing rights of her people she did not want to allow ships and other vessels in the leased area. Despite requests from the authorities to allow free movement of ships, Rasmani reiterated that such a move was not in the interests of the fishermen because the ships not only destroyed their nets, but also frightened the fish away. She also pointed out that she had had no intention of taking a portion of the river on lease, but the company's imposition of taxes and restrictions on the fishermen had forced her to do so.

At last, the authorities gave in and agreed to lift all restrictions and taxes on fishing rights of the fisherfolk. The entire lease amount of Rs 10,000 was refunded to Rani Rasmani. That tradition continues even today. There is no *Panidari* (water tax) system for fishing in the Ganga in Bengal, whereas this system is still prevalent in Bihar and some other places. A reminder of Rasmani's brave stand against the oppressive British authorities is a gigantic iron pillar with a piece of chain standing next to Adi Bhutnath temple, near Nimtala Ghat in north Calcutta. It is the pillar to which iron chains were tied for the blockade of the Ganga.

Defiance of Colonialism

Many poor farmers had been compelled to take up indigo cultivation when the British settlers were given the right to purchase and

cultivate land in India by the Chartered Act of Lord Bentick. Many whites, therefore, either acquired land or advanced loans to poor farmers and pressured them to forsake the farming of foodgrains and other cash crops for indigo cultivation. Indigo export to Europe was lucrative for the British settlers who held a monopoly of this business at that time, but the shift in traditional cultivation practices had devastating consequences for farm-ers. Within a few years, most of the fertile lands had undergone forcible indigo cultivation, resulting in a fam-ine situation in Bengal. When the farmers declined to cultivate indigo, they were tortured, jailed, and even killed.

Rasmani came to know of the situation when the poor cultivators

of Makimpur Parganas, which was owned by her, told her about the atrocities committed by the indigo merchants led by a Mr Donald. Rasmani decided that a straight fight was the best op-tion. She, therefore, sent the farmers back to the village with a written order to the manager in that area to teach Donald a good lesson. She also sent a group of 50 *lathials* (private lathi-wielding guards) to help the farmers in the fight.

The farmers, with Rasmani's backing, turned on Donald and his men. The indigo merchants were driven out from the area and this upris-ing against the merchants set a precedent. By 1859, lakhs of cultivators had joined in a countrywide struggle, known as the Great Indigo Revolt. Fuelling their

rage against the practice of indigo cultivation was a famous Bengali play, titled *NilDarpan*. This play, based on the plight of the indigo cultivators, was written by Dinabandhu Mitra and translated into English by poet Michael Madhu S udan Dutta and printed and published by Reverend James Long. In a case that was started against publication of the book, Long was fined and imprisoned. Eventually, the Crown had to set up the historic Indigo Commission in 1860, which ultimately resulted in freeing the farmers from the vice-like grip of the indigo merchants.

Rasmani could not brook the arbitrary actions of the British authorities. One year, during the Puja festival, her priests were going in a customary musical procession from



Dakshineswar Temple

the family's palace to the Ganga, when it was stopped by the Company's soldiers. Rasmani reacted by arranging for a bigger procession the next day. She was served with a show cause notice by the authorities. However, Rasmani refused to be cowed down. Under the eyes of the officer who had served it, she tore the notice and threw it into the dustbin. She was fined Rs 50 for non-compliance of the government order, which she paid.

That was not the end of the matter. Within a few days, the city was agog with the news of Rasmani's latest move—the fencing in of the entire stretch of 3 kms from her palace near New Market to Babu Ghat with strong wooden logs which blocked the city's three main thoroughfares from north to south. The entire traffic in the city was virtually forced to come to a standstill. The government took the case to court. Here Rani Rasmani established that she had enclosed only the area owned by the family. In fact, she asserted, the government had violated her rights. Rasmani won the suit. The government was forced to refund the fine of Rs 50 and assure her the freedom to celebrate the festival without interruption.

Rasmani's brave stand against the British rulers inspired the people of Calcutta to compose a couplet in her honour:

“When the Rani's horses and carriage roll down the street, they say, None, even the English Company, dares to stand in her way.”³

Rasmani was a woman ahead of her times. She, however, refused to go along with some of the populist and fanatic propaganda of that time. For instance, although she was dead against the oppressive rule of the British, she did not support the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. She maintained that although the British were unwanted in this country, the victory of the

mutineers would bring about a worse situation, since their revolt was based on religious fanaticism, manifested in the controversy on hog and bovine tallow in cartridges.

Social Reform Efforts

In the nineteenth century, child marriage, especially of girls under the age of nine years, was widely prevalent among certain communities in some parts of India. In many cases, the age difference between the bride and groom was so great that a large number of women became widows at a very young age. The agony of these young women was compounded by strong taboos against widow remarriage. On the other hand, men were free to marry any number of times, regardless of whether they were already married or widowers.

Rasmani was greatly pained at the plight of these women. She became an ardent advocate of more rational marriage practices that minimised the age difference between a husband and wife. Ignoring the fierce opposition of orthodox Hindus, she arranged the marriage of her 13-year-old daughter to a person who was only two days older than her.

Rasmani took a strong stand in favour of widow remarriage and extended support to Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's campaign for a law providing for widow remarriage. She also undertook a new movement against polygamy and submitted a draft bill to the board of directors of the East India Company, the then law makers. It was presented and published by Mr Calbyl, a member of the Board.⁴

Perhaps the most significant of Rani Rasmani's contributions in the field of social reform is the construction of the gorgeous temple complex at Dakshineswar, about 6 kms north of Calcutta on the bank of the river Ganga. The temple is a powerful symbol of Rasmani's

uncompromising position against the religious tyranny exercised by high caste Hindus.

At that time, lower caste Hindus were debarred from establishing religious institutions and the rules for lower caste Hindu women were particularly stringent. Rasmani took on the onerous task of constructing such an institution, a temple for Kali. She was unswerving in her determination despite bitter opposition from higher caste members of the community and her virtual boycott by them. For the construction of the temple, she spent Rs 12 lakhs, a huge sum in those days.

The origins of the temple are given a mystical hue in many biographical sketches of Rasmani. She had apparently long cherished the desire to go on a pilgrimage to Banaras. The night before her departure, she dreamt that the Divine Mother, who she revered intensely, appeared before her and ordered her to give up her pilgrimage and instead build a temple for her on the bank of the Ganga. In 1847, Rasmani purchased 20 acres of land at Dakshineswar for the purpose.⁵

The construction of the temple complex began in 1847, and it took over eight years for its completion. Besides the main temple, dedicated to the Divine Mother Kali, there was also to be a temple dedicated to Krishna and twelve small temples dedicated to Shiva. Rasmani spent Rs 50,000 for the land, Rs 160,000 for building an embankment along the river, and Rs 900,000 for the temple complex. In addition, she spent Rs 226,000 for some property which was meant to be used as an endowment for the maintenance of the temple.*

The installation ceremony in the temple was fixed for May 31, 1855. However, a seemingly insurmountable obstacle stood in the way. Since Rasmani was a Shudra, no orthodox Brahmin would agree to officiate as

her priest or partake of the sacramental food offered to the goddess. Undeterred, Rasmani wrote to renowned pandits of different schools of thought, asking for their opinion in the matter. Only one, Ramkumar Chattopadhyay, gave a favourable opinion. He said that the scriptures permitted such a temple if Rasmani made a gift of it to a Brahmin and provided adequate funds for its maintenance. Following this advice, Rasmani gave the temple over to her spiritual preceptor and set aside the income from a big estate in Dinajpur district for its maintenance. Ramkumar was appointed priest of the Kali temple.

Apart from its early history, the temple is a landmark in other ways. It was from here that Shri Ramakrishna's spiritual message was first heard. It also became an altar for preaching religious harmony. In the words of Margaret Elizabeth Nobel (Sister Nivedita): "... Had there been no temple at Dakshineswar, we could not get Shri Ramakrishna; without Shri Ramakrishna, no Vivekananda... the entire matter depended on the establishment of a temple complex in the midnineteenth century on the Ganga to the north of Calcutta and that also is the result of the devotion of a rich woman of the lower caste."⁷

The most powerful spiritual influence in Rasmani's life was that of Shri Ramakrishna. She first came in contact with him when her son-in-law, Mathur, saw an otherworldly, handsome young man in the precincts of the Kali temple. On enquiry, he learnt that the young man, Gadadhar, was the younger brother of Ramkumar with whom he was staying. Both Rasmani and Mathur wanted Gadadhar to work in the temple. They finally persuaded him to take on the task of dressing and decorating the Divine Mother.



The Kali Mandir

After Ramkumar's death, Gadadhar (better known later as Shri Ramakrishna) was appointed chief priest of the temple. Shri Ramakrishna was unmindful of external appearances and immersed himself wholly in the contemplation of the goddess.

There is a small story which illustrates the depths of Ramakrishna's devotion to the goddess. One day after a bath in the Ganga, Rasmani went to the Kali temple and requested Shri Ramakrishna to sing a devotional song to the goddess. He was completely immersed in his song but intuited that Rasmani was thinking of something else — it happened to be a law suit — and gave her a slap on the back. Startled, a repentant Rasmani went to her chamber. When her astonished attendants criticised the priest's behaviour towards her, she silenced them by saying that the Divine Mother had punished her for her own lapse and had granted her illumination through Ramakrishna.

As time went on, she gradually withdrew from the affairs of the estate,

leaving her son-in-law, Mathur, to manage them. She spent most of her time worshipping Kali in the temple garden of Dakshineswar under the spiritual guidance of Shri Ramakrishna.

Rasmani died on February 19, 1861 at the age of 68. In a world riven by injustice, oppression and religious fanaticism, voices of sanity such as Rani Rasmani's are rare indeed. In the bicentenary year of her birth we would do well to remind ourselves of a woman who had boundless courage to stand up for the rights of the exploited poor.

References:

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- 6 Swami Chetananda, *They Lived With God—Life Stories of Some Devotees of Sri Ramakrishna*. Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1991.
- 7 *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*. Nivedita Girls' School (Calcutta, 1967), Volume 1.

This article was put together by Manushifrom the above mentioned books and articles. Since we were unable to use Bengali source material, this is likely to be a very inadequate account. We invite those of our readers who have access to more information on her life to add to the little that we have been able to put together. □