

# Chapter 1

## Role of a Nineteenth Century Woman's Divinity in Self-Formation

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Rashsundari Devi's autobiography, the first of its kind by any Bengali woman, Amar Jiban is the testimony of a 19th century Bengali woman's ordeals. It not only highlights the theme of women's education through her yearning for knowledge of letters; it also calls for equal spiritual status for women as she personally yearns for God. She chooses to rewrite her life in this autobiography, broadly in alignment with God's life. She attributes to God every good or bad thing happening around, even her life with transgressions. The chapter showcases how the re-presented self of Rashsundari follows the broad religious codes, yet not in the customary way and her personalized fantastic experiences, like precognitive dreams, help her mould the shape of her God. The author invokes the guru-shishya dynamics and looks through the glass of a few religious texts of Hinduism, especially the Bhagavad Gita, to analyse whether she transgresses from the whole religious system or actually encodes her discontent uniquely on the bedrock of religious following, adherence, and devotion.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In her autobiography *Amar Jiban* (Devi, 1897), the only text that she would ever write, Rashsundari Devi moulds her own life with that of the god's. She first writes this text at an age of fifty-nine and then revises and extends it at an age of eighty-

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eight as she looks back at her life in retrospection through this text. And when she does so, she does it from her subjective view point. As she revisits the past and restructures it in the present, we cannot expect to learn about her lived experiences from the text. The changes, if there at all have been made, to present these selected memories are not bound to be conscious decisions either. The 1897 text, (second and enlarged edition, that we shall refer here) thus, gets enough colouring owing to the unavoidable impact of the author's present (the time when she writes) beliefs. God and divinity become a major theme and shapes the structure of the text accordingly. The life of the devotee and that of the god get intertwined to produce this nineteenth century text. When Rashsundari is writing, the contemporary society is already talking about 'the question of woman'— their social status, their education, they stepping out of the *andarmahal*. In such a milieu *Amar Jiban* comes out. It is unfortunate that superficial and propagandist reading of the text at that time absorbed and categorized it under their respective corpus of Hindu revivalism, nationalism and liberal rationalism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Rashsundari (the protagonist of the text; henceforth used as the same if not mentioned otherwise) is introduced to the idea of god by her mother in the context of fear. She is suggested to chant his name so that the god, *Dayamadhav* can hear her and come and save her. Next time when we hear about her ordeal with god, *Dayamadhav* listens to the prayer and saves her along with her brother from the graveyard. This is when she is told by her mother about the non-conflicting relationship of *Dayamadhav* with the *Parameshwara*. The god is invoked for the third time when she is being married off and her mother sends with Rashsundari the treasure of god— that she would hold close to her heart all her life— that she would build up a very personal relation with. The protagonist does not get exposed to any customary god. Rather she gets the idea and aid of god from her mother. Though the names of god bear gendered connotations, her and her mother's approach is a non-gendered, individualistic one. Rashsundari herself approaches the god in a "cerebral way" (Sarkar, 2014) and presents it in a non-gendered language. Their idea of these gods— first *Dayamadhav* and then *Parameshwara*— silently indicates the knowledge, she must have acquired through the popular religious tales and folktales.

Rashsundari builds up the narrated self on principles from that sacrosanct text that was and still is revered highly and followed by not just different sects of Hinduism, including Vaishnavism that Rashsundari's family followed, but also orthodox ones— *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita*. This can be a conscious or unconscious attempt, given her devotion to follow the ways of god. She might not have been aware of this parallel

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