

‘Sacred Rebels’ of Bengal: The DashaMahavidyas as Counter-narratives to Colonial Patriarchal Womanhood in Bengal

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Abstract

In India, the patriarchal social structure assigns women roles that are rooted in ideals of obedience, chastity, and domesticity. Hinduism is considered the oldest religion in the world, and Hindu Tantra is a significant part of it. In Hindu Tantra, particularly the worship of the ten *Mahavidyas* (*Dasha Mahavidya*), presents goddess archetypes that defy the patriarchal norms that expect women to be gentle, soft spoken, well dressed, patient, modest, obedient and dependent; while they themselves are portrayed as wild, fierce, erotic, chaotic, ascetic, terrifying, and independent. Colonial India was a period when women’s lives were shaped by both traditional patriarchal expectations and colonial modernity, and as reform movements. This study proposes to investigate how the *Mahavidyas* embody “transgressive femininity” and how their narratives contrast with the roles and identities prescribed and expected of women during the colonial period in patriarchal Hindu society.

The Mahavidyas include Kali, Tara, Tripurasundari, Bhuvaneshwari, Chhinnamasta, Bhairavi, Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi, Matangi, and Kamala. These goddesses range from nurturing beauty to terrifying destruction. By comparing these goddesses with the societal expectations of women in colonial Bengal, this research aims to uncover women’s subordination, domestic roles, control over sexuality and mobility, and how the Mahavidyas challenge patriarchy. The Hindu Tantric goddess models exemplify female power that disrupts social order. Therefore, the researcher seeks to reveal the paradox of admiring and worshipping transgressive goddesses while restricting women’s roles in society from a sociological perspective.

The objectives of this study are:

- To compare the *Mahavidya* archetypes with roles and behavioural expectations for Hindu women of the colonial period of Bengal.
- To understand how the *Mahavidyas* challenged patriarchy.

The researcher tries to find out more about the *DashaMahavidya worshipped in Bengal and how they challenge patriarchy that controlled and shaped the identities of the colonial women of Bengal*. The researcher has done a field visit to the two *DashaMahavidya* temples present in Kolkata, and also conducted a desk research based on secondary sources of data to find out more about the colonial women’s roles and identities in Bengal.

Keywords: *DashaMahavidya, patriarchy, women’s roles, societal expectations, contrasts.*



Image captured by the researcher on 24th October, 2025

1. Introduction

The history of women's identities in colonial India unfolds at the intersection of religious symbolism, political domination, and patriarchal control. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonialism reshaped not only the material lives of women but also their cultural representations. The British imperial discourse constructed Indian women as victims of indigenous patriarchy, while nationalist reformers reimagined them as custodians of spiritual purity. In both narratives, women's subjectivity was contained within patriarchal frameworks. Yet, within Hindu religious cosmology, there existed alternative images of the feminine that are fierce, autonomous, and transgressive. The *Mahavidyas*, the ten wisdom goddesses of the Tantric pantheon, embody forms of female power (Shakti) that resist domestication and disrupt patriarchal binaries of purity and pollution, virtue and vice, as well as creation and destruction. The *Mahavidyas* represent a radical reimagining of feminine power in Hindu spirituality. Originating from the story in which *Parvati* takes ten forms to prevent Shiva's escape, the *Mahavidyas* challenge male dominance through literal domination that depicted iconographically sitting or standing on Shiva's body, asserting spiritual and cosmic authority (Vora, 2023). Their imagery in Tantra deconstructs the binaries of pure and impure, domestic and wild, and male and female disciplines, thereby revealing liberation through embracing the marginalised and forbidden.

During the colonial period in India, women's identities, both British and Indian, were profoundly shaped by the intertwined forces of patriarchy, imperialism, and social reform. The era marked a complex

negotiation between traditional gender hierarchies, colonial interventions, and early feminist thought that sought to redefine womanhood within the Indian context. Colonial society in India was structured around rigid patriarchal ideals that dictated women's roles as domestic caregivers and moral guardians (Inan & Singh, 2025). For Indian women, patriarchal norms confined them within the private sphere through practices such as sati, child marriage, purdah, and restrictions on education and property ownership. Their identities were defined relationally as daughters, wives, or widows, anchored in honour and family duty (Bhatia, 2007). The colonial encounter conflated gender, race, and class, producing a layered identity for women. The “good Indian woman” was idealised as virtuous, modest, and self-sacrificing, reflecting the intersection of Brahmanical purity and Victorian morality. Likewise, British women's virtue was used to justify imperial dominance, as their domestic order symbolised civilisation against the perceived “chaos” of indigenous society. Through this dual vision, both groups of women became instruments of patriarchal representation—one as the idealised subject of reform, the other as its propagator (*Memsahibs: British Women in Colonial India* | IIAS, n.d.).

This study explores how the *Mahavidyas* challenge patriarchal constructions of femininity and how their symbolic energies can be read as counter-narratives to colonial representations of women. By placing goddess imagery alongside the formation of colonial women's identities, this study argues that the *Mahavidyas* provide a mythic vocabulary for articulating resistance, agency, and feminist reclamation within a patriarchal and colonial world.

2. Literature Review

H. Srivastava (2024) in ‘The Impact of Gender Roles in the Representation of the Divine Feminine in Hinduism’ contrasts *Navadurga's* domesticated femininity with the *Mahavidyas'* radical independence, arguing that the *Mahavidyas* remain marginalised for expressing female agency, sexual power, and destruction beyond patriarchal control. The *DasaMahavidya* are routinely placed in Tantric and esoteric registers, their worship less public and more stigmatised as “dangerous” or “forbidden.” Srivastava cites both textual origins (*Devimahatmya*, Tantras) and ethnographic/ritual histories to demonstrate how scholarly work has linked this divergence to patriarchal anxieties surrounding female autonomy and sexualised power. Her overview echoes prior scholars who have explored how ritual visibility (and its absence) maps onto normative gender expectations. A distinct body of work examines Tantra and its association with taboo practices, as the primary locus for *Mahavidya* worship. Srivastava highlights scholarship that discusses how Tantra's transgressive rituals (use of sexuality, corpse/charnel symbolism, ingestion of taboo substances) produce anxieties in mainstream Hindu society and thereby marginalise these goddesses into esoteric spaces. This literature often sees the exclusion as symptomatic of patriarchal attempts to regulate female agency by relegating uncontrollable aspects of femininity to the margins.

David Kinsley's (1998) canonical study of the ten *Mahavidyas* remains a cornerstone because it foregrounds their erotic, violent, and liminal characteristics and locates them within Tantric practice and symbolic systems that defy neat, domesticated readings of the feminine. This body of work establishes the *Mahavidyas* as embodiments of transgressive *Shakti* as forms of female power that problematize ordinary gender prescriptions. David Kinsley demonstrates how the Devi functions as a cosmic regulator, at once mother-protector and agent of violent cosmic correction, thus situating Durga/Kali as complementary aspects of a unified feminine power.

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* (1882) is frequently invoked; its recasting of the motherland as a triadic goddess (from suffering mother to Kali to warrior Durga) shows how goddess

symbolism was mobilised to inspire anti-colonial militancy while simultaneously producing new gender norms (virangana/heroic woman vs. the idealised domestic woman). Scholars have shown that nationalist deployments sometimes reclaimed Kali's ferocity as a patriotic strength but also tended to domesticate or moralise those energies to fit nationalist ethics, producing a paradoxical effect: empowerment at the level of symbolism, containment at the level of gender norms (Kaur & Mahananda, 2024).

Tanika Sarkar's *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2001) provides a foundational framework for understanding how colonial Bengal constructed the idealised feminine identity through intertwined nationalist and patriarchal discourses. Sarkar argues that the figure of the *pativrata*. This chaste, self-sacrificing Hindu wife became the symbolic anchor for the nation's moral purity, thereby transforming women into custodians of cultural authenticity while simultaneously restricting their mobility, autonomy, and political voice. Her analysis of reform debates, religious treatises, and nationalist writings reveals how the elevation of domestic femininity functioned as a mechanism of control: women were exalted rhetorically yet disciplined socially. In this formulation, the woman's body became the site where anxieties about modernity, tradition, and colonial rule were negotiated. Sarkar's insights are essential for understanding how actual women in Bengal experienced everyday patriarchy at the very moment they were idealised as the spiritual core of the emerging nation-state (Sarkar 2001).

Complementing this nationalist domestication of femininity, Sumanta Banerjee's "Under the Shadow of the Goddess" (2010) highlights the complex and often contradictory role of goddess traditions in shaping gender identities in Bengal. Banerjee demonstrates that although goddess figures—especially powerful, transgressive forms worshipped in folk and Tantric contexts—held the potential to challenge patriarchal hierarchies, elite reformist and orthodox institutions often sought to neutralise or domesticate these radical energies. His analysis of ritual practices, oral traditions, and popular religious performances reveals how patriarchal structures systematically reinterpreted or suppressed goddess cultures that emphasised female autonomy, rage, and agency. For a study on the *DashaMahavidyas*, Banerjee's work is particularly significant, as it demonstrates that while these goddesses symbolically embody unrestrained feminine power, their liberatory possibilities were frequently constrained by the socio-religious and colonial reforms that redefined acceptable womanhood in Bengal (Banerjee 2010).

Ashai & Singh (2025), in their article 'Impact of Colonial Rule on Indian Women', note that British reforms like the abolition of sati and widow remarriage laws positioned women as symbols of cultural morality. Women were legally "protected" yet politically silenced, their identities reduced to expressions of purity and sacrifice.

There has been a notable research gap found in how the *Mahavidyas* challenge patriarchy as compared to the colonial women's identities of Bengal. Thus, the researcher aims to explore the presence and history of the *Mahavidyas* temple in Kolkata, and how the colonial women's identities of Bengal under patriarchy are challenged by the *Mahavidyas* archetypes.

3. Objectives of the study:

- To compare the *Mahavidya* archetypes with roles and behavioural expectations for Hindu women of the colonial period of Bengal.
- To understand how the *Mahavidyas* challenged patriarchy.

4. Methodology:

The researcher has conducted desk research with secondary sources of information from scholarly articles

and research papers. To select and identify the most relevant studies on the topic, the Google Scholar online database was used. The selection process was guided by specific keywords, which have been reproduced in the following search phrase: *Mahavidya and colonial women's identities in Bengal*. The analysis has been done through the thematic analysis method. The comparison has been limited to Bengal; thus, the selection of literature has also been done in the same way.

In addition to this, the researcher has also visited the two *DashaMahavidya* temples in Kolkata, one of which is located in Cossipore, the oldest, and, as mentioned by David Kinsley (1998), the only *DashaMahavidya* temple in Kolkata. The other one was built in recent times in Shibpur, Howrah. The visit has helped us know more about the oral history of the temples and also, to some extent, about the goddesses.

5. Rationale of the study:

The present study arises from the need to critically interrogate the historical processes through which colonial modernity, Indian nationalism, and upper-caste patriarchy collectively produced a highly regulated model of womanhood in Bengal. While scholars like Tanika Sarkar (2001), Partha Chatterjee (1989) and Charu Gupta (2002) have exposed the gendered nature of colonial discourse, relatively little attention has been paid to how indigenous religious imaginaries, especially Tantric goddess traditions like the *DashaMahavidyas*, offered *counter-narratives* to such constructions. This research seeks to fill that gap by situating the *DashaMahavidyas* as both a theological and sociological critique of colonial patriarchy, demonstrating that the feminine divine functioned not merely as a spiritual metaphor but as an embodied social discourse of resistance.

The rationale for selecting Bengal as the geographical and cultural focus lies in its historical centrality to both colonial reformism and Tantric goddess worship. Nineteenth-century Bengal was the crucible of colonial governance, *bhadralok* nationalism, and women's reform movements, making it an ideal site for examining how competing gender ideologies coexisted and collided. Simultaneously, Bengal has been one of the most vital regions for goddess traditions, particularly the *Mahavidya* cults of *Kali*, *Tara*, *Chinnamasta*, and *Dhumavati*, whose ritual, literary, and folk presence provided women with symbolic and practical resources for negotiating patriarchal constraints. By analysing this intersection, the study contributes to a more complex sociology of gender that acknowledges both domination and indigenous modalities of agency. The study limits its scope to nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal because this was the period when colonial and nationalist patriarchy reached its most organised ideological form, while goddess worship remained vibrant at both folk and tantric levels. Extending beyond this context would dilute the analytical clarity and historical specificity that make the sociological findings meaningful. The study draws selectively on the canonical frameworks of Michel Foucault of 'Disciplinary Power' (1977), Pierre Bourdieu of 'Habitus and Symbolic Violence' (1990) and Judith Butler of 'Gender Performativity' (1990). These theorists provide complementary perspectives that help explain how gender regulation operates and how symbolic or ritual practices can subvert it. The theoretical choice remains intentionally broad but focused on mechanisms of power, embodiment, and resistance. Rather than surveying all feminist or religious literature, the research engages deeply with a small cluster of pivotal works that directly inform the Bengal-specific dialectic between colonial modernity and goddess-centred resistance.

6. Findings and Interpretation

6.1 Oral History of the *DashaMahavidya* Temples

❖ *DashaMahavidya* temple, Cossipore, North Kolkata:

The temple stands at Cossipore (Kashipur), near the cremation ground (mahashmashan) on the Hooghly River bank in north Kolkata. It is one of the very rare temple complexes dedicated exclusively to the ten Tantric goddesses of the *Dasha Mahavidya* tradition.

According to oral tradition, the temple was founded by a tantric practitioner (name obscured in local legends) in the late 18th or early 19th century. The tantric milieu is hinted at through the choice of deity (*Mahavidya*), and its placement near the cremation ground makes it a typical marker of Shakta/Tantric worship.

The temple's original tantric associations are preserved in oral memory, where the founding tantric is said to have performed intense *sadhana* of the *Mahavidyas*, drawing upon Shakta and Tantra traditions (who was left-handed as well). Because of the temple's setting (near the cremation ground, the Dutch Kuthi area, etc.), it was somewhat outside the orthodox brahmanical mainstream, which allowed for tantric ritual practice. The tantric founder remains anonymous in published sources (likely lost in time), but the local lore emphasises a shrine built with minimal patronage, supported by devotees performing tantric worship of the ten forms of the Mother Goddess.

The temple also features in the spiritual journey of Sri Ramakrishna. According to the temple's own website and local pilgrimage guides, Sri Ramakrishna visited the temple "several times" (Admin, 2025). An old man said, "*Once Sri Ramakrishna went with Mathura Nath to see the temple. Finding the temple in such condition, Sri Ramakrishna asked Mathur to provide rice and money monthly so that the service of the deities could be continued.*"

In this way, Ramakrishna links up the temple with his own network of devotees and patronage. The fact that he "found the temple in such condition" underscores that by his time, the temple had perhaps declined somewhat and required revival or support. In oral recounting, devotees emphasise an evening when Ramakrishna sat quietly in the shrine, meditating before the Mother Goddesses, and later he recommended to his devotee, Mathur Babu, to support the temple's daily worship and economic upkeep (*Ramakrishna – November 2025, n.d.*).

Mathur Mohan Biswas (often referred to as "Mathur Babu") was a zamindar, philanthropist and a close associate of Sri Ramakrishna. Local tradition connects him with the *DashaMahavidya* Temple: when Ramakrishna visited the site, he asked Mathur Babu to provide regular offerings for the goddess. Mathur is said to have agreed, thereby becoming a benefactor of the temple.

According to one man, "*Finding the temple in such condition, Sri Ramakrishna asked Mathur to provide rice and money monthly so that the service of the deities could be continued. Mathur readily agreed to that. Since that time, Sri Ramakrishna would visit the temple occasionally.*"

Thus, Mathur Babu's support helped revive the temple's ritual life and maintained its continuity. His association also links the tantric shrine with the broader devotional network around Ramakrishna and Dakshineswar.

From a sociological angle, the temple represents multiple layers of marginality, patronage and devotion, heritage and also decline, and social identity. A temple dedicated to the *Mahavidya* in a cremation-ground setting links ritual deviance (cremation ground, which is considered to be a taboo site) with empowerment (Mother Goddess). It bridges orthodox and heterodox traditions and reflects how marginal religious practices survive in urban contexts. The involvement of a zamindar-patron, Mathur Babu and a charismatic

saint, Ramakrishna, shows how traditional religious institutions depended on elite patronage and charismatic legitimacy. It shows the interface of class (zamindar), religion (saint) and ritual (temple). Oral memory emphasises the temple's decline by the mid-19th century and revival through Ramakrishna-Mathur patronage. This is a familiar pattern in Indian temple studies: ritual centres decline when patronage drops and survive when new networks intervene. For the local community of Cossipore, the temple is part of their identity. The narrative of Ramakrishna's visit gives it a pilgrimage dimension; Mathur's support gives it historical respectability. The temple becomes a locus of local heritage, not just ritual.

The *DashaMahavidya* Temple in Cossipore is more than a local shrine; it is a living site where Tantra, devotional Bhakti and elite patronage intersect. It's a story of a tantric founder, of Sri Ramakrishna's visit, and of Mathur Babu's support, giving it rich sociological relevance, showing how marginal ritual spaces survive, how saints and patrons reshape religious institutions, and how local memory preserves identity and heritage.

***DashaMahavidya* temple in Shibpur, Howrah:**

The *DashaMahavidya* Temple (*DashMahavidya* Mandir) sits in Naskar Para, Shibpur, Howrah, a compact urban neighbourhood across the Hooghly from north Kolkata. The temple is embedded in everyday neighbourhood life, alleyways, small shops, and the household courtyard and is managed today by the Shibpur Bijoyee Sangha. Its modest façade and everyday rhythms make it a different kind of sacred place than the large, touristic temples of central Kolkata: it is above all a local shrine whose meaning is produced by neighbours, volunteers and annual festivals (*Dashamahavidya Temple — Under Management of Shibpur Bijoyee Sangha*, n.d.).

Local memory links the temple's formation to mid-20th-century civic life. According to the Bijoyee Sangha's own account, the group that was originally a community club began running an annual sarbojanin (public) Kali puja in 1958; within a few years, the puja became a well-known local event, and a formal temple structure and management emerged from that collective will. Older informants speak of "a few young men" and neighbours who "decided to make a permanent place for the Mother", the phrasing used repeatedly in oral accounts, and thus the temple grew as a social project as much as a religious one. From interviewing the priest who conducts the and the Sangha's records, it is clear that the temple's yearly calendar, Kali puja, *Annakut* (*Annakut Mahotsav*), and special *Mahavidya*-linked rituals are the main ways the temple lives in people's memories. The priest said that the Kali puja takes place for ten days, in tantric rituals, beginning with the first *DashaMahavidya*- Maa Kali, followed by more 9 days of worship, where, each day, according to the astrological connections, each deity of the *DashaMahavidya* is worshipped individually. Other than this, an animal sacrifice is conducted after a month of Kali puja. The Bijoyee Sangha organised the sarbojanin Kali puja starting in 1958; soon after, the public rituals grew to include community meals, widow-feeding (rice bhog after *Ambubachi*, in local accounts), and night vigils. These events are as much about mutual aid and social belonging as about individual devotion (*Dashamahavidya Temple — Under Management of Shibpur Bijoyee Sangha*, n.d.).

The priest emphasised that during these festivals, "*neighbours bring vegetables, the women cook together, and children learn songs.*" This sociality of sharing food, rotating responsibility, and informal dispute resolution at the shrine is what keeps the temple relevant across generations.

The Shibpur Bijoyee Sangha continues to manage the temple and the pujas; its registration and contact details are public. The Sangha performs both ritual administration (puja schedules, daily offerings) and civic functions (organising relief, supporting the needy during festivals). Local oral testimonies describe

how the Sangha stepped in during times of crisis (floods, pandemic) to distribute food and coordinate help, highlighting the temple as a node of local solidarity.

Although the temple is named for the *DashaMahavidya* (the ten aspects of the Mother), local people speak of the temple more commonly as a Kali/Devi place with many winners of small devotional rites. Temple literature and signage indicate that the ten goddesses are venerated, but in everyday practice, devotees frequently address “Maa” (the Mother) without enumerating all ten names. Thus, while the *Mahavidya* presence is real (images/plaques and ritual references exist), the popular focus tends to be on accessible maternal forms of the Goddess and on the festival calendar. In other words, the temple’s name preserves the tantric lineage, but local devotion emphasises communal rites and Kali worship.

The priest said, “*It was the youth of the neighbourhood who built it*”, suggesting civic origin rather than elite sponsorship.

People said, “*We meet at the puja*” to indicate the temple’s social role.

Elders recall when the puja moved from a house courtyard to a formal pandal and finally to the permanent temple structure. Local shopkeepers remember contributing a rupee or two each month in earlier decades — a pattern that preserved the shrine’s rituals.

This origin story matters sociologically as the temple did not arrive through elite zamindar patronage or royal endowment but through voluntary associational work (a sangha), reflecting post-independence urban civic cultures in Howrah. The temple’s history is therefore entangled with neighbourhood identity and local organisation rather than with grand architectural patronage.

DashaMahavidyas Temple in Shibpur is best understood not as a monumental relic but as a lived neighbourhood institution, born out of volunteer civic action, sustained through festival reciprocity, and serving as a hub of social solidarity. The *Mahavidya* framework provides the temple’s theological identity, but oral memory shows the shrine’s everyday significance lies in the routines of care, food, song and mutual help that make it a centre of communal life.

6.2 The *DashaMahavidyas* as a Counter-Imaginary to Colonial Patriarchal Womanhood in Bengal

• Patriarchal Production of Womanhood in Colonial Bengal

Colonial Bengal produced a remarkably contradictory set of gender norms that simultaneously idealised and marginalised women. Under the dual pressures of Victorian morality and upper-caste nationalist reformism, women were redefined as symbols of spiritual purity, familial duty, and cultural authenticity. Nationalist thinkers, particularly within *bhadralok* culture, envisioned the “ideal Hindu woman” as the guardian of the home who is chaste, self-sacrificing, spiritually elevated, yet socially confined. Tanika Sarkar (2001) argues that the colonial period crystallised the figure of the *pativrata* wife as the axis of moral nationalism. This symbolic elevation concealed the deepening of patriarchal control, as women’s autonomy, sexuality, bodily mobility, and public presence became objects of increased surveillance. The result was a gender regime in which symbolic glorification masked everyday subordination.

Against this backdrop stands an alternative cultural archive: the *DashaMahavidyas*, the ten Tantric wisdom goddesses whose iconographies and mythologies express states of feminine power as erotic freedom, wrath, sovereignty, liminality, and radical independence that directly contradict the colonial patriarchal ideal. These goddesses, deeply rooted in Bengal’s tantric and folk traditions, offer symbolic, ritual, and social resources that destabilise the normative gender order (Doniger, 2010). When viewed sociologically, the *Mahavidya* tradition emerges not merely as a set of theological constructs but as a counter-discourse and counter-practice that kept alive alternative possibilities for female agency in a

period when the colonial state and Indian patriarchal reformers attempted to redefine womanhood along disciplinary lines.

- **The *Mahavidyas* as Transgressive Archetypes: Symbolic Inversion of Patriarchal Femininity**

The ten *Mahavidyas* - *Kali*, *Tara*, *Tripurasundari* (*Sodashi*), *Bhairavi*, *Chinnamasta*, *Dhumavati*, *Bagalamukhi*, *Matangi*, *Kamala*, and *Bhuvaneshvari*- collectively embody forms of *shakti* that challenge patriarchal codifications of purity, modesty, and domesticity. Their iconographies display elements colonial society coded as “dangerous,” “impure,” or “obscene”: exposed bodies stained with cremation ash (*Kali*), decapitation and self-bloodletting (*Chinnamasta*), hunger and widowhood (*Dhumavati*), erotic radiance unconstrained by marriage norms (*Tripurasundari*), or mastery of speech, sound, and social pollution (*Matangi*). As Kinsley (1998) notes, the *Mahavidyas* collectively form a repertoire of female power that “transgresses the boundaries of respectable femininity” (Urban, 2003).

The Victorian-colonial patriarchy demanded that women conform to ideals of modesty, emotional restraint, physical purity, and sexual containment (Raychaudhuri, 1999). The *Mahavidyas* invert each of these qualities. Where colonial womanhood mandated the suppression of female rage and desire, *Kali* and *Bhairavi* externalise rage and erotic power as divine. Where Victorian norms emphasised widows sorrow and passivity, *Dhumavati* transforms widowhood into a form of untamed sovereignty. Where colonial law regulated women’s bodies through the category of obscenity (Gupta, 2002), *Chinnamasta*’s iconography as headless, naked, bleeding rejects the bodily shame altogether. Such inversions destabilise the taken-for-granted nature of patriarchal norms. They offer models of womanhood that do not require submission to domesticity or sexual regulation. This symbolic opposition alone made the *Mahavidyas* incompatible with the colonial-nationalist project of creating obedient, spiritually “pure” domestic women (Sarkar, 2001). Besides this, unlike classical goddesses such as *Sita* or even the sanitised form of *Durga* used in nationalist imagery, the *Mahavidyas* refuse domestication. Their myths depict women who flee domestic authority like *Kali* leaving Shiva, break social contracts like *Chinnamasta*’s refusal to submit to hunger or desire, or occupy socially stigmatised spaces like cremation grounds, forests, or courtyards of the “polluted”. These narratives provided repertoires for women to imagine themselves beyond wifhood or reproductive roles, disrupting the colonial patriarchal assumption that female identity derived solely from relational roles as wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Also, all of these goddesses are independent of consorts beside them, like other typical domestic goddesses.

- **Ritual Practice as Counter-Structure: How *Mahavidya* Worship Generated Gendered Agency**

While symbolic inversion is powerful, sociological significance deepens when symbols influence practice. *Mahavidya* worship in Bengal has been found in tantric households, folk shrines, women’s ritual groups, and possession cults, which often granted women forms of agency that colonial patriarchy sought to suppress (McDaniel, 2004). Many *Mahavidya* cults rely on women as ritual leaders, mediums, or household officiants. Evidence from tantric families in Bengal indicates that women often conducted *puja*, maintained ritual spaces, managed offerings, and acted as decision-makers during festivals (Kinsley, 1998). In possession cults associated with *Kali*, *Bhairavi*, and *Matangi*, thus, women served as vessels for the divine voice in an authoritative role unavailable in Brahmanical orthodoxy or colonial civic structures. Such ritual authority challenges the patriarchal structure that restricts women to domestic labour. It produces alternative hierarchies where women’s spiritual competence supersedes male control. These ritual networks also created micro-economies (selling offerings, organising festivals, and maintaining shrines) that gave women a degree of economic power that is something largely denied in colonial law and inheritance codes.

Colonial patriarchy depended heavily on control of female mobility. Purdah norms, surveillance of public behaviour, and strict policing of women's movements were central to maintaining respectability (Raychaudhuri, 1999). Yet many *Mahavidya* spaces exist outside male-controlled environments such as cremation grounds, riverbanks at night, women's courtyards, or folk shrines operated by female lineages. These spaces allowed women to gather, exchange stories, and form bonds of solidarity. Such gatherings contrast with the colonial nationalist vision of women restricted to the "inner domain" (Chatterjee, 1989). By practising rites in liminal, public, or unregulated spaces, female devotees enacted a form of spatial resistance to patriarchal confinement.

Possession by *Mahavidya* forms, especially *Kali*, *Chinnamasta*, and *Bhairavi*, allowed women to express anger, grief, desire, and dissatisfaction that were otherwise silenced in colonial households. Emotional expression is sociologically significant: it enables agency, disrupts hierarchical relations, and legitimises negative affect as divine rather than deviant. For colonial patriarchy, which required women to model patience, submission, and emotional labour (Sarkar, 2001), these ecstatic states constituted a direct challenge. Gupta's (2002) discussion of colonial moral policing shows that female bodies in states of possession were often labelled obscene, uncontrollable or dangerous. Such condemnation signals precisely how threatening these ritual practices were to patriarchal order.

- **How *Mahavidya* Narratives Offered Alternative Subjectivities?**

Beyond ritual practice, the *Mahavidyas* provided narrative frameworks that women could use to reinterpret their lives. These frameworks opposed the moral-nationalist narratives that defined the colonial ideal of womanhood.

- **Women's sexuality-** Colonial Bengal promoted desexualised femininity; female desire was framed as immoral, pathological, or socially dangerous (Gupta, 2002). In *Mahavidya* mythology, goddesses openly experience, pursue, or display desire not just merely reproductive but cosmic, social, and spiritual. *Tripurasundari's* erotic energy is central to the functioning of the universe; *Matangi* embodies tantric erotic skill; even *Kali's* wild energy is not devoid of bodily passion. Such narratives de-stigmatise female desire and challenge the colonial assumption that respectable women must be passive, modest, and sexually silent.
- **Women's aggression-** Colonial patriarchy required women to suppress anger, an emotion coded as masculine and socially destabilising. *Kali's* rage, *Bhairavi's* fiery disposition, and *Chinnamasta's* self-sacrifice through violent release revalue anger as a sacred force. This symbolic validation allowed women to process, name, and assert emotional states otherwise demonised by Victorian morality.
- **Women beyond marriage-** Colonial law and nationalist reformers insisted that women achieve fulfilment through wifedom and motherhood. *Dhumavati*, the widow goddess who thrives without a husband, repudiates this logic. She embodies sovereignty, hunger, knowledge, and independence. Her myth destabilises the association between widowhood and social death, which is a key pillar of patriarchal regulation in Bengal.

The subversive potential of *Mahavidya* traditions was also detected. Colonial states and nationalist elites actively sought to domesticate or marginalise these goddess forms. While benign, maternal forms of goddesses (like *Bhavani* or sanitised *Kali*) were appropriated into nationalist imagery, the radical *Mahavidyas* were marginalised. Bankimchandra's *Anandamath* transforms the goddess into a moral mother figure, a symbol of national purity, not transgressive female autonomy (Sarkar, 2001). Such reworking neutralised the disruptive energies associated with tantric traditions.

Colonial courts viewed many tantric rituals as obscene, superstitious, or criminal. Women in states of possession were sometimes institutionalised or policed under vagrancy or obscenity laws (Gupta, 2002). Public female ritual specialists faced stigma, surveillance, or accusations of witchcraft or impurity. Orthodox reformers attempted to incorporate selected *Mahavidya* practices into sanitised ritual frameworks, removing elements of sexuality, blood, or bodily autonomy. Banerjee (2010) notes that elite Hindu reform movements domesticated goddess worship by eliminating its folk and female-led dimensions.

- **What do the *Mahavidyas* Reveal about Gender Resistance?**

Taken together, the *Mahavidyas* demonstrate that alternative gendered subjectivities existed even during periods of intense patriarchal production. Their significance lies in their capacity to de-naturalise patriarchal norms by making female autonomy thinkable; produce embodied practices that grant ritual, emotional and spatial agency; provide counter-narratives for women who reject or struggle within colonial domesticity; preserve pre-colonial gender pluralities against Victorian homogenization; and undermine nationalist patriarchies that glorified women symbolically but denied them power (Narayanan, 1998). Thus, the *Mahavidyas* do not simply challenge patriarchy at the level of imagery; they also articulate a cultural sociology of resistance, where symbols, rituals, bodies and narratives combine to contest the colonial production of womanhood.

7. Theoretical Framework

Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power provides a foundational lens for interpreting how colonial Bengal regulated women's bodies through law, morality, domesticity, and surveillance (Foucault, 1977). Colonial patriarchy operated through Foucauldian mechanisms of normalisation-respectability, sexual control, domestic confinement, and emotional discipline. Women were subjected to "technologies of the self" which taught them to internalise ideals of purity, modesty, and wifely duty. The *DashaMahavidyas* oppose this disciplinary order at the level of both symbol and practice. Their iconographies with bleeding bodies, nakedness, rage, sovereignty, and erotic power represent a refusal of the docile feminine body that colonial patriarchy attempted to produce. In Foucauldian terms, the *Mahavidyas* disrupt the regime of bodily conformity by legitimising what the colonial system marked as "dangerous," "obscene," or "impure." They create knowledge systems and ritual practices that unsettle the dominant apparatus of control (Foucault, 1980). Thus, the *Mahavidyas* function as counter-discourses in the Foucauldian sense, offering alternative truths about femininity that challenge the hegemonic, colonial-brahmanical disciplinary order.

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic violence illuminate how colonial Bengali gender norms became embodied in everyday practices (Bourdieu, 1990). Colonial and nationalist discourses created a feminine habitus built on domesticity, obedience, self-sacrifice, and emotional labour. This habitus taught women to "naturally" accept subordination; symbolic violence made patriarchal norms appear morally justified and culturally valued. The *DashaMahavidyas* interrupt this process by disrupting gendered habitus and redistributing symbolic capital. The goddesses model rage, unpredictability, desire, independence, widowhood, creativity, and ritual autonomy, which are dispositions that directly contradict the colonial feminine habitus. Devotional communities that honour *Kali*, *Chinnamasta*, or *Dhumavati* attribute high value to traits that patriarchal society stigmatises, such as anger, widowhood, erotic expression, and ferocity. This revaluation challenges the symbolic violence that historically devalued such traits in women. Through this Bourdieusian lens, the *Mahavidyas* represent "cultural sites where the

misrecognition of patriarchal values becomes temporarily suspended,” enabling women to embody dispositions outside the colonial-gendered habitus.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity posits that gender norms are produced through repeated performance rather than biological essence (Butler, 1993). Colonial Bengal institutionalised the repetitive performance of “ideal womanhood”: modest speech, purity rituals, widow’s asceticism, domestic labour, seclusion, and emotional restraint. The *Mahavidyas* enable subversive performativity. Their rituals allow women to enact alternative gender scripts through possession, ecstatic dance, ritual speech, embodied rage, erotic power, widow-sovereignty, and boundary-crossing behaviours. These performances constitute what Butler calls “subversive repetition”, which acts that destabilise the norm by performing femininity otherwise (Butler, 1990). The *Mahavidyas* thus generate gendered counter-performances that expose the constructedness of colonial patriarchal femininity.

8. Major Sociological Findings:

The findings of this research emerge from an interpretive synthesis of textual, historical, and sociological analyses conducted on the intertwined subjects of colonial womanhood and the *DashaMahavidyas* within the socio-religious landscape of Bengal. The findings presented in this section thus map the dual sociological process at work in colonial Bengal. The simultaneous production of patriarchal femininity and the emergence of counter-discourses of female power rooted in Tantric cosmology. In doing so, the study redefines goddess worship not merely as religious devotion but also as a sociological form of resistance, where the sacred becomes a terrain for negotiating power, identity, and freedom.

- **Colonial Patriarchy & the Construction of Womanhood-** Colonial Bengal produced a hyper-patriarchal feminine ideal built around chastity, domesticity, self-sacrifice, and spiritual purity. Nationalism reinforced rather than dismantled patriarchy, using women symbolically as “mothers of the nation” while excluding them from real political agency. Victorian morality and Hindu reformist ideology combined to regulate women’s sexuality, emotions, and bodily presence in public spaces. Women’s bodies became key sites of colonial control through laws, censorship, policing of obscenity, and household surveillance. A gendered habitus of submissiveness was created (via education, ritual norms, and media) that normalised women’s acceptance of dependence and silence.
- ***DashaMahavidyas* as Counter-Imaginary-** The *Mahavidyas* represent transgressive, boundary-breaking feminine power that contradicts colonial models of docile, pure womanhood. Their iconographies valorise what colonial patriarchy stigmatised: anger, sexuality, widowhood, pollution, nakedness, hunger, and independence. Goddess narratives normalise emotional and bodily autonomy, offering alternative templates for female subjectivity. They redefine impurity and danger as sacred, thereby disrupting purity codes that disciplined colonial women’s behaviour.
- **Ritual Practice & Embodied Agency-** *Mahavidya* worship provides practical spaces for female authority (ritual officiation, possession, healing roles, decision-making). Women gain spatial freedom by participating in rituals outside patriarchal household control, such as cremation grounds, riverbanks, and folk shrines. Ritual possession and ecstatic devotion allow socially forbidden emotions, rage, desire, and grief can be expressed without punishment. Women form solidarity networks through ritual gatherings, enabling emotional support and collective resistance to domestic patriarchy.
- **Sociological Mechanisms of Resistance-** *Mahavidya* myths create alternative truths about gender that challenge dominant patriarchal ideologies. Ritual enactments perform femininity differently (Butler), destabilising the colonial-gender script. Women create knowledge systems through ritual practice

(standpoint theory) that contradict patriarchal definitions of purity and respectability. The goddesses revalue stigmatised traits, undermining the symbolic violence that naturalised submissive femininity. *Mahavidya* devotion reshapes women's internalised dispositions, giving them alternative emotional and behavioural repertoires.

- **Limitations-** Nationalists and orthodox reformers often sanitised or domesticated goddess imagery, neutralising its radical potential. Colonial authorities treated tantric rituals as obscene or deviant, policing female practitioners through legal and moral frameworks. Class and caste dynamics shaped who could access these liberatory practices; elite women's participation was more constrained than lower-caste or folk practitioners.

9. Conclusion:

The study demonstrates that colonial Bengal produced a narrowly disciplined model of womanhood shaped by Victorian morality, nationalist ideology, and brahmanical patriarchy. This model relied on the construction of women as chaste, domestic, self-sacrificing, and spiritually pure, ideals that justified the intensification of surveillance over women's bodies, sexuality, mobility, and emotions. In contrast, the *DashaMahavidyas* represent a radically different repertoire of feminine power rooted in Tantric and folk traditions. Their iconographies of rage, erotic autonomy, impurity, widowhood, hunger, and sovereignty directly challenge the colonial gender regime that sought to standardise female identity (Erndl, 1993).

The research reveals that despite the intensification of colonial patriarchal control, indigenous goddess traditions preserved *plural forms of female agency* outside elite or colonial institutions. The *Mahavidyas* served as symbolic, ritual, emotional, and social resources that enabled women to negotiate, challenge, or reinterpret patriarchal constraints. This study shows that colonial womanhood was not totalizing; it was actively contested through ritual countercultures that held radically different understandings of femininity. By examining goddess narratives, ritual practices, possession cults, and women's ritual authority, this research shows that the *Mahavidyas* provided alternative discourses and embodied spaces where women could negotiate and resist patriarchal constraints. These practices disrupted colonial disciplinary power, revalued stigmatised emotional and bodily states, and enabled women to inhabit identities that defied the idealised domestic norm. Although nationalist and colonial institutions attempted to domesticate or suppress the radical potential of these goddesses, the persistence of *Mahavidya* worship demonstrates that patriarchal modernity was neither total nor uncontested. Ultimately, the *DashaMahavidyas* function as sites of symbolic and practical resistance, revealing a deeper sociological truth: that colonial modernity produced not one but multiple, competing visions of womanhood, and that indigenous ritual cultures preserved alternative pathways for female agency even amidst profound structural oppression.

10. Limitations of the study

This study is limited by its historical scope and textual dependence. Focusing primarily on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal ensures contextual depth but restricts the generalization of findings to other regions or modern contexts. The research relies largely on archival documents and secondary ethnographies rather than primary fieldwork, meaning that lived ritual experiences and contemporary practices of the *DashaMahavidyas* may not be fully represented. Since it is not possible to achieve data of the lived experiences of these colonial women, it is limited to secondary sources of literature.

Linguistic limitations also arise from the reliance on translated Sanskrit and Bengali Tantric texts, which may lead to interpretive gaps. Furthermore, the colonial and reformist materials analyzed predominantly

reflect only elite *bhadralok* perspectives, limiting direct access to subaltern women's voices. Methodologically, the study's qualitative and interpretive orientation privileges depth of meaning over empirical generalizability; thus, findings are analytical rather than statistical.

Finally, although theoretical insights from Foucault, Bourdieu, Butler, and Collins illuminate power and gender, these frameworks emerge from Western epistemologies and may only partially capture indigenous Tantric cosmologies. Despite these constraints, the study tries to offer significant sociological insights into how goddess traditions symbolically and ritually resisted the patriarchal production of the colonial womanhood in Bengal for the Hindu women mostly from the upper and newly emerged middle class.

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