

# Women Who Spend Their Life with Their Family Deity in Contemporary India:

## A Case Study of the Rāṇī Satī Worship

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### Introduction

This paper explores how Mārṅārī women in Kolkata spend their life in contemporary India through the practice of *satī* worship which entails visits to *satī* temples enshrining *satī* goddesses, informal congregations of devotees and *pūjā* ceremonies (a Hindu ritual). These *satī* temples mostly commemorate women who have “committed” *satī* by entering the funeral pyre of their husbands and over time they have become deified as goddesses. The Rāṇī Satī worship which I will focus on this paper is supported by Jālān family of Bāṁsal *gotra*, Agrwāl community and the goddess Rāṇī Satī is regarded as their *kuldevī* (Family Deity). The followers come to pray for an offspring and for the happiness of their families. Managing the temple, organizing functions, doing *pūjā*, and all related activities including formal rituals activities remain in the male domain, although the central figure in *satī* worship is “a woman”. Here, I would like to show the *satī* worshippers who spend their entire life centered around on Rāṇī Satī worship and how they embrace the idea, by interviewing women devotees of Rāṇī Satī worship who live in Kolkata. And it has discovered that the practice gives a social activity, provides an opportunity to Mārṅārī women to construct new relationships besides the family, a new community in which they search for their social position. This is where their agency comes into play: they are the organizers, the holders of the congregations, although the men remain participants and not the controllers of the activities.

Normally, the word *satī* conjures up the image of a Hindu wife entering her husband’s funeral pyre to burn alive with him. The image expresses the notion that the woman is willingly undergoing death out of a sense of duty and love for her husband, and in the belief that her self-sacrifice will bring great reward in a future incarnation to her family, clan and devotees. However, representations of *satī* and the meaning of the word “*satī*” can be different depending on the context in which it is used. In the original Sanskrit, the word *satī* means a virtuous or chaste woman and also refers to the goddess Satī who is an incarnation of the great goddess Pārvaṭī, famous as a virtuous woman in Hindu mythology. Second, *Suttee*, as Westerner observers have often spelt the word, describes

the ritual of widow immolation rather than the person who is burned<sup>1</sup>. Finally, *satī* denotes mother goddess (*satīmātā*) whose divinity is confirmed by her self-sacrifice on the funeral pyre. Thus semantically speaking, more than one notion of *satī* emerges, though in the colonial period the emphasis came to be on the act of burning (self-immolation) on the funeral pyre of a dead husband.

Rāṇī Satī temple in Jhunjhunu is the biggest and the most famous of the *satī* temples, and devotees visit this temple from all over India. The temple is supported by Jālān family of Bāṃsal *gotra* of the Agrwāl community and the “goddess” Rāṇī Satī is regarded as their *kuldevī*. These Satī temples are mostly located in north-west India where Rajput culture is dominant and are supported by the Mārṅwārī community or by a specific caste, or by other communities. Their goddess is Rāṇī Satī who was known during her life as Nārāyaṇī Devī, belonging to the Jālān clan, a lineage of Agrwāls who are successful businessmen in India. It is said that their original state is Shekhawati although Rāṇī Satī temples are found in Mumbai, Delhi, Varanasi, Calcutta, as well as many other cities across India<sup>2</sup>.

Regarding the story of Nārāyaṇī Devī, there are booklets which are issued by the temple. There are booklets related to Rāṇī Satī’s worship as well as the story of Nārāyaṇī Devī to inculcate a better understanding of the belief in the worship of *satī*. Presently the followers deem the booklet *śrī rāṇī satya namaha śrī rāṇī satī maṅgala śrī nārāyaṇī carita mānasa* or *śrī nārāyaṇī carita mānasa* by Ramākānta Śharmā virtually as scriptures. Subsequently, Haragoviṃḍa Murārakā who is Ramākānta Śharmā’s disciple, wrote a booklet on the story of Nārāyaṇī Devī - *amara suhāgana, amara vīrāṅganā, satī siromaṇī śrī rāṇī satī dādī jī kī amara jīvana kathā* and a booklet *sat kī jyata* which is a guide to the worship in question and answer form. The booklet is composed in verse by Ramākānta Śharmā, and in prose by Haragoviṃḍa Murārakā to make the narrative easy to understand for the devotees. These publications serve an important function in propagating Rāṇī Satī worship and all the three booklets are available outside the temple.

In the Rāṇī Satī worship, the idea of *pativrata* (to be virtuous wife to their husband) is the focal point. This idea is also emphasized in the booklets that tell the account of Nārāyaṇī Devī life (which is available in the temple premises) which the devotees follow as their guide book. The booklets not only introduce the story of Rāṇī Satī and show how Rāṇī Satī is a special woman, but also emphasizes that she has power of *sat*. Here, it occurred to me that in the booklets, only the ideal woman is described, there is no description of specific roles for men. Although in *satī* worship the main actors are women, it is the men who have made all the rules. The management of the temples and writing of the booklets is also done by men. Priests conducting “*ārtī*” are also appointed by them.

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1 [Courtright 1994: 28]

2 [Courtright 1994: 31]

Nowhere do we find what the women followers think and how they interpret this idea of *satī*, and how it impacts their lives.

According to my interviews, 80 % of followers in Rāṇī Satī worship are women, especially married women. Main activities are singing songs commemorating Rāṇī Satī's life and studying textbooks published by the Rāṇī Satī Trusts. Earlier, men did not join them in their activities, but in the last few years, they have also started to attend these sessions. Managing the temple, organizing functions, doing *pūjā*, and all related activities including formal rituals activities remain in the male domain, although the central figure in *satī* worship is "a woman". The Rāṇī Satī worship preaches women devotees to be a woman who achieves a superior state, and who can be considered to be *satī* by being virtuous to her husband. Of course there are no prescribed rules for husbands to follow. I can't find any set of rules which tell us "what the men should do to be deserving husbands". Prescription for ideal behavior are expressed only for women. The main teaching in Rāṇī Satī worship is to be a *pativrata*, that wife should be virtuous to her husband. The concept that by being virtuous the woman can be *satī* and consequently bring success and happiness to her family. This makes the woman exist only in the role of a wife. She has no identity of her own as a woman. It seems that her happiness is solely dependent upon serving her husband. Through his success, and through her virtuousness, she will be happy in her life. Theoretically this grants power to her without actually conferring it in practice.

It is doubtful whether in Rāṇī Satī worship, the women followers worship this precept (*pativrata*) obediently at all times. If so, is it possible to think that the idea is deeply ingrained and imbibed from their background, from the way they are brought up or is it something that develops only post marriage? I wonder what are the conditions in which these ideas germinate and the kind of environment which sustains them. Or, is there a space where the woman prays for herself internally although superficially she abides by the old established doctrine? My finding is that there are aspects of "women's agency" in this subsidiary role, there are aspects within which the women explore their own identity, and occasionally assert their autonomy.

Analyzing this will be a clue to understanding the genuine status of Rāṇī Satī worship in contemporary India — whether it is a mere statement of form handed down by tradition or is it really a reflection of the wife's sincere belief in the glorification of the virtuous wife? Even as a good wife, and perhaps sometimes as not, how do women find a way in which they think of themselves, to create their identities that may be different and alternate from one decided by a decidedly patriarchal domesticity they are part of. For between the ideal as handed down to them and the variedness of practice one may locate women's agency.

When we study the women devotees of Rāṇī Satī, it is important to consider its regional charac-

teristics, the relations between the Rajput and the Mārṡwārī community, and their identities in post—colonial period. And some researchers have done these studies very well. However, they take into account the broader parameters related to factors such as geographical, socio- economic, cultural and caste equations. There is no study focusing on the women devotees themselves, their faith and belief in the Rāṡī Satī phenomena and the manifestation of their feelings. From their lively activities which I attended during my field work I found that the devotees have warm feelings toward Rāṡī Satī. While this is reflected in their celebrations facilitating Rāṡī Satī worship, the idea of widow immolation, the basis of all Rāṡī Satī worship, is in fact non-existent in their minds. The two issues for them are completely separate. Whether this is an outcome of the government’s vigilant eye banning *satī* worship, or because this no longer the behavior expected from this migrant Mārṡwārī community of Kolkata, or a mix of the two cannot be said with certainty.

A male devotee told me how he began to worship Rāṡī Satī. While he was in hospital with a heart problem, he saw the booklet of the Rāṡī Satī story. He read the story, Nārāyaṡī Devī’s dedication and compassion towards her bridegroom at the tender age of 13 years moved him so deeply that he became a worshipper. It was her compassion, and not the act of committing *satī* that made him a devotee of Rāṡī Satī. That exalted feeling also underlay Rāṡī Satī worship and not only widow immolation, was the sense I had. Thus we may find a variety of reasons for the popularity of the worship of Rāṡī Satī and should not assume any given attribute of Rāṡī Satī is attractive to the devotee.

### **Rāṡī Satī Temple and the Worship**

My first set of interviews were in Kolkata, not in Rājasthan. I was planning to conduct the interviews with followers who visit the Rāṡī Satī temple. I have to mention that the main Rāṡī Satī devotees belong to the Mārṡwārī Agrwāl community and that most of the pious devotees and their ancestors have migrated from Rajasthan to Kolkata. I could not meet any local Jhunjhunu women who too are pious believers. To me it seems Rāṡī Satī followers of Jhunjhunu recognize Rāṡī Satī as goddess just like any other Hindu goddess not as their *kuldevī*. Consequently, I focused on interviewing Kolkata followers only. At present there are two Rāṡī Satī temples in Kolkata, these are managed by two families. There is no relationship with the management, or in any other aspects, to the Rāṡī Satī temple in Jhunjhunu. One is the “Śrī Rāṡī Satī Jī kā Maṡṡīr” located in Rambagan. It was constructed by Nopany Family, Bāṡsal *gotra* in 1963. The other is “Śrī Rāṡī Śakti Jī kā Maṡṡīr” in Kangrugacchi. It is known as the oldest temple, and it was constructed in 1752 (V.S 1810). It is notable that this Rāṡī Satī temple of Jālān family, Bāṡsal *gotra*, in Kangrugacchi is much older than the one in Jhunjhunu.

My field work was conducted over four visits. My first visit was on the day 25<sup>th</sup>–30<sup>th</sup> Jun 2012, second was 12<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> Aug 2012, 4<sup>th</sup> Oct–11<sup>th</sup> 2013 and last was 5<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> Nov 2014. I interviewed forty women. Each interview took around half an hour to one hour. I followed certain criteria for my work viz, interviews at a devotee's residence, interviews at the temple premises.

My interview strategy was essentially in three parts. First, I wanted to get general information about *gotra*, their hometown, education, occupation etc. In contemporary India, although followers maintain that there is globalization and generalization in Rāṇī Satī worship, the community is in fact not wide spread at all, only a small part of a community are worshipping Rāṇī Satī. At the present stage, it is not recognized that Rāṇī Satī is a universal goddess not like the other popular Hindu Goddesses. The image of the Rāṇī Satī which the specific community creates has an individual characteristic which is different from other goddesses. Thus, the individual characteristic of Rāṇī Satī is formed by a limited community. I feel that analyzing personal background of the followers in the community is a clue to understand the thought processes which underlie *satī* worship.

My second purpose was to know their specific activities as followers and to find out how they interpret Rāṇī Satī and how they recognize her. Such information never comes from literature. As actually each life is different, their interpretation of their religious experience is also different. My effort was to understand these differences in their worship of Rāṇī Satī.

A third intention was to know what they think about committing *satī*. Actually, when “glorification of *satī*” is prohibited, Rāṇī Satī temple was accused of indulging in an unconstitutional act. In that situation, it is important to interpret how they understand these sensitive issues and it is a subject of interest to learn how they protect their worship from such legal and social taboos.

### **Changing *Gotra* on Marriage**

My understanding from the interviews is that most of the people whom I interviewed were of Bāṃsal *gotra* or ex- Bāṃsal *gotra* whose *kuldevī* is Rāṇī Satī and they were worshipping her since their childhood. According to my research, around 63 % of the devotees belong to Bāṃsal *gotra* or ex-Bāṃsal *gotra*. Marriage is not allowed in the same *gotra* because that would be considered incestuous relationship. Therefore, women have to change from their natal family's *kuldevī* to the marital family's *kuldevī*. As an example, a woman (A) belonged to Goyal *gotra* before marriage and her *kuldevī* was Sakamr Mātā jī (Durgā's incarnation). After marriage her *gotra* changed to Bāṃsal. On the other hand, there are people who belonged to Bāṃsal *gotra*, and after marriage, their *gotra* has changed to other *gotra* like Bindal. Did this mean that the woman whose natal family's *kuldevī* is Rāṇī Satī can continue to worship her *kuldevī* or she has to follow a new *kuldevī*, when she enters a new family or can the woman whose new family's *kuldevī* is Rāṇī Satī accept

easily Rāṇī Satī as her new *kuldevī* instead of her natal family's *kuldevī* ? According to this, it seems to be common that people worship simultaneously both their *kuldevīs*. We are given some clue in Lindsey Harlan's research<sup>3</sup>, when she analyzes how a woman accepts a new *kuldevī* at the time of her wedding. When a woman marries, she loses membership in her father's *kul* and becomes a member of her husband's *kul*. As a matter of course she is expected to worship the new *kuldevī*. In that time she may face difficulty with worshipping new *kuldevī* because she had been devoted to her natal family's *kuldevī*. Harlan mentions three ways in which women accept marital *kuldevī*.

One is to reconceive one's natal *kuldevī* as a deity of choice. The woman has taken her natal *kuldevī* out of direct competition with her conjugal family by a process of reclassification. According to my interviews, the woman who has her natal family's *kuldevī*, can continue to worship her *kuldevī* when she enters a new family, she can also follow a new *kuldevī* upon marriage. It implies the freedom to choose. However Rāṇī Satī remains the core deity and ultimately obeisance is to be paid to her. In the hierarchical order of *kuldevīs* Rāṇī Satī remains supreme.

Moreover, I came to know that some women whom I interviewed had been worshipping Rāṇī Satī since they were born, even if they were not from the Bāṃsal *gotra*. Thus, changing of *kuldevīs* after marriage creates no problems or tensions. The woman's adherence and faith to *kuldevīs* is what matters.

Secondly according to Harlan, at *Navarātrī kuldevīs* are homologized with the great goddesses which reduces tension between the competing *kuldevīs*. This concept also implies that the *kuldevīs'* form differs, their essence is one. Thus, if a woman calls the new *devī* "*kuldevī*", but identifies her with the old *kuldevī*, the function of the new *kuldevī* to provide protection to the family continues. Thirdly Harlan mentions that in cases where the old *kuldevī* is retained she is given less obeisance than the new *kuldevī* in terms of image (generally *triśūl*) location and ritual performance. The main image of *kuldevī* is flanked by lesser goddesses and all are worshipped together.

About 30% of the devotees which I interviewed are not of the Agrwāl community, their affiliations are different yet they worship Rāṇī Satī because for them Rāṇī Satī is Mā (Durgā), or because the temple happens to be close to their residences or because they think it is *śakti* temple. Thus, they regard Rāṇī Satī in the same light as the goddess Durgā, or *śakti* worship. The narrative of Nārāyaṇī Devī is of no consequence to them nor the fact that Rāṇī Satī is the *kuldevī* of the Agrwāl community. Some of these visitors are lured into worshipping Rāṇī Satī : a fact highlighted by Harlan in her view that *kuldevīs* are homologized with great goddesses. It is thought that their devotion to Rāṇī

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3 [Harlan 1992]

Satī is a matter of “faith”, no documentation of adherence or performing of rituals is necessary. To sum up, in Rāṇī Satī worship, women have an opportunity to adapt their old *kuldevī* to the tradition and the demands of the conjugal family<sup>4</sup>. This reconciliation happens without stress or conflict.

### **Women’s Life**

A second aspect that I will emphasize are the elements which were common in what the interviewees said. The married women (Agrwāl community) whom I interviewed are mostly senior high-school graduates, they have no experience of working in society outside the home and they are mostly house wives. They married between twenty to twenty-five years on average, although some single women study at school, or work. All married women had arranged marriages. It is said that for Agrwāls marriage is most important in their life. They search for a partner very carefully and they strictly follow family customs. Agrwāls used to ask the barber or their *paṇḍit* for information of a marriage partner because barbers were connecting with the community and *paṇḍit* was a reliable person to safeguard collective interests<sup>5</sup>. Mārwārīs think marriage is a community issue and matches are suggested by the community members. The Mārwārī community generally prefers marriages into respected business families of equal status and attention would be paid not only for financial status but also reputation of the family. The network of relations is large and extensive<sup>6</sup>. In addition they believe in matching of horoscopes to find an eligible person based on their education. It is said that recent tendency is that groom and his family prefer a well-educated woman. A lady who has just graduated from high school told me she is not allowed to have a love marriage, her parents will search for a groom for her after a few years. She wants to continue her studies but that will depend on whether her husband allows her to continue to study or to work or not. In such a situation, she accepts her fate<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, women’s security in their marital family is based upon giving birth to a male child. In fact, most of the women followers replied that they pray to Rāṇī Satī for having a son. In India, it is thought that it is the biggest duty for a mother to have a baby boy to keep their lineage going. Women are almost duty bound to produce a male heir and in their quest to gratify the wishes of the family they seek the blessings of Rāṇī Satī whom they often refer to as Satī Mā or Rāṇī Satī Dādī with affection and regard.

### **Being *Pativrata***

In Rāṇī Satī worship, the ideal of the “*pativrata*” which Nārāyaṇī Devī exemplified in her story

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4 [Harlan 1992: 95-96]

5 [Channa 1979: 31]

6 [Jhunjhunwala 2002: 221]

7 Interviewed N, Agrwal on 7<sup>th</sup> Nov 2013.

is regarded an admirable act. A follower thinks that the most important thing in this worship is that wife always should pray for the success of her husband and his long life. Thinking about herself or her natal family. Wife should serve her husband, his family and children. One woman told me that a husband is god. In actual life, the specific act entails that the wife restrains her husband from any excesses of food and drink, to keep her husband in a good physical condition. She is also required to look after the parents-in-law, grand parents, children, and the entire household. In other words, a *pativratā* wife is required to support her husband to be successful socially, to bring prosperity and protection to the family thereby enhancing their social status. The compound of economic, social and moral status establishes the family's social standing in the community which is of prime importance amongst the Agrwāls. A wife has the role of "*pativratā*", and she makes an effort to perform her role as such. However, it is obvious that being *pativratā* does not bring her happiness directly, she can only be happy through her husband's success. In Rāñī Satī worship *pativratā* promises happiness to the wife and protects her from the scourge of widowhood, a situation wherein the widow was sometimes expected to commit *satī*.

In the patriarchal structuring of the idea of *pativratā*, the wife, or the woman remains subservient to the husband. Her role is solely to ensure the welfare of the man. The woman has no identity of her own. This obvious dichotomy is hidden from the view of the followers of Rāñī Satī worship. A female devotee spoke her mind to me when I asked what she prayed for? She said, "As you expect, I pray for my husband first. If my husband were to die before me, what would I do? My family and I would be destroyed, we would have no means of livelihood, thus I pray to Rāñī Satī for my husband's longevity." The comment reflects the helplessness of a wife in the absence of her husband as well as her total dependence on him. It is unthinkable for her to take care of her family as a responsible and an equal partner in the marriage. Her background and bringing up foment such insecurities. The remark also reflects the patriarchal elements in society which she accepts unquestionably. A woman who had got just married into the Bāmsal *gotra* told me that she had just started to follow the *kuldevī*, Rāñī Satī<sup>8</sup>. When she said that *pativratā* is good, I asked her reason for saying so. The question confused her, she merely wanted a good image of herself as a newlywed wife. "*Pativratā*" had no greater significance for her.

A widow told me that we do not need to be *pativratā* to worship Rāñī Satī, as nowadays widows also worship Rāñī Satī<sup>9</sup>. She started to worship her for resolving a problem in her family. The other widow, M, Choudhry, belonged to the Bāmsal *gotra*, and after marriage her *gotra* changed to the Garg *gotra*. On being blessed with a baby she began to worship Rāñī Satī. At present, although she

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8 Interviewed to N, Jālān on 6<sup>th</sup> Nov 2014.

9 Interviewed to a woman (Singhal *gotra*) on 7<sup>th</sup> Oct 2013.



lost her husband twenty years back, she does *pūjā* for Rāṇī Satī at her house without missing a single day and sometimes visits the temple<sup>10</sup>. The concept of *pativratā* has no meaning for her. Her faith in Rāṇī Satī remains indelible. Another unmarried woman visits the temple only on special occasions. She has no special feelings for Rāṇī Satī, she is simply her *kuldevī*. She will continue to visit Rāṇī Satī temple after marriage too<sup>11</sup>. The young unmarried woman, S, Jālān, belongs to the Bāṃsal *gotra*. She worships Rāṇī Satī under her parent's influence. From my interview, there is no special finding to explain why she worships Rāṇī Satī except for the reason that she is her *kuldevī*. She wishes to be a fashion designer in future, therefore she seeks to marry a global person to make her dreams come true<sup>12</sup>. As shown above, the concept of *pativratā* does not play any important role for the unmarried women, widows and the non Agrwāl community. Only the married women of the Agrwāl community hold in esteem the concept of *pativratā*. Apart from praying for their husbands and their families, women pray for themselves too, their health, wealth, and good relationships. In recent times, the Rāṇī Satī worship is not restricted to a *pativratā* wife only, the concept has expanded to include worship by widows as well who pray for their own well-being. This trend is also visible in the presence of single women and men amongst the devotees. (As told to me by an interviewee) However this minor deviation in no way alters the significance of the original concept of “*pativratā*”.

### **Rāṇī Satī Dādī Jī**

The devotees consider Rāṇī Satī as a mother or a grandmother. A woman told me that Rāṇī Satī is like a mother. There are so many gods in India. People can respect each god. But finally we return to Rāṇī Satī. That's why we call her Mā (mother) or Dādī jī (grandmother). The stance of Rāṇī Satī worship is unique. The devotees have warm feelings towards her. When they invoke the metaphor “Mā”, they want her to show them the right way, like a mother who is strict and stern and when they address her as “Dādī Jī” they are invoking her all- encompassing love.

A woman devotee had been talking about her wishes to Rāṇī Satī (not demanding that her wishes be fulfilled). She wanted her husband to buy an expensive item, but lacked the courage to tell him. After she talked with Rāṇī Satī, she got an opportunity to tell her husband and the item was purchased. She believes that Rāṇī Satī created this opportunity. The devotees do not, as they report, demand that their wish be granted, they just talk about their feelings to Rāṇī Satī<sup>13</sup>.

From another interview, I heard the following story : one day a woman devotee lent her gold

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10 Interviewed M, choudhry on 6<sup>th</sup> Nov 2014.

11 Interviewed A, Agrwal on 6<sup>th</sup> Nov 2014.

12 Interviewed S, Jālān on 6<sup>th</sup> Nov 2014.

13 Interviewed B, Agrwal on 6<sup>th</sup> Oct 2013.

necklace to her daughter-in-law to attend a formal party. A few days later she asked the daughter-in-law for the gold necklace. The daughter-in-law apologized and said she had lost the necklace. The disturbed devotee could not accept the loss and asked for Mā's intervention to get over the trauma. The next day, her son informed her the necklace had been found. (This is an example of Mā's beneficence)<sup>14</sup>.

These stories show a relationship between Rāṇī Satī and the devotees. They think that when they have a wish to pray or have some problem, they do *darśana* not to pray to her like other gods, but to talk with her. It seems that their relationship with Rāṇī Satī is very close and real. She seems to be their emotional supporter, and she is listening to whatever they want to talk about. Therefore, she has a special existence for them, especially married women who have to accomplish their marital duties. The devotees think that Rāṇī Satī understands their innermost anxieties as well as their small wishes pertaining to their daily lives. Rāṇī Satī Mā in her all compassionate form is helpful forever and obliging. She gives a boon like a small gift as well as big ticket demands like husband's longevity.

The relationship between Rāṇī Satī and followers is a phenomena. I found a common theme running through my interviews. Rāṇī Satī appears to people in a dream exhorting them to become her followers, and promises to become their benefactor thereafter. It is a kind of "transaction" between them and she demands loyalty. B, Agrwal told me about her first experience<sup>15</sup>.

After she had a baby girl, she wanted a baby boy next. Her sister-in-law invited her to the *kīrtan* (singing of hymns) of Rāṇī Satī. She attended the *kīrtan* for the first time. After that she was not allowed to go again to the *kīrtan*. Then, one day, Rāṇī Satī appeared to her in a dream and demanded to be worshipped. She told Rāṇī Satī of her family's opposition to her. Rāṇī Satī requested her to light a *dīyā*<sup>16</sup>. The woman explained her inability to do so as she was menstruating at the time. Thereafter Rāṇī Satī asked her to fast. The woman fasted for Rāṇī Satī twice a month without telling her family. Soon after that, she informed me, she got a baby boy.

The implication of the story is that Rāṇī Satī makes herself known to people in their dreams. Rāṇī Satī exhorts B, Agrwal to worship her. This experience made B, Agrwal a devout worshipper of Rāṇī Satī. The "transaction" was successful. The story expresses Rāṇī Satī makes herself known to her in their dreams as well. Not only Rāṇī Satī exhorts her to worship but also she makes her presence felt in some form or through a symbol. When the people grasp the significance of this phenomena they become her followers and she helps to fulfill their wishes. The prerequisite for this

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14 Interviewed B, Agrwal's neighbor on 6<sup>th</sup> Oct 2013.

15 Interviewed B, Agrwal on 7<sup>th</sup> Oct 2013.

16 The vessel holding the oil for a light [Hindi- English 1994: 499]

beneficial communin between her and the followers is that they must first become her loyal devotees.

It is significant to note that Rāṇī Satī makes her presence known to the followers through a symbol. In the narrative given above it is the appearance of her footprints. Such stories are commonly narrated by her followers. The “footprint” symbolizes *śakti pīṭh*, the seat of power, which exerts a tremendous pull on the dovotee towards her and her submission is inevitable and complete<sup>17</sup>. Rāṇī Satī gives them the feeling that she is always with them. This has the effect of giving the devotees peace of mind and a sense of protection from an ever loving deity.

### Types of Devotional Activities

According to my interviews, there are two ways to do “*darśana*” and do “*ārtī*” to Rāṇī Satī. One is at Rāṇī Satī temples, and second is at devotees’s home. The *darśana*, a word which means “seeing” or “observing”, comes from “*drś*” in Sanskrit. It generally means “visiting a shrine”<sup>18</sup>. During *darśana*, devotees seek to have a successful and intimate audience with the *devī* and the *darśana* embodies the conceptual notion of a profound and intimate perceptual interaction with *devī*<sup>19</sup>.

#### Temple visits

Although not daily, they often visit the temple to do “*darśana*”. According to Hillary Rodrigues, the devotee’s entire being, their gross constituent elements, all their senses, including sight, and even their inner mental faculties are engulfed in a unifying “vision” of the *devī*. When followers visit the temple, they approach the deity, make their offering and do *darśana* and receive part of it back as *prasāda* (religious offering).

Here is a ritual of *darśana* worship.

1. Pouring water on the temple or on the threshold and wiped by cloth.
2. Marking thirteen specks in a line by *rolī*<sup>20</sup>
3. Marking thirteen specks in a line by *kājal*<sup>21</sup>
4. Put a grain of rice and mark thirteen specks by *mehendī*<sup>22</sup> on the thirteen dots.
5. Give a pair of *moli*<sup>23</sup>
6. Offer in incense, garland of flowers, food and put a piece of coconut kernel on each thirteen dots.

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17 See [Erndl 1993: 62]

18 [Hindi- English 1994: 482]

19 [Rodrigues 2007: 75]

20 A red powder made principally from turmeric and lime (used to make sectarian, or decorative, marks on the forehead). [Hindi- English 1994: 873]

21 Lampblack (applied medicinally and as a cosmetic to the eyes). [Hindi- English 1994: 187]

22 The henna plant (powdered leaves of which are made into a paste with catechu and used especially by women to decorate their hands and feet [Hindi- English 1944: 833]

23 Blade of grass. [Hindi- English 1944: 544]

7. Rinse<sup>24</sup> your mouth and do *ārtī*, make a devout wish, worship.
8. Dedicate a petal and bow to *satī jī*
9. Say “Pranāma Karen“ (greet respectfully) and go round the temple.
10. Adorn remaining *rolī*, divide the offering of foods.

In addition, while you are worshipping, a song honoring *satī* sung on. There is description of the way of worshipping to Rāṇī Satī in the booklet by Murārakā.

While you are chanting mantra, you sit down with your face turned towards northeast and put a rush mat to sit. The mantra is as follow.

- 1) Pour water on the temple or on the threshold and wipe by your right hand.
- 2) Write ॥ श्री : ॥ with the third finger of right hand by *rolī*
- 3) Write “*svastika*” 卐 ॥<sup>25</sup> under the ॥ श्री : ॥
- 4) Make thirteen dots under it.
- 5) Put a grain of rice and *mehendī* (green color) and petals on each letter.
- 6) Finally, dedicate money on the center of *svastika*

From the interviews I gathered that making thirteen dots represents invoking thirteen *satī* goddesses who committed *satī* in Jhunjhunu. This is a characteristic feature of ritual of *satī* worshiped.

#### Home shrine worship

The followers do *pūjā* in front of the shrine in the morning at their homes. Some followers visit the temple every morning, others visit it once or twice a week or once a month etc, it varies. There are altars devoted to Rāṇī Satī at each home.

Daily *Pūjā* ---- (Morning)

1. The followers take a bath before doing *pūjā*.  
(not allowed to have breakfast before *pūjā*, but tea is alright)
2. Clean the shrine
3. Change water in the flower pots which decorated the shrine
4. Read *chālīsā* (Rāṇī Satī Maṅgal Pāṭh, Rāṇī Satī *ārtī*, Kṛṣṇa *ārtī*) , Meditation to Śiva
5. Add flowers to the shrine (It takes about 40 min)

----- (Evening)

Remove the flowers and do *ārtī* (10min)

24 A ceremony performed in worshipping a god: a dish holding a lamp, burning ghee, incense or other articles is moved in a series of circles in front of the idol. [Hindi- English 1994: 92]

25 *Svastika* which is a symbolic design of formation was used in various religion of India. It comes from Sanskrit. Regarding this origin, there are variety of views about its origin like from the Mediterranean, the Mesopotamia or the Indus Civilization. In India, it is taken by Hindu, Buddhism and Jain, it is regarded as a symbol of the burning sun or the flame. Generally speaking, a *svastika* of clockwise twining is thought to be an auspicious symbol of the masculine principle, on the other hand, a *svastika* of anti-clockwise twining is an inauspicious symbol of the feminine principle. However, a worship of goddess or Bon use a *svastika* of anti-clockwise twining on purpose. [South Asia 2012: 678]

It is said that the flame, paste, fragrant smoke, flowers and food or the *pūjā* offering symbolize the constituent elements of nature, as well as its nourishing qualities. The red powdered *rolī* is recognized as symbol of blood and an auspicious color. A red color of a bride's clothing comes from same meaning. Bridal symbolism is also evident in the red powder offered to the Goddess, for the powder is worn by brides on their wedding day and also by married women as a sign of auspiciousness<sup>26</sup>. It is an important complement to sandal wood paste whose saffron yellow color symbolizes the purity of renunciation, and the coconut which is smashed when offered in order to release the fluid it contains, also carries the symbolism of a sacrificial offering of the head and blood<sup>27</sup>. Goddess worship is traditionally associated with blood. Thus, offering of these components to the *devī* is important. These features are remarkably expressed in *tantric* religion of the medieval period. The blood sacrifice is the main element in goddess worship from Durgā and Kālī to the indigenous goddesses.

Offering of food by the *paṇḍit* is made to his sisters and daughters who are not married. If *cunrī* is dedicated, it is also given to them. In Hinduism, it is thought that the thread or scarf offering is made in simple acts of goddess worship, and it symbolizes the gift of a female garment, and most likely is an acknowledgement of the *cunrī*'s femininity. The thread or scarf is generally dyed red with traces of yellow, reiterating the joint symbolism of blood and purity<sup>28</sup>.

The devotees are required to worship Rāṇī Satī at their homes. Visiting Rāṇī Satī temple in Jhunjhunu, or other Rāṇī Satī temples is optional. The most important is the direct relationship between Rāṇī Satī and the devotees and home worship is perhaps recommended as the women folk do not venture out alone in traditional Agrwāl families. There are different forms of worship depending upon different regions and different families. There is no strict adherence to any one particular form of worship. Apart from doing *darśana* and *pūjā*, there are activities for women such as keeping a *vrata*, and holding/participating in *kīrtans*.

### ***Vrata*: a devotional observance**

In general, in South Asia it is thought that an act of fasting at religious events purifies the body. In India, Vedic rituals became more important after the Vedic period<sup>29</sup> especially for women. They keep *vrata* throughout the year, often for the well-being of their marital relationship, their spouse, offspring, and other family members. The ritual of fasting varies but it always embodies an element of renunciation, or austerity<sup>30</sup>. In Rāṇī Satī worship, married women often keep *vrata*. Women ob-

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26 [Erndl 1993: 66]

27 There is a story of a sacrificial offering of a head and blood in Erndl studies. [Erndl 1993: 46]

28 [Rodrigues 2007: 77]

29 [South Asia 2012: 487]

serve a fast on the twelfth day from the new moon, and on the twelfth day from the full moon.<sup>31</sup> During fasting, they can have something anytime, but it is once a day. Having tea or drinking water is allowed.

It seems to be flexible and there are choices and options for them to keep *vrata*. Every member is not required to observe it every time. It can be done by rotation, by two members of the group at a time. Their group can fix the day of fast but it should be observed twenty-four times in a year. The other example, a woman keeps *vrata* twice a year, other woman does it during Diwālī, once a month etc. Moreover, they decide to keep *vrata* twice a month and they keep it by turn or together. It is effective for making solidarity. *Vrata* encourages community bonding and shared activities among women. A group which I interviewed keeps *vrata* on the day of *kīrtan* activity which is held twice a month. They spend time together and share the experience of fasting. Their interaction brings them closer and the objective of fasting becomes stronger. She moreover thinks there is an element of sacrifice in the *vrata* that the woman keeps for the well-being and welfare of her family. According to her, fasting and prayers are often performed for the sake of others, so that the husband and children may be healthy, they will have luck in the future, and gain wealth if they are poor. Keeping *vrata* expresses a characteristic of a “good” woman and is also a way of salvation for a wife. Because it is thought that all disaster or unhappiness at home is caused by a wife, a wife has a responsibility to take care of her household. Keeping *vrata*, a wife can show her sincerity she can be seen as making an effort to bring good luck to her family.

McDaniel says that while some *vratas* are for the happiness of the women performing them, most focus on the happiness of those around her. It emphasizes happiness found in the social world rather than in a supernatural or heavenly world<sup>32</sup>. In contemporary India, *vrata* is to wish happiness for others in this world, and it connects to her own happiness indirectly. There has been some dispute among scholars whether women perform *vratas* for the sake of others or for their own welfare, while men perform them for themselves. There is no person who prays for a stranger. All the people belong to a community (like family, relative, and society etc). Nobody is seeking happiness in isolation. As McDaniel thinks even wishing the welfare of others in the family may be called selfish, as it makes one’s life easier. It depends on one’s understanding of altruism<sup>33</sup>. I think that the activity of keeping *vrata* in Rāṇī Satī worship is not rigid. Rather they try to find a good way of keeping *vrata* with which they are comfortable. (e.g, going together in a group to motivate their feelings, to

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30 [Rodrigues 2007: 77]

31 A month is divided into two periods, one is a fifteen days from a new moon to full moon and the other is from the full moon to the new moon.

32 [McDaniel 2003: 107]

33 [McDaniel 2003: 111]

encourage each other, arranging shift system etc). In this way, there is flexibility to adjust *vrata* to contemporary requirements.

### ***Kīrtan***

In Rāṇī Satī worship, the followers do *kīrtan*. This is call-and-response chanting or “responsory” performed in India's *bhakti* devotional traditions. It is a major practice in *Vaiṣṇava* devotionalism, Sikhism, the *sant* traditions, and some forms of Buddhism, as well as other religious groups. In the thirteenth century, a form of rituals was conducted by religious leaders like Jñāneśvar (1275–1296) and Namdev (1270–1350)<sup>34</sup>. There are several steps in the *kīrtan* : speaking, singing, narrating, rhythmic gaps, well-constructed pauses or silences, simultaneous dancing, acting etc. I think that the *kīrtan* occupies an important position in Rāṇī Satī worship because it includes a role of propagation. The followers of Rāṇī Satī don't propagate activities except for singing of songs which praise Rāṇī Satī. If someone is influenced by the songs, they join the *kīrtan* and sing together. And some of the devotees who are not good at reading character, come to know the Nārāyaṇī Devī story by their sense of hearing. Thus, the activity of *kīrtan* is more important for such people. Sometimes someone may become a follower of Rāṇī Satī worship under the influence of another devout member and her stories of gratification.

Women whom I interviewed participate in doing *kīrtan* frequently. They have formed area wise groups. They meet at a member's residence for *kīrtan* once a week or once a month, it is all flexible. They can also have *kīrtan* with friends. They can do *kīrtan* whenever they like. There are some groups for doing *kīrtan* in Kolkata. B. Agrwal takes responsibility of one of them. She belongs to a group of singers whose name is “UMM<sup>35</sup>”. She is the main vocalist. This group was established thirteen years ago. According to B. Agrwal, her group holds the *kīrtan* twice a month, once on the twelfth day from the new moon, and on the twelfth day from the full moon to the new moon. The activity is held at member's house, it can be done by rotation. If it is difficult for the member to hold the *kīrtan* at her house on that day, she can ask some members to exchange the day and if the member has a domestic problem (e.g. the house is too small, her family opposes her activity etc), she can arrange space at Rāṇī Satī temple or book a hall where it can be held. In this way, her group has continued to hold *kīrtan* for the last five years.

There are three points which I joined a *kīrtan* on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2012 : Meeting in Rāṇī Satī worship from 13:30–16:30. First, there were about twenty five women who were all married. They all wore saris with *cunrī*. It is said that wearing sari and *cunrī* is the formal style in Rāṇī Satī worship.

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34 [South Asia 2012: 210]

35 Alias name

Thirteen participants are required for doing a *kīrtan*, so members confirmation is requested. Moreover, as a formal style, married women are required to wear a red sari. Nowadays, doing *kīrtan* wearing red sari has become a symbol of Rāṅī Satī worship. If members wearing red sari are doing *kīrtan*, it indicates they are members of Rāṅī Satī worship group. However, there is no problem at the *kīrtan* if members come dressed in their normal attire. Of course there were no married women dressed in western clothes. However there were single women wearing *salwar kurta* (Indian cloths) or pants. The activities of *kīrtan* are done by married women, and *ārtī* is conducted by a couple (wife and husband). The schedule of the activity is arranged usually on weekdays in the daytime.

Second, they continued singing in praise of Rāṅī Satī (based on *śrī dādī jī bhajanamālā*) for three hours. During this time, they were clapping with their hands, and one woman was ringing a cymbal. Some women sometimes danced. Midway in the singing, they strewed flowers on everyone and they put *mehndi* on their hands (It is a symbol of marriage), and they put turmeric on their cheeks. They handed out a votive offering (*prasāda*, it was Rs.10, and chocolate). Then some persons made their contributions, and did *ārtī*. A woman put *sindūr* on the foreheads of the devotees. Coming up to the closing, one man came and sat in front of the altar. It seemed that he was the husband of this house. They started doing *ārtī* one by one after him. There are basic rules in the *kīrtan*. During the *kīrtan*, 1, read the entire *Maṅgal Pāṭh*, 2, Do *ārtī*, 3, Do *pūjā*. This order has to be maintained and once the *kīrtan* has started, it cannot be halted or discontinued. The main vocalist who leads the *kīrtan* should follow the order, however she can rearrange the compositions within that order. Thus, whether the *kīrtan* is good or not depends on the main vocalist's self-expression, and it is her responsibility to make the *kīrtan* a success. It takes three-four hours for a *kīrtan*, and apart from the main vocalist, two-three women are present as reserves.

Third, while I was observing the activity of *kīrtan*, a woman devotee fell into a trance and became possessed. She would select a woman from the congregation and mumble something to her and sometimes she would beat her back with her hands. She finally lay down and after a few minutes she recovered consciousness. The gathering were given a votive offering (*prasāda*, it was a mango and a box of sweets). According to Katheleen M. Erndl, many scholarly studies of possession are regarded as rather patronizing attempting to account for possession as a purely psychological or sociological phenomenon, not something that “really happens”. However she herself thinks that the most important thing is that for devotees in a cult, the crucial concern is not just that person is possessed, but who or what is possessing the person and for what purpose<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, she tries

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36 [Erndl 1993: 106]



to view the Goddess possession not as an isolated phenomenon but as a religious expression within the theological and ritual context of the Goddess cult and popular Hinduism in general. These devotees whom I observed, behaved like Rāṇī Satī or they closed their eyes, looked up and mumbled as if they were communicating with Rāṇī Satī or they got into a hysterical condition. Then people around them touched their feet in salutation. Here, as Erndl says, it is important to consider why these particular devotees became possessed, and how the rest of the devotees in general interpret the phenomenon of possession. The general understanding of possession is that the Goddess plays in people and speaks through them as a means of helping her devotees and showing them her *śakti*. As Erndl explains that in Hinduism there is no clear dividing line between divine and human, gods can become humans and humans can become gods. And women who are possessed as Mātā or living goddesses are also included, and these women are thought to embody the *śakti* of the goddesses and this process occurs with varying degrees of institutionalization. Erndl thinks that the sanctity of the possession experience carries over into specialist and object of worship.

If we interpret women who are possessed as Rāṇī Satī to embody *śakti*, these women become selected women (specialists). The concept is similar to the concept of *sat* which Sangari and Vaid mention. According to them the concept of *sat* encourages women to be a *pativrata* and the belief in *sat* functions to elevate what would otherwise be seen either as ritualized murder or suicide into a supremely holy act of wifely devotion<sup>37</sup>. In the same way if selected woman has *śakti* becomes the model of good wife. Then consequently should possession be considered in a positive light as a form of *śakti*. This brings us to another logical argument that a woman may want to become possessed voluntarily so as to become a goddess temporarily. In fact Erndl concludes there is an example of a woman who enters into possession voluntarily. She argues that spontaneous possession experiences do often progress into regular or planned ones and become part of a person's devotional and spiritual practice, and the initial experience may be repeated and developed into a periodic pattern. As I could not interview the woman who was in a possessed state, I cannot explain what was happening to her nor the condition of her mind in that state.

According to Erndl, purity is cited as a requirement for a suitable vehicle as well as being a vegetarian, a teetotaler and of course chaste. That is why young girls below the age of puberty and unmarried women are thought to be especially suitable vehicles as manifestations of divinity. This idea underlies the *Kumari* cult of Nepal in which specially chosen young girls are given a ritual position as goddesses until their first menstruation<sup>38</sup>. However, in Rāṇī Satī worship, the vehicle is a married woman, it is different from Erndl's concept. To begin with, the activity of *kīrtan* is done by

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37 [Sangari & Vaid 1991: ws-5]

38 [Erndl 1993: 182]

married women, although there are a few single women members.

I got a realistic answer from a devotee on this phenomena of “possession”. She described it as a heightened state of deep thought which can happen when a person has a serious problem and is seeking relief through Rāṇī Satī’s intervention. The intensity of her concentration transforms her into a heightened state of awareness which is akin to the concept of *śakti* power. Through my interviews, a common understanding about possession that emerged was that Rāṇī Satī is always watching over the devotees. She does not enter into a human form, and those women who become possessed have a delicate sensibility, and are swayed by their own mental condition. The onlookers in the *kīrtan* look upon her with veneration, bow to her exalted condition and acquiesce. They show respect not to Rāṇī Satī but to the woman possessed. Although the elders in a community or gathering generally do not pay salutation to the young, here even they acquiesce. A spell is cast over the entire congregation. My interviewee also said that amongst the devotees the phenomena of “possession” remains debatable although during the *kīrtan* all of them succumb to the mood of the occasion.

### **The Women Devotees of Rāṇī Satī in Contemporary India**

I have focused on the women devotees of Rāṇī Satī centering on their voice. Through my field work, I saw the image of the women devotees who worship Rāṇī Satī sincerely and energetically. In the post-colonial period, the interpretation of “*satī*” ignored the real woman’s voice. At that time the society was male dominated and women had no independent voice. In Rāṇī Satī worship the women devotees are prominent, they worship to seek their own happiness (although it is through the welfare of their husbands) they engage energetically in the communities Rāṇī Satī worship activities, they play a distinct and important role. Is there a change in the position of the woman in society? Is the woman now thinking for herself and thinking of her role in society? With the passage of time all phenomena is changing, and a galaxy of influences is at work. Within these social, political, intellectual, legislative changes, the structure of Rāṇī Satī worship has also undergone transformation. In the beginning, only married women worshiped Rāṇī Satī to avoid widowhood : in contemporary times single women, widows and sometimes men as well engage with Rāṇī Satī. The trend seems to be growing.

In the Agrwāl community, the norm is that the man goes out to work while the wife takes care of the household. This social order has prevailed since the post- colonial period. In this patriarchal system the wife is required to be *pativrata*. The wife obliges the dictates of society and follows the ideals of *pativrata* believing that that will bring her happiness. The word “*pativrata*” means that the woman “serves” her husband with devotion. But my view is that the underlying meaning of *pa-*

*tivratā* has shifted from “serving” to “supporting” or “leading” her husband to social success for the happiness and harmony of her family. Moreover, there is a space where the woman prays for herself internally, it is as a mother, as a wife, as a woman, although superficially she abides by the old established doctrine.

Yumiko Tokita explores the possibility of women’s agency in contemporary India focusing on the village women in Odisha. In the village, it has been thought that the inner space (home) is regarded as “traditional space”, and the women have a responsibility to protect that space. They understand their position and behave as a protector of that space. According to Tokita, at the village level, there is a ripple effect of male politics on the women. The women, amongst themselves, in that inner space, form their own opinions and subsequently influence their men. They indirectly become a part of the cultural and political system outside of the familial domain. The *Panchayat rāja*, a recent political innovation which has helped greatly in the empowerment of women, has further given the village woman a strong voice in deciding the affairs of the village. This has helped bridge the gap between the “inner” space and the outer male domain<sup>39</sup>.

In Rāṇī Satī worship, it is demanded of women devotees to be *pativratā*. Although the *pativratā* concept has patriarchal element work in varied ways, through my field work, I have learned that in reality it seems. It can be said that married women devotees of Rāṇī Satī try to work to create their space while understanding their position as a wife. They take considered position regarding which is the best way for becoming happy, and how they should behave. They accept the condition that a husband goes out to earn money, and a wife takes care of her family. However, within the constructed domestic structures they inhabit, they make a place for themselves in different ways. Firstly, the communal worship of Rāṇī Satī gives them access to a congregational life with other worshippers where they can socialize as well as devotees. Secondly, in their particular modes of worship, e.g. the keeping *vratas*, they concentrate their own modes of worship and their own centrality to their domestic happiness. Finally, within particular wishes that fuels their worship, they seek a special relationship with the goddess Rāṇī Satī, a personal transactional relationship where both they, and the goddess in as far as she apparently initiates certain devotees and their form of worship, where they are the central characters. Thus, within patriarchal structures that perpetuate subordinate role for women, women are able to form on their own roles, within homes and domesticity, and in their modes of worship. This may not be the high and “public” form of worship as for instance, conducted in large temples in Jhunjhunu by men. But within a narrower domestic space, or communal public performance with other women worshippers, women do indeed play and important role. In this

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39 [Tokita 2011]

context, one may even speak of their “agency” in so far as, they focus on their wishes, roles and feel empowered by their special relationship with Rāṇī Satī.

By participating with such ritual of worship, even men, for example, when they agree to initiate worship in their homes, acknowledge the significance of women and wives, their rituals, devotional matters as central to the welfare and auspiciousness of their homes. Moreover, through new forms and through new devotees of Rāṇī Satī, which includes widows, one may say that the relationship of Rāṇī Satī with her various devotees is changing, and that even those not seen to be her traditional worshippers are adopting and adapting her for their needs.

Emilia Bachrach, explored how the devotees of the Vallabh Samprady in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, seek to interpret their didactic text which mention eighty-four devotees who are remembered for their devotional attributes, with aesthetically distinct way of articulating theology, devotional practice, and religious identity through intertextually rich narratives of devotee’s live. The devotees seek a solution of their individual problems from the text, and these experiences of the devotees are discussed in the group through a consideration of the relationship between textual models and real-life practices. Bacharach concludes that reading text is inherently a collective and performative act that inspires group dialogue and debate<sup>40</sup>.

In the Agrwāl community, married women spend most of their time at home. They normally are not allowed to go out alone, and it has been thought by men that women should be at home, and the general idea does not seem to have changed. It has to be noticed that the activity of the *kīrtan* gives the house wives opportunity to connect with “society” beyond the domestic sphere. The activity of the *kīrtan*, where people come together, provides an opportunity to construct human relationships outside of the family, to form a new community in which they search for their social position and play the role of an ideal woman as Rāṇī Satī devotees.

As Emilia Bachrach states viz a viz the written text, the *kīrtan* offers a similar kind of opportunity to the women to share their experience, their special relationship with Rāṇī Satī, the boon they believe the goddess bestows upon them thereby inspiring the non-devotees to join the group. One important element in the Rāṇī Satī worship in contemporary times is the opportunity gives the woman to create her own space in which her persona is exhibited and comes out as a dominant entity. (Here she is not subservient to her husband.) In the *kīrtan*, the woman who is possessed (which is an act of theatricality), so to speak, also creates her own space. She is under pressure from within herself to become possessed the next time around as well. Equally she becomes an object of interest through her seemingly super natural act. Talk about her gathers ground specially among the new

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40 [Bachrach 2015]

members. It generates publicity further and she understands that “she” is the central point in this phenomenon. The *kīrtan* — this shared activity generating hypnotic conditions with self-imposed suspension of disbelief acts as a force multiplier in the propagation and sustainability of Rāñī Saṭī worship.

### **Committing Saṭī**

In my interviews, I asked what the women devotees think about committing *saṭī*. In the *kīrtan*, the devotees sing the story of Nārāyaṇī’s life. In the annual ceremony meeting which was held on 1<sup>st</sup> Jan 2012, the drama depicting Rāñī Saṭī stories is played by the devotees accompanied with the *Mangal Pāṭh*. Of course in the final episode of the drama is the scene of Rāñī Saṭī’s committing *saṭī*. Everyone seemed to be focusing on the final episode of the drama. It is the culmination of the Nārāyaṇī Devī story and the play ends amidst great applause<sup>41</sup>. The followers (including men) of Rāñī Saṭī maintain that committing *saṭī* is totally wrong. They regard Rāñī Saṭī worship as *śakti* worship. Committing *saṭī* by force is not *śakti*. Therefore, they insist they will not commit *saṭī* when their husbands die. B, Agrwal told me that some devotees did not know about the committing of *saṭī* by Om Kanwar and Roop Kanwar<sup>42</sup> when the news was broadcast<sup>43</sup>. Their interpretation of Nārāyaṇī’s *saṭī* is that she became a *saṭī* by her own power of ‘*sat*’ and in those days committing *saṭī* was not illegal and she just followed the custom which responded to the demands of the time.

Although the followers think Rāñī Saṭī worship and committing *saṭī* are totally different, there is a picture of Rāñī Saṭī next to their altars wherein Rāñī Saṭī is depicted sitting with her husband’s corpse on the funeral pyre in some follower’s houses. They explain this contradiction by referring to it as a mere symbol of their worship. We must bear in mind the legislation prohibiting *saṭī* and its glorification. There is a possibility the worshipers perforce had to separate the two issues i.e *saṭī* worship and widow immolation in adherence to the law. The other rationale to bear in mind is whether genuinely they are convinced in their hearts that the two issues are separate, and *saṭī* worship does not imply acceptance of committing *saṭī*. It is not possible to ascertain the truth.

In this guise it has to be mentioned that Rāñī Saṭī worship has been continuing till now and even expanding among the Agrwāl community. After the Roop Kanwar immolation phenomenon followed by national legislation prohibiting all glorification of *saṭī* and the resultant social taboo the organizers of the temples and *melās* had to rethink their strategy to keep the “*saṭī* worship” activity alive. Hence the emergence of two separate issues i.e. “committing *saṭī*” and “*saṭī* worship”.

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41 I got a DVD of this ceremony which were taken by B, Agrwal’s husband.

42 See Sangari and Vaid’s studies.

43 Interviewed B, Agrwal on 7<sup>th</sup> Oct 2013.

Hardgrove also points out the fact that a prominent *satī*-worshipping community does not advocate actual *satī*. The issue is *satī* worship. It has to be considered separately. She concludes why and how the worship of *satī* functions as a public performance of a domestic theme, as the marker of a communal identity in the frame work of anti- colonial nationalism by asserting its own civilization- al attainments in the backdrop of household culture of the colonizer.

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