



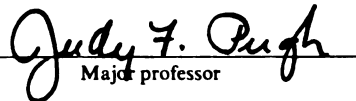
This is to certify that the  
dissertation entitled  
Potent Words, Potent Objects: "Doing  
Mantras" in Assamese Everyday Life

presented by

Vandana Goswami

has been accepted towards fulfillment  
of the requirements for

Ph.D. degree in Anthropology

  
Major professor

Date 6-6-94

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES



3 1293 01027 5976

**LIBRARY**  
**Michigan State**  
**University**

**PLACE IN RETURN BOX to remove this checkout from your record.**  
**TO AVOID FINES return on or before date due.**

DATE DUE	DATE DUE	DATE DUE
FEB 6 1986	11:141244975	
	APR 05 2019	
<del>0410 1</del>	100	

MSU is An Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Institution

c:\circ\date\due.pm3-p.1

**POTENT WORDS, POTENT OBJECTS: "DOING MANTRAS" IN ASSAMESE  
EVERYDAY LIFE**

**By**

**Vandana Goswami**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Department of Anthropology**

**1994**



## ABSTRACT

### POTENT WORDS, POTENT OBJECTS: "DOING MANTRAS" IN ASSAMESE EVERYDAY LIFE

By

Vandana Goswami

This dissertation, based on field research in India, examines the cultural category of "doing mantras" in the north-eastern state of Assam. Mantras are configurations of specific syllables, words and sound units that are seen to have innate power. They are a part and parcel of Hindu ritual, and are most commonly seen and studied in a religious context. "Doing mantras" refers to practices in which its religious and ritual dimension is recontextualized and used to interpret and resolve everyday situations and problems like illness, afflictions and dilemmas. The practice is played out as interactions between practitioners and clients and often proceeds along a sequence of divination, diagnosis and remedy. Using Sherry Ortner's conceptualization of cultural schemas, the study analyzes this practice by focusing on its nature, its internal logic and its influence in dictating actor's thoughts and actions. By examining illness and health as one aspect of misfortune, affliction and the experience of suffering, the study gets away from a common assumption in medical anthropology that health and illness can be objectified into isolable entities. Instead, it analyses the practice of mantras as a

culturally typical way of interpreting and resolving diverse situations in a similar way, that is, in terms of mantras. It thus addresses the need seen by some scholars for medical anthropologists to address broader issues of social theory. Besides helping in understanding some of the assumptions about reality held by actors, the interactions also provide a window into particular culturally important concerns and sources of distress that emerge from the socio-cultural setting.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funding for this research was provided by The American Institute of Indian Studies, and at the outset, I thank them for their generous support. I also extend my gratitude to all my informants without whose cooperation this research would not have been possible.

I am indebted to Dr. Judy Pugh, the Chairperson of my PhD Guidance committee, for her constant support and guidance. Our long conversations opened up new avenues of ideas for me. Her friendship kept me away from the bouts of depression which writing a dissertation and being away from my family often threatened to bring about. My other committee members, Dr. Loudell Snow, Dr. Charles Morrison, and Dr. Harry Raulet were always there for me whenever I needed advice and direction. I thank Dr. Loudell Snow for her continuous reassurances that writing and defending a dissertation in two semesters was not an impossible endeavor, and that I could do it. The encouragement of my committee and their confidence in me was a constant motivation in writing this dissertation.

I thank Laura Cahue, Eufrazio Abaya and other colleagues who acted as my sounding board while getting this

dissertation in shape. Special thanks go to Barbara Knuth, Mary Ann Keilen and Gail Barricklow from the Department of Anthropology for all their help both during the writing stage as well as during the preparation of the final draft.

My family has been an immense source of support throughout the process of fieldwork and analysis. My father, Barada Sarma spent countless hours locating, reading and translating Assamese texts, as well as holding scholarly discussions with me. These discussions have been of utmost help to my writing. I thank him for all his efforts. Last but not the least, I am indebted to my husband Deepangkar Goswami for enduring months of separation without any complaints --- first during my fieldwork and then again when I came back to America to write and defend my dissertation while he kept the home fires burning in India. This dissertation would never have come about without his nagging, coaxing and finally even threatening me to finish it. My heartfelt thanks to him for keeping his own life on hold while I pursued my studies.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
CHAPTER 1 THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS .....	1
CHAPTER 2 MANTRAS IN GENERAL .....	29
CHAPTER 3 THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING .....	51
CHAPTER 4 THE PRACTITIONERS .....	84
CHAPTER 5 THE PRACTICE .....	124
CHAPTER 6 THE CLIENTS .....	173
CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION .....	215
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	226

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 CULTURAL LOGIC OF "DOING MANTRAS" ..... 17

Figure 2 CULTURAL SCHEMAS OF THE PRACTICE  
OF MANTRAS ..... 17

Figure 3 MAP OF INDIA ..... 52

## CHAPTER 1

### THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

This dissertation addresses the growing concern among some medical anthropologists over the strong emphasis of a biomedical orientation in some spheres of medical anthropology, and the widespread assumption that the biomedical model, being "scientific", is a "natural", superior, and universally applicable model. This bias has resulted in the role of medical anthropologists as mediators to aid in the promotion of health (in its biomedical conceptualization) worldwide. Drawing analogies between the current relation of anthropology to medicine, and the history of anthropology's relations to European colonialism, Nancy Scheper-Hughes [1990] sees anthropologists as being mediators since colonial times, and medical anthropology as an extension of that mediating role. Reacting against anthropologists as "culture-brokers", she asserts that just as the colonial anthropologists took for granted the inevitability of the colonial enterprise, similarly, present day medical anthropologists do not question "the inevitability (nor the technological superiority) of the whole biomedical health enterprise itself" [Scheper-Hughes 1990].

The "culture-broker" role can be especially seen in the

work of clinically applied medical anthropologists who are engaged in using anthropological knowledge to meet the needs of health practitioners [Scheper-Hughes 1990]. For example, Kleinman, Eisenberg and Good [1978] argue for the need for a clinical social science. Their general assumption is that there is a difference between the illness models of health practitioners and patients. Their main concern is to translate cultural concepts brought in by patients into strategies that can be directly applied by clinicians to patient care. This can be accomplished, according to them, by teaching clinicians to elicit the patient's model, and then formulate and communicate the doctor's model in terms that the patient can understand. Once the doctor elicits the patient's model, he or she can then attempt to educate the patient if it is felt that the patient's model will interfere with appropriate treatment and care. Even though these anthropologists talk of negotiations of shared models between doctors and patients, their underlying assumption is the superiority of the clinician's biomedical model in the treatment of disease.

The emphasis of medical anthropology on medical systems and medical pluralism can be seen as a response to the structural organization of biomedicine. Interest in "non-western medical systems" developed in terms of a contrast with "western medical system". Anthropologists thus viewed non-western medical systems in terms of the institutional



frameworks of the western medical system, emphasizing the structure of the beliefs, practices, roles and relationships in a health and illness-related setting.

One of the common threads running through the work of most medical anthropologists is the emphasis on health and illness. Health and illness become objectified into isolable entities. Worsley [1982] argues that treating bodily ills takes place in any culture within a "metamedical" framework of thought. The biomechanistic model is only one such framework, and is by no means universal. Nichter [1991:138] similarly views health as only one aspect of well-being. He argues for the need to ground ethnomedical studies in the study of everyday life, and in perceptions of the normal and natural, the desirable and the feared, and in the embodied knowledge of common sense. A similar issue is raised by Scheper-Hughes [1990], who is dissatisfied with the tendency in medical anthropology to reduce the complexity and richness of anthropological knowledge to "a few reified and 'practical' concepts, (such as lay explanatory models, the disease-illness dichotomy, somatization)" [Scheper-Hughes 1990]. The result, for her, is "not only the reification of sickness and human suffering as these are understood by cultural anthropologists, but also the reification of medical anthropology itself" [Scheper-Hughes 1990]. Other anthropologists have also questioned the fundamental

assumptions of biomedicine --- mind-body duality, illness as a biological phenomenon, the body conceived of as a mechanistic system, among others [Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, Comaroff 1980, Young 1980, Pugh 1983]. Western biomedical bias and colonial rule, in some form or the other, have helped to create a vocabulary of medical anthropology based on apriori western categories to which other cultures do not often relate. As stated by Comaroff [1981], "rigid definitions and decontextualization always involve the creation of artificial priorities in analysis and also the unwarranted imposition of chimerical western categories."

Focus on apriori categories moves attention away from the individual actor, who is usually not concerned with pre-given categories. Illness and health are experiential situations, and are not often differentiated from other life experiences [Comaroff 1981, Pugh 1983, Scheper-Hughes 1990, Worsley 1982]. Hence, the compartmentalization of medical anthropology to only issues of health and illness can be a distortion of what the reality is. Therefore, there must be an interplay between medical anthropology and broader issues of social inquiry. There is a growing sentiment that we are first social and cultural anthropologists, and hence we need to look at social and cultural realities like misfortune, suffering, and affliction [Scheper-Hughes 1990, Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, Worsley 1982, Hahn 1984]. In

Worsley's words, we are dealing, "not with **illness** but with **misfortune** and the prevention of misfortune" [1982:327].

Scheper-Hughes has a similar opinion when she says that "ours must be an anthropology of affliction and not simply an anthropology of medicine" [1990:196].

These issues were brought into focus for me as I began this dissertation research. The research was conducted in the state of Assam in north east India. My interest in this part of India stems from the relative lack of anthropological studies of the area. Audrey Cantlie [1984], one of the very few anthropologists working on the area, writes that anthropologically speaking, almost nothing is known of Assam, and no significant studies have been made of the Assamese-speaking inhabitants of the Brahmaputa valley. Being an anthropologist hailing from the Brahmaputra Valley, I am trying to fill that gap.

I went to Assam to explore the Kamrupi medical system, as referred to in the ethnographic and historical literature, and its practitioners, the *bej*. The ancient name of Assam is Kamarupa, and scholars [Choudhry 1959, Basu 1970] refer to the existence of Assamese manuscripts that describe the Kamrupi system and its practices. The origin of this tradition has been traced to the Kamrup-Kamakhya complex --- a specialized form of the Tantric cult of Hinduism, which was prevalent in Kamrupa [Choudhury 1959a, 1959b, Kakati 1948, Goswami 1975]. The temple of Kamakhya

in Assam still attracts hundreds of devotees everyday.

The Assamese dictionary defines *bej* as "a conventional physician (*chikitsak, vaidya*)", as well as "a faith healer [one who treats (*chikitsa kore*) by incantations and medicines]". As a native Assamese speaker I was aware that a practice, referred to as *bejali* and its practitioners, called *bej*, was a part of common discourse. The word *bej* has been in my vocabulary all my life. I knew that the *bej* were said to heal with incantations, and that there was a sense of ambivalence about them because they caused harm as well as healed. The talk of a Kamrupi medical system and its practitioners in history books and my own cultural knowledge of the existence of a category in Assamese called *bej* made me decide to study that medical system, through a study of its most identifiable aspect --- the *bej*.

PROBLEM OF DEFINITION. When I reached the field and tried to identify my subject of analysis, I ran into problems. Firstly, no one could relate to the term Kamrupi medical system. What the history books called the Kamrupi medical system was obviously just a generic phrase to refer to the "medical" practices of the area at an earlier period of time, when Assam was still known by its ancient name Kamarupa. Today, the name Kamrup only refers to a district in the state of Assam, and the identification of a pan-Assamese practice by that name holds no meaning. People

knew about *bejali* and *bej*, but had difficulty pinpointing who exactly a *bej* was. Associated with the term *bej* are other terms --- *ojhas*, *sadhaks*, *dhanantaris*, *vaidyas*. All these terms are conceptualized very loosely --- without rigid boundaries. There is a lack of clear cut definitions, and a great deal of overlapping in techniques. This resulted in disagreements among both the practitioners and the people when deciding who was to be termed what. The same person would be categorized as *bej* by one informant, and as a *sadhak* by another. I was often directed to individuals who were referred to as *bej*, but who did not see themselves as such. When asked to explain why they were not a *bej*, or what exactly did they call themselves, they were often unable to give a specific answer. Some said that they did some *bejali*, but were not *bej* as they did not practice it full-time. Others were quite displeased at the label, while several placed themselves in more than one category. These individuals were obviously practicing something --- their large clientele was proof enough --- but the boundaries were too blurred to allow any categorizations. As I looked for a medical system that was becoming more and more elusive, I faced the dilemma of being unable to identify a domain of analysis.

REDEFINITION OF DOMAINS. Facing this dilemma it became apparent to me that I had been presenting a priori categories

like the Kamrupi medical system to my informants, and expecting them to identify those categories according to my conceptualizations. I decided then, to let my informants elicit the domain of study for me and I found it in their accounts of what a *bej* does. A *bej* is someone who "does mantras" (chants incantations), or does things pertaining to *tantra-mantra* and *jhar phook*. Nobody could give an exact definition of what *tantra-mantra* was, but the general idea presented was that it deals with esoteric mantras which can make things happen. *Jhar-phook* (or *jora-phuka*) connotes curing through chanting mantras while waving a hand or a blade of grass in front of the person, and blowing mantras into a person or an object. But *bej* are not the only persons dealing with mantras. *Ojhas*, *dhanantaris*, *vaidyas*, all deal with mantras, and most are seen to do *tantra-mantra* and *jhar-phook* too. The Assamese-English dictionary [Chondrokanto Abhidhaan] defines an *ojha* as a *bej* who uses mantras to cure. *Dhanantari* is defined as a king who was an expert in medicine, while *vaidya* is defined as a *bej* or a physician. Jyoti Anglo-Assamese dictionary defines a healer as a *bej*, *vaidya*, physician, as well as a religious physician (*dhormiyo chikitsok*) --- a person who deals with *jora-phooka*, an *ojha*. Their definition of healing, besides the conventional one of curing or getting rid of illnesses, also includes getting rid of enmity and antagonism (*birodh aadi mitua*), to remedy, redress, retaliate (*protikaar kora*),

and/or to bring about good relations (*somil mil kora*).

What is apparent in all these definitions is the metamedical framework that Worsley [1982] talks about. The term healing goes beyond just physical ailments. As I talked to these practitioners, I found that they do more than just curing illnesses. Though there is confusion in terminology, the common factor underlying all these practitioners is the use of mantras, in one way or another. Some use mantras to identify and get rid of their client's problems, while others identify and get rid of problems created by mantras. Though the practitioners saw themselves as different from each other, their clients consulted them for relief from similar problems. The words of Suborno Das, a regular client of Ghono Kanto Goswami, one of the practitioners I talked to, can perhaps best illustrate why people seek the help of such practitioners. I had asked Suborno why she came to him, and she replied that she comes to him because human beings come across many dilemmas and problems (*samasyas*) as they go through life; he helps in relieving these dilemmas and problems. Other informants told me that life problems, illnesses and conflicts often occur because someone inflicts them on people, either deliberately or accidentally. These practitioners help people cope with such dilemmas, and often all that is required is counseling. Counsel can take the form of assistance with a variety of problems: finding the direction

in which a lost cow can be found; if a missing person will return home or not; where a missing person might be found; why a person is not getting married; if a person will ever get married, and if so, when; whether stolen goods will be found, and the identity of a thief; why a person is behaving in a particular way; will an expected promotion come through or not, and so on.

At other times, specific remedies are needed. Mantras are seen to bring peace to a household made unstable by conflicts between family members. Mantras can restore marital harmony. They can help an unmarried person to get married, and a childless woman to conceive. They can help in securing coveted promotions in the work place. They can get interfering in-laws out of the way. They can help in marriage negotiations as well as turn a person's mind away from an unsuitable liaison.

I found that informants had trouble defining *bej* because *bej* was too narrow a domain. The practice of *bejali* became a discernable domain only in the broader context of the practice of mantras. *Bejali* is only one form of practicing mantras, and what identified *bejali* as a practice, and *bej* as practitioners was the use of mantras. I therefore redefined my domain of study to focus on the cultural conceptualization of "doing mantras". The domain of "doing mantras" is not confined to the context of health and illness. What these practitioners are dealing with can



be termed as problematic life situations, misfortunes, or afflictions --- of which, illness and health form one dimension.

The most common way of looking at such practitioners in medical anthropology is in terms of their role as traditional healers. In this dissertation I look at practitioners or healers, but not from the constricting health and illness related perspective generally seen in medical anthropology. Assuming the importance of this common perspective, Arthur Kleinman, one of the prominent figures in medical anthropology is interested in developing a framework that makes clinical sense. He examines how clinical reality is differentially constituted in diverse social structural and cultural settings, and states that a "major research issue for medical anthropology should be to determine more precisely the universal and culture specific features of clinical activities" [Kleinman 1980: 375]. With this aim in view, he identifies five core clinical functions and five categories for comparing therapeutic relationships.

My perspective in this dissertation differs from Kleinman's in its focus. Though Kleinman states that illness and care are embedded in the social and cultural world, his emphasis is on health care and clinical reality. But as my data will show, illness and health are only one aspect of reality. In many societies, including Chinese

society that he studied, illness and health concerns are not rigidly differentiated from other sociocultural aspects. I therefore look at the cultural reality of problematic life situations rather than at the clinical reality of illness and health. Kleinman's interest is in facilitating practitioner-client interaction. My objective is to address broader cultural issues through these interactions.

Kleinman distinguishes between three overlapping sectors of health care systems --- popular, folk and professional, and sees each of these sectors having its own "culture" [1980:53]. He emphasizes the process of translation between the sectors "since it is crucial in the interaction between patients and practitioners, in the process of healing, and in the creation and resolution of communication problems that are 'endemic' to clinical care" [1980:53]. His focus on translation shows the existence of different "cultural" realities between the different sectors. He looks at how people move between such realities. The movement between various sectors of a society's health care system is also addressed by Janzen [1978], who describes and analyses the total medical scene of one region of Lower Zaire. He focuses on the management of illness and therapy by a set of close kin, who form the therapy management group [Janzen 1978:4]. Examining particular cases by following the strategies of this group as they move through various therapeutic consultations, he

arrives at the logic of therapeutic decision making. My data does not show the importance of a therapy management group. This is possibly because doing mantras is often an individual activity. Besides, I have also often seen practitioners ask clients to carry out particular remedies in secret to obtain their efficacy.

Kleinman's formulation of the sectors of health care systems helps in the conceptualization of plural medical systems. I see the practitioners I talked to as falling into the folk sector of his formulation. And as shown by him and Janzen, their clients also move between different sectors. But my emphasis is not on the process of movement and translation between sectors. Focusing on one particular practice in the folk sector, I examine the practitioners and clients in terms of their association with mantras, a cultural reality which cross cut various aspects of human life. Though not disregarding other realities, I emphasize one particular reality which is culturally seen as a way of dealing with suffering and look at the various kinds of problems addressed by it.

Doing mantras is only one way of dealing with suffering in South Asia. Nichter [1981], using data from South India shows how various forms of sociocultural distress are addressed by Ayurveda. Pugh [1984] shows how the "category of 'problem' or 'problematic situation' provides the general framework for presenting and discussing complaints and

dilemmas in the astrological context" [Pugh 1984:96]. Ewing [1984] examines the role of the Sufi Saints in addressing various forms of distress in Pakistan.

In the specific context of mantras, Carstairs and Kapur [1976] discuss three kinds of healers to whom the people of a South Indian community turn to when in pain, sickness and distress --- Vaidis, Mantarwadis and Patris. Vaidis, according to them are practitioners of Ayurveda. Mantarwadis use mantras to relieve distress while Patris have their own tutelary spirit whose power, when infused in amulets or a piece of thread alleviates the distress. More recently, Lambert [1992], discussing popular therapeutic rituals and discourses about the body in rural Rajasthan arrives at the cultural logic that orient Rajasthani folk therapeutics. She suggests that 'humoral' and 'prognostic' dimensions constitute two forms of this cultural logic. She states that these forms are not easily separable, since discourses and practices which concern matters of health are always interwoven in the context of everyday life and may be distinguished only tentatively for analytic purposes [Lambert 1992:1074]. She discusses what I call the practice of mantras as therapeutic rituals and examines them in terms of prognosis. She states that such rituals "are a form of therapeutic action concerned with the prognosis and developmental course, rather than the etiology, of sickness and with a more diffuse set of cultural assumptions about

its meanings and implications" [1992:1074]. Gellner's [1994] study of possession in Nepal addresses practitioners somewhat similar to those that I deal with, but his focus is on the spirit medium role. He suggests that this role tends to confirm stereotypes of gender and social lowness. As I see it, though mantras are a common way of dealing with problematic situations, and a lot of studies have talked about it and about practitioners dealing with it, I have not come across any studies in medical anthropology that has systematically analyzed mantras as a cultural practice.

Though I examine the practice of mantras in Assam, it needs to be kept in mind that this practice does not exist in isolation. Ayurveda, homeopathy, astrology, medical hospitals are all options people can, and do choose from. But a systematic study of movement between different healing traditions, and between different sectors of health care is yet to be done. In my experience, and as observed in my discussions with my informants, all these different traditions are used in conjunction with each other. Sometimes they are used simultaneously for the same or different problems, while at others they are all resorted to one after the other, especially for chronic or prolonged afflictions.

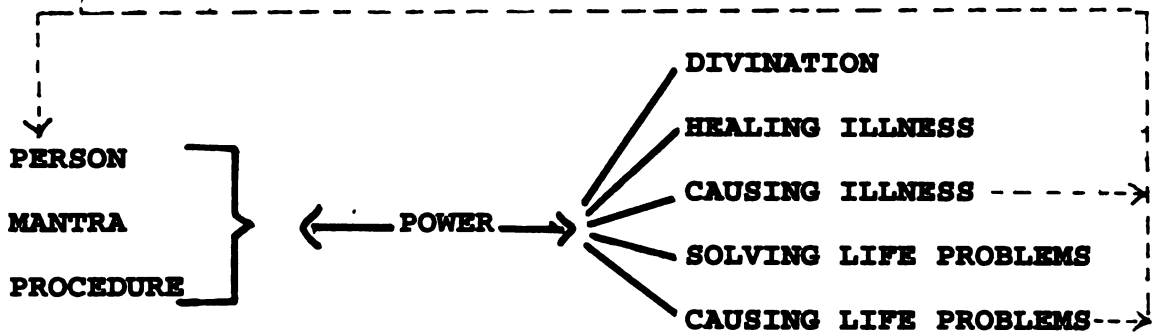
I explore the practice of "doing mantras" by focusing on the following three questions about it:

1. What is the nature of this practice,

2. What is the logic underlying this practice,
3. How influential is this practice in dictating the thoughts and actions of cultural actors.

Examining the nature of the practice, I found that doing mantras is a domain of culture that involves temporary associations between practitioners and clients. In this context, I define a practitioner as a person who has the knowledge of doing mantras and who uses this knowledge as a service to others. Clients are defined as the people who come to these practitioners to avail their services. The interaction between the practitioner and the client constitute the practice of mantras. The interaction is brought into play in times of problematic life situations. It helps in managing suffering --- the experiential dimension of affliction, misfortune, dilemmas, and crisis. These interactions are one way of understanding why suffering occurs and how they can be dealt with or prevented. The key element in these interactions is the use of mantras. The interactions are generally structured in terms of divination, diagnoses and remedies. Each of these three are based on certain assumptions about the nature of the world.

The second question stemmed as result of trying to understand why resorting to mantras in times of problems and difficulties made sense to the clients. I identified a cultural logic (Figure 1) that the right mantra, said by the



CULTURAL LOGIC OF "DOING MANTRAS"

Figure 1 CULTURAL LOGIC OF "DOING MANTRAS"

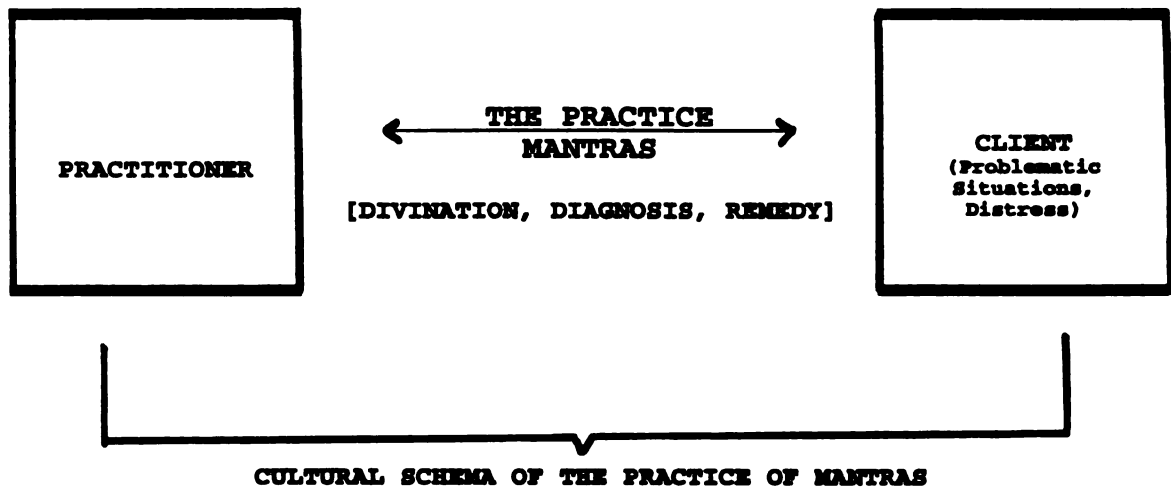


Figure 2 CULTURAL SCHEMA OF THE PRACTICE OF MANTRAS

right person, in the right way generates a power, which can be either positive or negative. This power can in turn be channeled by the practitioners for various purposes --- divination, healing illnesses, causing illnesses, solving life problems and causing life problems. The logic makes sense to the clients because it addresses indigenous conceptualizations of power, or *shakti*.

I find Susan Wadley's study [1975,1977] of the idea of *shakti* in Hinduism and in Indian society very insightful in this context. Wadley discusses two general connotations of the term *shakti*. In one sense "it implies the female energy of the universe, the energizing principle without which there would be no motion" [Wadley 1975:55], but it also means power in general. "*Shakti* carries the concepts of strength, energy, and vigor; but the strength is based on spiritual force, not physical force" [Wadley 1975:55]. Wadley found that the conceptualization of *shakti* is associated with the idea of the supernatural. Every being in the universe has *shakti*, some have more of it than others. Those with more *shakti* can be seen as supernatural beings for those with lesser powers. The term supernatural, according to her, is very difficult to define. There is no bounded supernatural domain, and a supernatural being may be a god, a demon or a ghost. The basic characteristic of any supernatural being, whether good or bad is in the *shakti* they control or represent.



Wadley states that as everything in the world embodies some power, everything in the universe is potentially a powerful being. She makes an analytical distinction between "unmarked", or less marked deities and "marked", or more marked deities. Unmarked deities are those which under all conditions are recognized as powerful beings, while marked deities are recognized as powerful beings only under some conditions in defined circumstances.

Wadley's discussion of *shakti* is very relevant in understanding the notions of power underlying the practice of mantras. As I discuss the various aspects of the practice in later chapters, I will draw out the implications of the ideas of supernatural, and of "marked" and "unmarked". Wadley uses the distinction between marked and unmarked not only in the context of deities, but also other power filled things, like wheat seeds, or a plough, which become filled with power in particular ritual contexts. In the context of doing mantras, this distinction helps in understanding why ordinary words and ordinary objects can be seen as potent items under particular circumstances.

The importance of understanding the logic behind people's actions cannot be overemphasized. Comaroff [1980] has stressed the need to look at the logic behind medical systems. Evans-Pritchard [1937] has looked at the cultural logic underlying Azande ideas of witchcraft. Bourdieu [1977, 1990] discusses the issue of logic at length. He

examines the schemes of thought, perception and action in terms of logical categories which make practices seem "reasonable" or "commonsense" [Bourdieu 1990]. He indicates how pervasive unconscious unarticulated cultural logics animate people's behavior. He suggests that there is a systematic character to 'habit' or 'custom' which interrelate many aspects of social life according to one underlying logic [Bourdieu 1977]. Most behavior, according to him, is motivated by very general dispositions, which are totalized in any culture into a **habitus**, defined as a system of durable, transposable dispositions. It consists of the central tendencies which give rise to and guide the infinitely varied ways in which people respond to one another in a social setting. The habitus is the unifying principle of practices of different domains, and cultural practices make sense because of the habitus. It is the product of early childhood experiences, unconsciously inculcated through socialization and continually modified by the individual's encounter with the world [Bourdieu 1977].

Though Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus is a helpful one, his idea of cultural logic is a little different from mine. He sees the underlying logic unifying different aspects of social life as a logic of oppositions. Using his Algerian data, he shows how the same sets of oppositions unconsciously organize various domains like the traditional calendar, spatial and symbolic arrangements of

the house, rituals and so on. But I see cultural logic more in terms of how people rationalize their actions rather than in terms of an unifying underlying principle. In the context of doing mantras, the practice makes sense because these actions are rationalized in a convincing manner. These rationalizations, though not often reflected upon by the actor, do not seem to be as unconscious as Bourdieu suggests. By defining practices as unconscious, practical schemes, opaque to their possessors [Bourdieu 1990:12], Bourdieu gives the sense of a social world consisting of agentless bodies blindly following the dictates of their cultural conditioning. As Comaroff states, "Bourdieu goes so far - - - that his actors seem doomed to reproduce their world mindlessly, without its contradictions leaving any mark on their awareness - - -" [Comaroff 1985:5].

This brings me to the third question I am asking about the practice of mantras. This question was raised in my mind by a personal perplexity, as I tried to understand why, in spite of growing up in the same cultural setting, these interactions were, in a sense, foreign to me. But at the same time, a lot of the ideas and cultural assumptions were not alien --- the notion of evil eye, wearing of amulets, or the role of planet configuration in determining outcomes were notions I knew very well. I had always taken mantras for granted and had never really looked into their role in everyday objects like amulets or even potentized water.

During my fieldwork trip in Assam, I also encountered a lot of people who, though belonging to the same cultural milieu, were both skeptical as well as disbelieving of the practice of mantras. This raised the issue of the role of culture in conditioning and influencing actors thoughts and action.

Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus is helpful, to a certain extent, in understanding this aspect in the context of doing mantras. Most of the clients operate on a tacit knowledge that mantras can do things. The creation and perpetuation of this knowledge can be related to that of the habitus. But his idea of the habitus assumes that people socialized in similar ways will have similar habitus, which in turn gets embodied within the actors, thus bringing about its own reproduction. He says that the past structures are incorporated into the present and unconsciously forgotten [1977]. This is similar to Berger and Luckman's [1967] idea of how past generations externalized ideas are internalized in future generations. The problem I see in their way of looking at cultural patterning is that they leave no room for individual choice. They help in explaining why broader cultural frames emerge, but they do not say why, within the same cultural setting, people do not always follow the same logic. Individual emotions, experiences, and ideas are disregarded in these analyses.

CULTURAL SCHEMAS. Sherry Ortner's conceptualization of cultural schemas provide a useful theoretical framework to analyze the three questions I am focusing on regarding the practice of mantras. Ortner sees cultural schemas as organized schemes "for enacting (culturally typical) relations and situations" [Ortner 1990:60]. These schemas shape human action in particular ways, endowing them with particular meanings, so that they unfold along more or less predictable lines. They are the symbolic frames through which people understand and respond to events [Ortner 1973,1990]. Calling them key scenarios in her earlier paper [Ortner 1973], she says that "Key scenarios, by prescribing certain culturally effective courses of action, embody and rest upon certain assumptions about the nature of reality" [Ortner 1973:1342].

Schieffelin also talks of a similar concept, which he calls a cultural scenario. He defines a cultural scenario as an event sequence, empirically recognizable in

the general procedure by which a people repeatedly approach and interpret diverse situations and carry them to similar types of resolution. The situations themselves need not be similar; it is the similar manner in which they are interpreted, carried forward, and resolved that is important [Schieffelin 1976:3].

He identifies a cultural scenario of reciprocity and opposition in Kaluli interaction. Ortner looks at hospitality as an cultural schema in Sherpa life [Ortner 1973]. She also applies the concept of cultural schemas to analyze the founding of Sherpa religious institutions

[Ortner 1990]. Geertz [1980] and Sahlins [1981] have used the notions of cultural patterns of action, cultural scenarios that seem to order the ways in which people play out social encounters [Ortner 1990]. These works form a part of a larger discussion in anthropology on the role of cultural structures in patterning human life. But for purposes of this dissertation, I am not going into those debates. I am only looking at Ortner's idea of cultural schemas. I would like to clarify at the onset that this is not a critique of her idea. I am using the idea as she presents it, to theoretically frame my analysis of the practice of mantras.

Analyzing the interaction between the practitioners and the clients in terms of a cultural schema, I examine the practice as a cultural means of interpreting, understanding and resolving different situations in similar ways --- in terms of mantras (Figure 2). Cultural schemas, according to Ortner [1990] are grounded in particular practices, and are the patterns or frames within which actors interpret and act upon their situation. They are found to be sensible, useful and logical ways of understanding reality. Ortner also says that there is a distance or loose fit between the actor and the schema, that is, between the actors' selves and their cultural models. Not all cultural models make sense to all actors at the same time, nor will two actors necessarily have the same relationship to the schema. Actors have some

amount of choice --- they can take the schema or leave it. Linkages made with the schema are temporary and contextual. A key factor in the cultural schema is the human agent. The schema shapes human action in particular ways by suggesting culturally typical ways of interpretation and enactment. Human action, in turn, is critical in shaping the schema. She also discusses the role of cultural schemas in ordering and freezing of cultural practices in particular narrative shape, by virtue of their representation in cultural stories --- myths, legends, folktales, histories, and so forth. Much of the time a cultural story will be just a story, with little relevance to a person's life. But at particular moments in an actor's life, the stories seem to make sense of a person's circumstances, and take on a new meaning. This is of crucial interest in the practice of mantras, as the most common way the practice is discussed in everyday life is in the form of stories. But sometimes, especially in times of crisis, these stories fit in with particular experiences. They then crystalize into something more than just a story, and help in interpreting what is going on.

These conceptualizations address the three questions I examine in this dissertation. The rest of the chapters are organized to analyze the cultural schema of the practice of mantras. Chapter 2 is a discussion of mantras in Indian studies and Indian culture. Chapter 3 is a general discussion of the ethnographic setting of Assam, especially

in the context of the practice of mantras. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examines the three components of the cultural schema -- the practitioners, the practice and the clients. Chapter 7 is the conclusion where I will pull together various issues addressed in the dissertation.

METHODOLOGY. This research is based on field study conducted in the Indian state of Assam, focusing on the Brahmaputra valley. In this dissertation, I look at the Brahmaputra Valley as a geographical area, and not specifically at the Assamese community, as "doing mantras" is not just an Assamese practice. Hence, though the majority of my informants are Assamese, there are also Bengalis, Biharis, Marwaris, Nepalis, and others from whom I received information. In spite of mantras being a part of Hindu religion, I also met many clients who were Muslims.

The data was obtained from three major sources. Discussions were conducted with informants in different parts of Assam to identify *bej*, to redefine my domain, and to get at local conceptualizations of the practice of mantras. I brought up the topic of doing mantras with whoever I talked to --- in market places, at social functions, in temples, and with friends, acquaintances and total strangers. I found people very eager to share whatever knowledge they had on the topic with me. Most of the information I got was in the form of stories. People



told me their own experiences as well as other's experience with doing mantras. Many of these informants were crucial in getting me acquainted with the key practitioners I have based the research on. I conducted extensive unstructured interviews with practitioners and their clients. Many of the practitioners allowed me into their sessions with clients. This constituted the second source of data I have. I sat through the sessions and observed the practitioner client interactions as they went on. Besides enabling me to understand the structure of the interactions, these observations also allowed me get information on the kinds of problems clients bring to the practitioners.

The third kind of data I have is from secondary sources. The Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Assam has a large collection of local level mantra texts, which I consulted. All the practitioners I talked to had their own texts but most of them were reluctant to let me handle them. Some of the practitioners told me that they had to perform rituals on their texts at a regular basis, and hence could not let me touch them for fear of polluting the mantras and making them impotent. The collection at the Antiquarian Studies library was therefore very helpful. I also looked at various kinds of literature, both popular and scholarly, on the Kamrupi tradition, Ayurveda, Tantrism and other topics relevant to my research.

All the clients and practitioners have been given

pseudonyms to maintain their privacy. As far as possible, I have tried to avoid naming small places like villages and towns for the same reason. One difficulty I faced in conducting the research was the political situation in Assam during the early nineties, when this research was conducted. The period during which I was there was marked by large scale terrorism, which made it unsafe for me to go to remote rural areas. A major part of the research was therefore done around Guwahati and a few larger towns, though I did manage to go to a few villages around those towns.

## CHAPTER 2

### MANTRAS IN GENERAL

The purpose of this chapter is to give a brief idea about mantras, their sources, how they have been perceived by scholars and how I have looked at them for purposes of this dissertation.

Mantras are a combination of potent words, syllables and sound units with a specific pronunciation and intonation. They are seen to be efficacious both as soteric devices as well as to gain control over the cosmos. Mantras have been seen, especially by western scholars, as "a common and vital, but troubling feature of Indian culture that more often has been taken for granted than made the object of sympathetic and systematic reflection" [Alper 1991a:1]. According to Alper the possibility of the successful use of mantras is a common part of the Indian mentality. Yet, the place of mantra, though analogous, is not identical to the place of prayer in the west. Alper goes on to say that according to the standards of modern science, mantras are irrational. Mantrasastra (the science of mantras) thus "shares neither the prestige of modernity nor the lingering prestige of traditional Western religion. Perhaps for this reason it has fallen through the cracks of Indology" [Alper 1991a:3]. This dissertation addresses this neglected part

of Indology.

As Alper [1991a] puts it, mantras are protean as a tool of human intentionality. They are used in a variety of contexts, for a plethora of purposes, with a multitude of informing emotions, and by the widest variety of individuals. The (Indian) tradition takes for granted that mantras are powerful, they are not arbitrary, nor are they interchangeable. Each of them is designed for a particular task, which will achieve a particular end only when it is used in a particular manner [Alper 1991a:6]. One of the main reasons mantras are taken for granted is because they stem from religious scriptures.

#### TEXTUAL SOURCES OF MANTRAS.

The two main sources of mantras are the Vedas and the Tantras. Along with them are a host of regional texts, which though often considered "lower" in status, are extensively used.

The Vedas. Very simplistically speaking, the Vedas are a collection of verses, hymns and formulas. The primary scriptures of Hinduism, the Vedas (from the root *vid*, 'know') are revered as *apaurusheya* (not of human origin), and are honored by epithets reserved for the gods, such as eternal, infallible, indestructible [Walker 1968b:556]. They were composed in an archaic form of Sanskrit, and handed down

orally through a succession of teachers, being progressively expanded, and suffering changes and variations as the canon grew [Walker 1968b:558].

There are four of these collections, together called the Vedic Samhitas --- The Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda, and the Atharvaveda. Mantras constitute the main body of the samhita compilations and are the most ancient part of the vedas [Walker 1968b:557]. The Rig Veda is regarded as the most important of the four vedas and is often seen as *the* Veda. It is a collection of prayers, praise, and invocation to the gods, mostly in metrical form. It was composed sometime between 1500 B.C and 900 B.C. The Yajur Veda, presumed to be composed between 700 B.C and 900 B.C, is compiled mainly from the Rig Vedic hymns, but is mostly in prose. It is a collection of formulas consisting of the rules and methods for the performance of sacrifice (*yagya*). The third Veda, the Sama Veda, is also presumed to have been composed between 700 B.C and 300 B.C, and it consists of hymns, most of which are from the Rig Veda. It suggests the melodies in which these hymns are to be sung, by showing the prolongation, repetition, and interpolation of syllables required in the singing.

The Atharvaveda is different from the other three, in that it consists largely of spells and incantations. It is concerned less with rituals and more with the problems of ordinary life [Embree 1972]. Walker describes the nature

and range of Atharvavedic mantras as such,

The Atharvaveda embodies the magical formulary of ancient India, and much of it is devoted to spells, incantations, chants and charms. In general the charms and spells are divided into two classes: they are either *bheshajani*, which are of a medicinal, healing and peaceful nature, dealing with cures and herbs for treating fever, leprosy, jaundice, dropsy and other diseases; this class includes prayers for successful childbirth, love spells, charms for fecundity, for the recovery of virility, hymns for the birth of sons, and a quaint chant to put the household to sleep while the lover steals into the girl's home at night. Or else they belong to the *abhichara* class, which are of a bewitching and malevolent nature; these include spells for producing diseases and bringing ill-luck to enemies. Among them is a spell that a woman may use against her rival to make her remain a spinster; another spell is meant to destroy a man's virility and so forth. There are hymns to serpents and demons, and incantations replete with witchcraft, sorcery and black magic [Walker 1968a:95].

Ayurveda, the traditional Indian science of health, was closely associated with the Atharvaveda. The Atharvaveda presents an entire pantheon of demons who bring about bodily distress as well as the mantras needed to expel these demons so as to cure the affected person. The healer chants mantras, often by waving or stroking certain plants over the patient, along with preparing and using medicines, which have often been consecrated by mantras [Zysk 1991]. Mantras were the key component of the healing rite. It appears that both Ayurveda and what I call the "practice of mantras" had roots in the Atharvaveda, but at some point during its development, Ayurveda severed connections with mantras and assumed a more "rational" form. Tracing the early Ayurvedic doctrinal shift from a magico-religious approach

to medicine to a more empirico-rational one, dating from around the Christian era, Zysk [1991] nevertheless states that later medical evidence demonstrates that magical medicine did not completely vanish vis-a'-vis the developing Ayurveda. A reverence for the older medical tradition of the Atharvaveda was still advocated in the older Ayurvedic treatises. The professors of the Assam Ayurvedic College whom I talked to also acknowledged the mention of the use of mantras in the texts, but, for professional reasons, their curriculum now includes basic know-how of biomedical techniques and not these ancient ideas. Zysk [1991:126] groups the employment of mantras in the Ayurvedic texts under the following categories: (1) the treatment of swellings and tumors and of wounds and sores (*sotha, vrana*); (2) the treatment of poison (*visa*); (3) the treatment of mental disorders (*unmatta, apasmara*); (4) the treatment of fever (*jvara*), and (5) the collection and preparation of certain medicines [Zysk 1991:130]. Though not treated by mantras in Ayurveda anymore, these categories, among others, are still used by most of the practitioners "doing mantras", along with the technique of stroking a hand, a blade of grass or some other object over the patient (*jora, jhar*). The mantras of the Atharvaveda are therefore significant in the context of doing mantras, one part of which involves the treatment of various kinds of illnesses.

Originating with the Vedas, the term mantra, in the

course of time came to be applied to any sacred verse from the scriptures, to spells, cryptic syllables, and "words of power", based on the magical properties believed to be inherent in sounds [Walker 1968b:25].

The Tantras. The term "Tantra" has a variety of meanings. In a broad sense, any system or thought structure was known as Tantra [Bhattacharyya 1982:2]. But it also denotes a loose set of doctrines and practices, followed by "certain left-hand sects of Hindus and Buddhists" [Walker 1968b:482], and often seen as contra-Vedic. The canon of *Tantrism* is believed to have been revealed by the god Shiva to his wife Parvati and a large part of its scriptures are in the form of dialogues between Shiva and Parvati. There is really no single Tantric ideology, neither is there a systematic philosophy [Alper 1991b:395]. There is an abundant Tantric literature, both in Sanskrit and in some regional languages, most of them still untranslated. Some of the Tantras are extremely obscure since the basic teachings were communicated orally and hence only partially written down at later times [Walker 1968b]. In general, the topics treated by Tantric doctrines are, (1) the creation of the universe (*srishti*), (2) its dissolution (*pralaya*), (3) worship of deities, (4) spiritual exercises, (5) rituals, (6) magical powers, and (7) meditation [Walker 1968b:483].

My interest for purposes of this dissertation is in the



association of "magical powers" with tantric practices. To a significant degree, what we call magical is integral to the Tantric spiritual exercises (*sadhana*) as such [Alper 1991b:411]. But some texts (*Indrajala Tantra, Tantrasaar, Kamaratna Tantra, Kakshaputa, Kothulvidya, Kotukrahasya, Dattareyantra, Bhutadamaratantra*) are more magical than others [Kakar 1982, Goudriaan and Gupta 1981, Alper 1991b]. The magical dimension of Tantra is seen in the performance of the Tantric *Satkarmas*, the "six acts of 'magic', whereby the master of mantra and meditation controls the cosmos in all its threatening diversity" [Alper 1991b:410]. These six acts are:

Maron (Liquidation) the power to kill or maim by mantras.

Santi (Pacification) the power to bring peace and happiness, cure illness, get rid of evil influences of planets, bad mantras, spirits.

Vasikaran (Subjugation) the power to infatuate, bewitch men, women, gods, and animals so as to have one's desires fulfilled by them, cause one to be subservient and controlled by another.

Stambhan (Immobilization) the power to paralyze, stop others' actions, prevent the effects of others' actions, even when they are already operating.

Ucchatan (Eradication) the power to torment one with pain, shame or material discomfort, make enemies flee in shame and disgrace, power to explode houses and dwellings.

Vidvesana (Sowing Dissension) The power of separating friends or relatives, creating ill-feeling between two parties (and thereby separating them from one another). [Alper 1991b, Chattopadhyaya 1978, Bharati 1965, Kakar 1982, Banerji 1978].

These Six Acts are performed through mantras. Used along with mantras are *yantras*, which are mystical diagrams possessing immense power when used in a properly directed way. These diagrams are of two kinds, one for wearing on the neck, arm or lock of hair as an amulet and the other, taken as identical with the deity for the purpose of worship [Chattopadhyaya 1978:80]. *Yantras*, when used for amulets often have the person's name written on it, which is then made potent by chanting mantras over it. The Tantric *satkarmas* are achieved both by mantras as well as by a combination of mantras and *yantras*. There are countless numbers of mantras and *yantras*, and it is impossible for a person to have efficacious knowledge of all of them. The practitioner chooses the mantras and *yantras* he uses according to his own knowledge ( which is usually based on the knowledge of his *guru* or *gurus* ) and the person's symptoms and needs.

For both spiritual as well as non-spiritual (magical) purposes, "mantra is the chief instrument of Tantrism" [Bharati 1965:101]. Mantra is so central to Tantrism, that *tantrics* (followers of Tantrism) are often called *mantriks*

and Tantra itself is seen as synonymous with *mantra-shastra* (the science of mantras) [Kakar 1982:171]. It is for this reason that my informants often used the terms "doing mantras" and "doing tantra-mantra" synonymously. A mantra is primarily a sequence of sound units (*sphotas*) with a characteristic pronunciation and intonation which the disciple normally learns from his *guru* (teacher). The major constituent of a mantra is a combination of *bijas* (seeds). A *bija* is a syllable without apparent meaning [Kakar 1982:172]. H.V Glasenapp states that such unintelligible syllables ( *om, hum, khat, phat* ) were known and metaphysical meaning ascribed to them since the later part of the Vedic period. But Tantric literature increased the number of these syllables to an immeasurable degree and "established quasi-scientific methods about how to combine these syllables either with one another or with meaningful words in order to unfold their dormant powers" [Glasenapp 1940: cf. Bharati 1965:109]. Mantric utterance is always methodical, and can never be both casual and effective. Mantras will be invalid, and not work if improperly launched. But still, the Hindu Tantras do not provide a single list or preliminaries that are either necessary or sufficient for the successful use of a mantra [Alper 1991b:423]. This is perhaps because the Hindu tradition is primarily an oral tradition [Alper 1991 a,b, Coburn 1984, Staal 1979]. The authoritative works of the Indian

traditions, though having been written down or printed, remain "oral" in character [Alper 1991b:355]. The higher status given to memory or the sound of recitation in comparison to writing [Staal 1979, Coburn 1984] can be seen in the importance given to the role of the *guru* (teacher), which I will discuss later on in the chapter.

Local Level Mantra Texts. Besides the pan-Indian, purely Vedic and Tantric texts, various local level texts also exist and are extensively used by both Tantric and non-tantric practitioners. The mantras are mostly in regional languages, though sometimes mixed in with Sanskrit words or *bija* (seed) mantras. The literature on such texts is very scanty. The texts I am interested in, in the context of Assam are those which are broadly called *bejali puthis* (*bejali* texts) or simply *mantra puthis* (mantra texts). They are unbound manuscripts, hand written in an archaic form of Assamese, usually on bark (*sanchi paat*), or on pieces of paper. They are normally individual or family possessions, and hence, hardly ever published. Most of the time, they are the books used by a practitioner, which he then passes on to his disciple or successor before he dies. A lot of these texts are highly esoteric and, especially in the case of texts having harmful mantras, are kept extremely secret. I was told by my informants that a lot of these personal manuscripts are being lost forever, because if a person died

without teaching his esoteric knowledge to a successor, then his books are thrown in the river. Coburn [1984:444] also talks about "the widespread custom that if a teacher does not find a student worthy of inheriting his manuscripts, he will, in his old age, simply discard them by throwing them into a river --- (as) living documents, unvivified by personal relationships are lifeless".

There has been no studies on these personal or family manuscripts, especially in Assam. The Historical and Antiquarian Studies department of the Government of Assam has been trying to collect such manuscripts and retrieve them before they are destroyed or allowed to rot and disintegrate by the families who own them. They now have a collection of about 150 manuscripts. Many of them are already unreadable -- being moth eaten, full of mold, the writing washed away in rain or in floods, or just torn or broken (in the case of those written on bark). They range in size from 14 inches by 6 inches to 4 inches by 2 inches, the smallest ones easily fitting into the palm of a hand. Their contents range from twenty-five to as low as five folios. An analysis of these manuscripts is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but looking through them, I found that many of them seemed to be a single mantra or a collection of mantras for specific purposes (curing snake bites, getting rid of spirits and ghosts, getting rid of pain, fever, swelling, or effects of other's bad mantras,

easing childbirth etc). A practitioner owns several of these manuscripts, thus giving him a range of mantras for a range of purposes. Different practitioners use different mantras for the same purpose, and there were very few mantras in the manuscripts that were identical. Only about five or six of these *bejali puthis* have been published, and there is the general idea that the mantras lose their efficacy with publication. This is because of the feeling that the mantras will not be effective without a guru to teach them as well as the notion that publication and the ensuing commercialization will destroy the power inherent in the mantra.

Though I have distinguished between three sources of mantras --- Vedic, Tantric and local, it needs to be kept in mind that these are not clear cut distinctions. The history of the present form of mantras has been very eclectic. Alper states that mantras are quintessentially Vedic [1991b: 332], but, for the most part, mantras of the past millennium have been tantric [1991b:392]. The Tantras have been drawing their material from Vedic sources with their own modifications [Chattopadhyaya 1978]. At the same time, side by side with Sanskrit mantras, vernacular mantras were also developing under Tantric influence [Chattopadhyaya 1978:73]. Alper states that it is impossible to separate Vedic, Tantric and folk elements, and that

any attempt to draw fixed external or internal boundaries is bound to fail. For at least a part of

the millennium, all of Hinduism has been Tantrified. Similarly, if to a lesser extent, all of Hinduism is arguably Vedicized. Yet, the bulk of mantras were surely uttered in contexts that were not explicitly Vedic or Tantric -- [Alper 1991b:358].

The eclecticism is very noticeable in the use of mantras by practitioners. The practitioners I talked to use a combination of Vedic, Tantric and local mantras. The mantras they use to solve their client's problems are selected in terms of their efficacy and not in terms of their source. The clients too do not bother about the source of the mantras. As far as they are concerned, what gives the mantra its power is the fact that it is the right mantra, recited by a person who has the knowledge and the power to use it in the exact way. The demand for exactness --- in matching words, time and action, in pronunciation, stress and rhythm --- is what Alper [1991b:337] sees as one of the major continuities between Vedic, Tantric, and popular use of mantras.

Another major requirement in the effective use of mantras, whether Vedic, Tantric or local is the need of a *guru* (teacher) in learning the mantra. Bharati [1965:186] defines a *guru* as a person who is capable of conferring initiation (*diksa*) on another person, and who has himself received initiation from one or more *gurus*. The most important aspect of *diksa* is that "its content must be a mantra of some sort or that a mantra must be a part of its content" [Bharati 1965:185]. The *guru*, through the process

of initiation discloses the mantra to his disciple (*sishya*). The *guru* holds the key to the efficacy of mantras [Alper 1991]. A mantra, when taken from a competent *guru* is always supposed to have a potency behind it [Chattopadhyaya 1978]. Even though the mantra may be obtainable in written form, it will be effective only when the *guru* teaches the exact way of saying and using it. A mantra lying in the pages of a manuscript or book has no force or power behind it; it is just a string of words put together. It is the *guru*, who makes the mantra into a living force, and initiates the disciple with it [Chattopadhyaya 1978]. An amount of secrecy is also involved in the disclosure of mantras, as a mantra loses its efficacy if revealed to a non-initiate [Bharati 1965:118]. It is usually the *guru* who decides which mantra is suitable for which disciple. As different *gurus* have different "specialties", it is normal for an avid pupil to have a succession of *gurus* [Alper 1991b:413]. The *guru-sishya* (teacher-disciple) relationship is an extremely important one in the practice of mantras, and both the *guru* and the *sishya* often test each other before sealing the relationship with an initiation.

#### MANTRAS IN THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT.

Various definitions of mantras have been put forth by scholars, ranging into different degrees of complexity. In fact, most earlier studies started with the authors'



definition of what a mantra is. Alper [1991a:6] has suggested that debating what really counts as a mantra and what defines it as a mantra is unlikely to yield interesting results. Instead, it would be more worthwhile to look at the kinds of situations in which mantras have been characteristically used. I agree with this suggestion, and instead of going into the question of definition, I am only laying down one scholar's [Gonda] sense of what mantras are. Instead of one over arching definition, Gonda moves through a series of definitions. Focusing on the Veda, he defines mantras as a general name for formulas, verses or sequences of words in prose which contain praise, and which are believed to have magical, religious or spiritual efficacy, are recited, muttered, or sung in the Vedic ritual and which are collected in the methodically arranged corpora of Vedic texts. His second definition sees mantra as a consultation, resolution, advice, counsel, design, plan, secret. His third definition is in terms of classical (popular) Hinduism, where he sees mantras as covering also all potent (so-called magical) forms of texts, words, sounds, letters, which bring good luck to those who know or possess them, and evil to their enemies. His fourth definition is in the Tantric context and defines mantra as a power (*shakti*) in the form of formulated and expressed thought [Gonda1975, cf Alper 1991a]. I find this four-fold sense of mantras useful for my purposes, as they reflect the sense of mantras that

my informants have.

Two common approaches to the study of mantras can be discerned --- mantras as instances of language, and mantras in terms of their role in religious transfiguration [Alper 1991a]. Without denying the importance of a linguistic approach<sup>1</sup> to mantras, I also appreciate Padoux [1991] warning that one should not lose sight of the fact that mantras are a form of speech or sound within an Indian context, are a part of a certain type of practice, functioning within the ideology of Hinduism, and within an anthropological framework. Mantras have "meaning" only within this universe of discourse. It is therefore not a case of speech or language in general, "still less of language as we conceive or use it" [Padoux 1991:300].

As religious instruments, mantras have often been examined in terms of their role in attaining salvation. But besides this philosophical aspect, mantras are also used in the context of everyday life. Alper [1991a] therefore distinguishes between quotidian and redemptive mantras. By quotidian he designates "purposes intended to cope with the multitudinous dilemmas of daily life" [8], such as "the discovery of lost cattle, the cure of impotence or barrenness, a passing grade in a university examination" [7]. By redemptive, he designates "purposes informed by the desire to cope with the human condition as a whole" [8], such as escape from the cycle of birth and rebirth, the

diminution of the effect of bad karma, or transportation to the realm of the god to whom one is devoted [7]. He does not see these as absolute distinctions, but as a continuum, with the quotidian intention of mantras at one pole and the redemptive at the other. Padoux [1991], while acknowledging the fundamentality of the redemptive aspect of mantras, also remarks that "only a minority of mantras are redemptive. Mantras first and foremost are words and sounds of power for ritual use and only secondarily, if centrally, soteric devices" [308]. He goes on to say that mantras in India are used much more often to gain supernatural powers or to produce "magical" effects than for redemptive purposes. Observing the comparative lack of studies on the practical use of mantras, he sees it as a field still open for research. He emphasizes that besides their textual and historical analysis, mantras also need to be "viewed as a living practice, in India and, perhaps, elsewhere" [313]. In a previous article [1978, cf Alper1991a] he had called for the need to see how mantras "function" and what can be said about the mantric phenomenon as a type of human praxis and discourse. A similar suggestion is made by Alper when he says that it is equally important to collate the examination of texts with anthropological field reports that examine how mantras, in fact, are used [Alper 1991a: 9 footnote]. This dissertation looks at how mantras are used to deal with the practical considerations of life.

Mantras are used in everyday life in two ways.

Mandelbaum [1966] distinguishes between "pragmatic" and "transcendental" aspects of religion, which he suggests are expressed in two different "complexes" of religious beliefs and practice. The "transcendental" complex

is used to ensure long term welfare of society, to explain and help maintain village institutions, to guarantee the proper transition of individuals from stage to stage within the institutions. It is concerned with the ultimate purposes of man. The pragmatic complex, by contrast, is used for local exigencies, for personal benefit, for individual welfare --- (such as) the curing of a sick child, the location of a lost valuable, victory in a local tussle [Mandelbaum 1966].

This dissertation addresses only what Mandelbaum calls the pragmatic complex. Babb [1975] sees the difference between the two in terms of hierarchy ---- the practitioners of the transcendental complex are Brahmins, and they worship higher level pan-Indian deities. The practitioners of the pragmatic complex are of lower caste and they deal with lesser, local level deities. This seems to be in contrast with my experience in Assam, where, though the transcendental complex is totally in the hands of the Brahmins, the practitioners of the pragmatic complex are both Brahmins and non-Brahmins. In fact, I was told that though there is no caste distinction in "doing mantras", at least till the recent past most of this knowledge existed only in Brahmin families, and was circulated only within the higher castes. The main distinction I see between the two complexes in the

context of mantras is in the purposes for which the innate power of mantras are used in everyday life. This power of mantras is harnessed by knowledgeable persons for different purposes --- as a tool for meditation or for the attainment of higher spiritual goals, to conduct rituals of worship (*pujas*), or to manipulate the world. *Pujas* are prescribed rituals of worship and homage to the gods, conducted by a Brahmin priest, usually on behalf of a worshiper. They are performed at various times and for various reasons, including in times of crisis and life transitions like birthdays and weddings. The chief purpose of a *puja* is to revere the god or goddess and seek their blessings. The priest has the power to conduct the ritual by virtue of his caste; he does not necessarily need to develop any personal powers.

In doing mantras, the personal power of the practitioner, combined with the power of the mantra is used for pragmatic purposes --- to diagnose and remedy a person's situation. The supernatural power is not only confined to gods and goddesses, but also includes the power of spirits or ghosts. It is contextual --- mantras are resorted to only in times of crisis, fear or worry. Moreover, it is personalized, individualized, and at a more one to one level. Though used in both *pujas* and in doing mantras, in the former, mantras are a part of an ritual, while in the later, chanting the mantra **is** the ritual. Doing mantras

takes off from a religious base, but then assumes a form that in western terms is generally seen as magic.

The western distinction between religion and magic [Grimes 1985, Alper 1991b] has resulted in much of what Alper calls quotidian mantras, as being seen as "magic", both by western and non-western scholars. The term "magic" is often used to describe practices that are at once popular and practical, in spite of the fact that practical concerns accounts for the overwhelming popularity of mantric utterance in traditional India [Alper 1991b]. The Atharvaveda has been considered "magical" in contrast to the other three Vedas [Alper 1991b, Bharati 1965, Banerji 1978, Chattopadhyaya 1978], and so are the tantric *satkarmas* [Bharati 1965, Goudriaan 1978, Kakar 1982, Chattopadhyaya 1978, Bhattacharyya 1982, Banerjee 1978]. Both the Atharvaveda and Tantrism has been looked down upon because of the "magical" aspect in them. At the local level, vernacular "magical" mantras are considered to be of a lower level, though they may often be the most popular mantras in use. Alper [1991b:348] argues for the impossibility and inadvisability of trying to separate religious and magical strands in the study of mantras. As stated by Padoux, mantras usually have both redemptive and magical effects. With mantras we are at once in the world of spiritual experience and in that of supernatural or "magical" powers [Padoux 1991:310].

Both Alper and Padoux also underscore the need for studies of regional mantric traditions. They both [Alper 1991b:374,403; Padoux 1991:313] see Assam as an interesting case in this context, because of its importance in the tantric tradition. It is particularly in eastern India that Tantrism reached its culmination, and most major works of this philosophy are of eastern origin [Walker 1968b:482]. Assam is one of the main regions of Tantric predominance, and the temple of Kamakhya is one of the main *pithas* (seats, centers of Tantric worship). Kamarupa, the ancient name of Assam is prominent in most Tantric texts [Bharati 1965, Chattopadhyaya 1978, Banerji 1978, Bhattacharyya 1982, Kakar 1982, Walker 1968b]. The *Kamaratna Tantra*, a widely known magical Tantra, dealing with the Tantric *Satkarmas* was written in Assamese. Connected with the Tantric influence is the reputation of Kamarupa as the land of magic. Walker [1968a:86] states that "Kamarupa was known from early days as the home of black magic and witchcraft, and several Tantric charms and spells in ancient Assamese still survive". But nobody has really studied the "magical" dimension of Assam. This dissertation is a step in that direction.

## NOTES

1. In anthropology, Tambiah's [1985] article, *The Magical Power of Words* uses a linguistic approach to analyze ritual words (including mantras), spells and magical language. But this piece of work was not very relevant to my present purposes as I am trying to get away from the study of mantras as instances of language.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

The locus of this research is the Brahmaputra valley in North East India, which forms a major portion of the present Indian state of Assam. For centuries Assam remained outside the bounds of the Indian mainstream, largely due to its peripheral geographical location and its climate, which seemed unhealthy to outsiders. The region receives a high amount of rain, its neighboring Khasi and Jaintia Hills having the distinction of getting the highest rainfall in the world. Being a narrow valley, the six hundred kilometers of the Assam plains was, and still is, prone to high floods, with its accompanying health hazards. The tropical climate of the region gives the area many forests, which abound with wild animals and snakes. The Mughal empire, which took over almost all of India could not incorporate Assam into its fold. One of the two most common legends still circulating among people about the reasons for this is that the advancing Mughal army could not tolerate the malaria infested jungles of Assam, and had therefore to leave. The second story is that they were defenseless against the powerful Assamese *bej* who caused the entire army, including the general, to get so ill that they were forced to retreat.

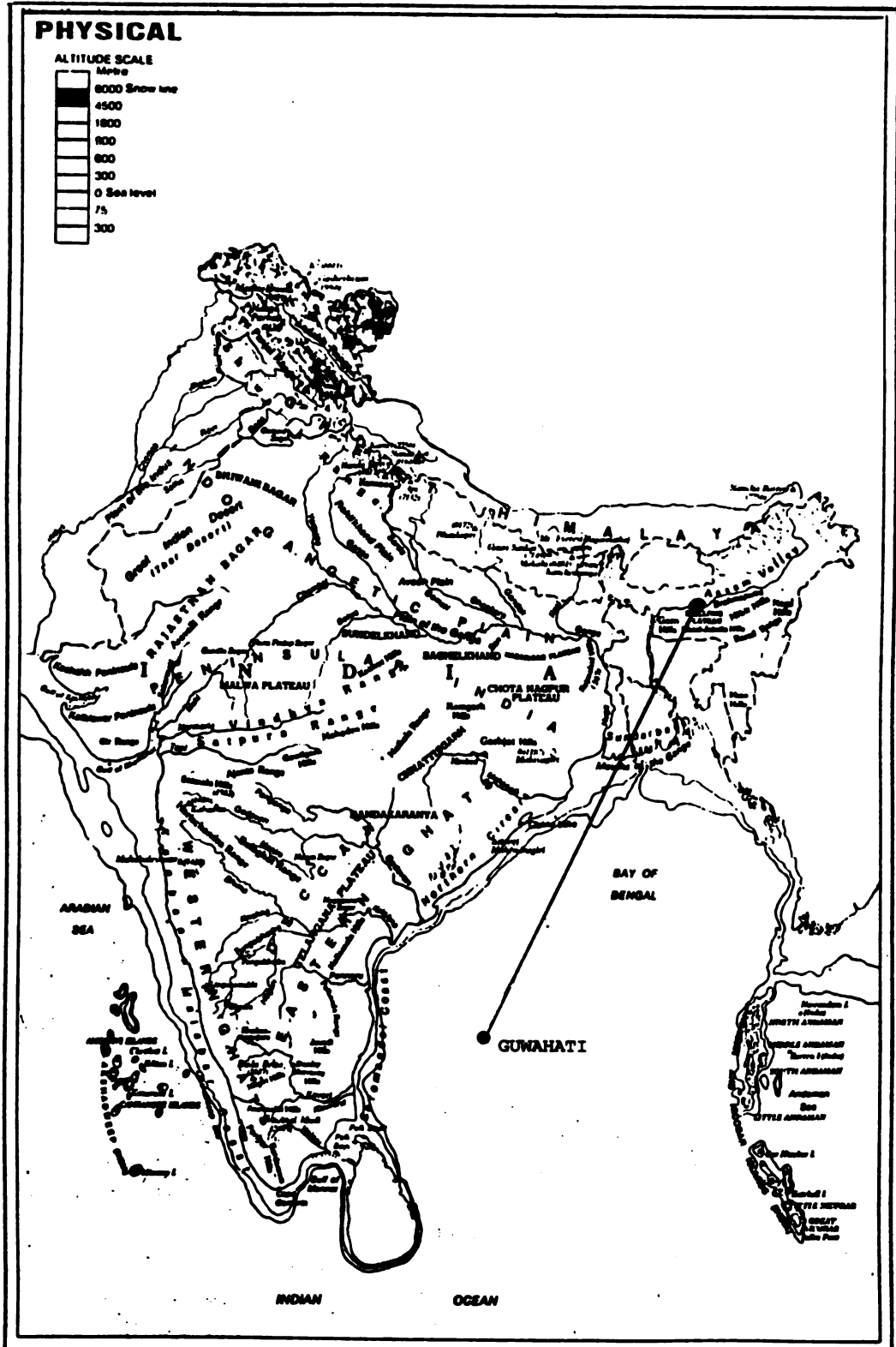


Figure 3 MAP OF INDIA

In ancient India this area was known as Kamarupa. It is difficult to determine when the Brahmaputra valley came to be called Assam. The most common explanation is that the term Asam, Assam, or Ahom was originally applied to a Shan tribe who migrated from upper Burma at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and gradually extended throughout the Brahmaputra Valley. According to the Ahom tradition, the name meant "unequaled" or "peerless" and was applied to them in admiration by the local tribes [Gait 1906:241]. The Ahoms did not impose their religion and culture on their subjects. Rather, they took to Hinduism in the course of time, including Tantric Hinduism. The Assamese society gave the Ahoms a distinct place as a caste, neither very highly placed, nor in the lowest categories.

Assam in the present times has an area of 78,523 sq. kilometers. The state is primarily agricultural, with very little industrial development even in the present times. Conceptually, the Brahmaputra valley is divided into Upper Assam and Lower Assam. This distinction is based on the location of a place in the upper part (*ujoni*) or the lower part (*namoni*) of the river Brahmaputra. There is some variation in customs and dialect between the two, but the differences are not significant for purposes of this dissertation. There is no clear cut division between the two segments, but the conceptual transition from Upper to

Lower Assam is made somewhere between Guwahati and the town of Nowgong, located about 75 miles east of Guwahati.

Guwahati, the largest city in the region is generally seen to be a part of Lower Assam, though in recent times, people from all over Assam have settled in this city.

The state had a population of nearly twenty million in the 1981 census [Das 1982:1]. Besides the Assamese, the population consists of various tribal groups who surround the state, as well as Bengalis, Nepalis, Marwaris, and other outsiders. During and after the British rule, several million people migrated to Assam from other areas. They belonged to three main groups --- hindu Bengalis, who came to take the administrative posts created by the British, and to work in the railway industry, the tea garden workers who came mostly from the tribal areas of central India, and Bengali muslim immigrants from East Bengal, the area currently known as Bangladesh [Das 1982]. The last two decades have been turbulent times in Assam, due to massive uprisings of indigenous Assamese, who fear themselves becoming a minority in their own state.

(Hinduism is the dominant religion of the state. The region is a stronghold of Tantrism,) especially the Sakta school (a way of thinking in which reality is ultimately identified with a goddess) of Hindu Tantrics, evidence of which can be seen in the numerous temples dedicated to various manifestations of the goddess Durga. A major

festival of the state is the four day Durga Puja celebrations in autumn, marked by at least a four day long holiday, educational institutions closing down for three weeks. The Sakta aspect has been completely ignored by Audrey Cantlie [1984], who, in her ethnography of an Assamese village only focusses on Assamese Vaishnavism (followers of god Vishnu). She states that

The majority of Assamese Hindus follow the path of devotion based on the teachings of the Bhagavata Purana which is associated in the state with the name of a fifteenth century preacher called Shankardeva. Today Shankardeva is venerated among Assamese Vaishnavas not only as the founder of their faith and an incarnation of Vishnu but as the originator of all that is peculiarly Assamese in their social organization and culture, and hence, in a sense, as the father of the Assamese nation [Cantlie1984:xi].

In her ethnography, Cantlie seems to include the entire Assamese society within the term Assamese Vaishnavism. The Assamese Vaishnavism that she is talking about was the result of a reform movement against priestly domination and rituals. It was perhaps the same wave of reformism which appeared in different regions of India around the same time --- Ramanujan in South India, Tulsidas in Central India, Guru Nanak in the Punjab, and Chaitanya in Bengal. In Assam, Shankardeva and his followers started a devotional movement, with a form of prayer called *naam kirtan*. *Naam* primarily means a name, and, secondarily and idiomatically, prayer, usually sung aloud. *Kirtan* involves singing hymns of praise to god Vishnu, usually in a group. *Kirtan* is also

the name of a religious text narrating the doings of god Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu), which the Vaishnavas regard as their main text. *Naam kirtan* does away with priestly rituals and concentrates solely on common prayer by reciting hymns accompanied by clapping of hands and sounding of cymbals and drums. Shankardev and other contemporaries of the reform wave of that period attempted to bring out the basic Vedic truths into local languages so that the common people could understand them. This was in contrast to the prevailing system of Sanskrit ritualism, that led to absolute dependence on the priests for religious matters. The organizing structure of the movement was the establishment of the *Satra* institution, which has been very well described by Cantlie [1984]. A *satra* consists of a *guru* and the disciples initiated by him. Every Assamese Vaishnava is required to take initiation from the family *guru* prior to his marriage. The *guru*, who is the head of the *satra*, is called *satradhikaar* (owner of the *satra*), or Gosai (god). The position of *Satradhikar* is a hereditary one in *satras* where the Gosai can marry. In *satras* where he has to be celibate, a boy from a Gosai family is given to the *satra* at a young age and trained as the intended *adhikar* (owner) [Cantlie 1984]. In my experience, most Gosais come from families with the last name Goswami, and in recent times at least, a man with the name Goswami is often addressed as Gosai.

A *satra* derives its income from two main sources --- *satra* land, and dues of its disciples. There are estimated to be about 650 *satras* in the Assam Valley, of which only twenty are rich and powerful. The majority of *satras* are poor and getting poorer [Cantlie 1984]. It appears that the importance of the Gosai as a spiritual leader is slowly decreasing in many parts of Assam. But some Vaishnavites politicise the situation by dichotomizing Assamese religious life into followers of Vishnu and followers of other deities, especially goddesses (*gosani*). By ignoring the importance of other deities, and by equating Assamese society solely with Assamese Vaishnavism, Cantlie plays right into their political intentions. The importance of Vaishnava sects and subsects in present day Assamese society cannot be denied, and they have many followers. But they do not reflect the entire picture. It is significant that there is constant intermarriage between Vaishnavites and non-Vaishnavites. My own set of acquaintances and relatives belong to both "groups" and I see no dichotomization, especially at the everyday level. Most Assamese worship a range of Hindu deities, and Vaishnavs, except for the very fundamentalist ones, often go to other temples. Even in the context of "doing mantras", I have talked to practitioners who are either Gosais of *satras* or come from Gosai families, but who talk in terms of Tantric *satkarmas*. Cantlie's ethnography, though excellent in its analysis, is a

normative account of an Assamese religious sect, and only partially reflects Assamese religious reality.

Sociocultural aspects. In this section, I describe certain sociocultural aspects of Hindu Assamese which are relevant to my analysis, mainly in the arenas of family, marriage and religion. I also lay out particular culturally important concerns and sources of distress that emerge from this sociocultural setting.

Assamese families are patrilineal and patrilocal. Sons carry on the family (*bonsho*) through successive generations. Perpetuation of the family line is such an important consideration that some families follow a variation of the marriage ritual where the bride is required to hold a male child on her lap for a little while to symbolize the purpose of the union being solemnized. Children are born into their father's caste and sons are permanent members of that family. A daughter stays a member of her father's family till she marries. During the marriage ceremony, her father ritually severs all her ties to his family and gives her away as a "gift" (*kanyadaan*) to the bridegroom. She then gets ritually incorporated into his family.

Two kinds of marriages are distinguished --- "arranged" and "love". Ideally, it is the duty of the parents to search for suitable spouses and "arrange" their children's marriage. A majority of the marriages belong to this



category. "Love" marriages (when a couple fall in love and decide to marry), though common, are usually looked down upon. In an arranged marriage, most negotiations start with locating a suitable person belonging to the same caste. Some of the considerations in selecting a prospective bride or groom are that they should preferably come from families of similar economic standing, should be a "good girl" (*bhal sowali*) or a "good boy" (*bhal lora*), with a good reputation.

The boy's economic situation, with a steady income is very important, and a young man with a good job is an excellent catch in the marriage market. A girl's looks and temperament are given weight, and a pretty, demure, obedient person, with good housekeeping skills is the best choice. In recent times, higher education is becoming increasingly important for both sexes, a bachelor's degree being seen as a minimum degree, especially in urban areas, even by lower middle class families. I find the terms a "good boy" and a "good girl" very intriguing because there is generally no fixed criteria on which to assess "goodness". A congenial personality, everyday behavior, academic achievements, economic security, special skills --- all or any of these, besides others, can be a measure of a "good" girl or boy.

Once a suitable person is spotted, the horoscopes of the prospective bride and groom are usually matched on astrologically prescribed points. Often, especially in Brahmin families, the final stage when negotiations are

finalized is called "viewing the girl". Family members of the prospective groom, or the groom himself would inspect the prospective bride, either at her or someone else's home, or at some public place. Though there is a protocol in many families in Assam, unlike other places in India, not to reject a girl after she is formally "viewed", this is a time of utmost tension for the girl's family, as the final say in the negotiations usually rest with the bridegroom's side.

Inability to get a daughter married is a source of constant worry to parents. Metaphorically, "the father of a girl is in possession of an asset that can only be realized by being given away" [Cantlie 1984:58]. The marriage negotiations themselves are the source of many quarrels, and are conducted privately in the early stages to avoid malicious gossip against the prospective bride or the groom spoiling the chances of a settlement [Cantlie 1984:58]. Even after a negotiation has been finalized, both parties tread warily in case someone, out of malice or jealousy deliberately or unconsciously prevents the marriage from taking place. Most families perform some kind of religious ritual before a wedding seeking divine blessings on the couple, as well as divine help to prevent any problems coming up before the ceremony and to enable the celebrations to go off smoothly<sup>1</sup>.

Religion forms an important aspect of everyday life in Assam. Religion is a domain learned right from childhood.

Every home either has a specific room or a specific corner of the house set aside as sacred, which has an altar where the family members chant their prayers, or request the gods for favors. One of the daily rituals of most Hindu women is an early morning bath and then a visit to the altar to light a lamp or some incense. Many families ritualistically light lamps twice a day, once in the morning and once at dusk (*sandhya*) --- the period of transition between day and night. Besides, visits to temples, both during festivals as well as at other times, and the performance of *pujas* (rituals of worship) are very common in most families. *Pujas* are also performed on a public or institutional basis, to mark particular festivals. Institutions like banks, schools and colleges perform a special *puja* for Saraswati, the goddess of learning, to mark the annual festival called *Saraswati puja*. The four-day long annual festival of *Durga puja* is marked by numerous large scale and expensive public performances of *pujas* devoted to goddess *Durga* and her associate deities, all over the state. As goddess *Durga* symbolizes *shakti* (force, power), various police and other security forces all over the state also perform this *puja* in a big way. Similarly, factories, construction companies and businesses dealing with machinery perform an annual *puja* to pay homage to the god of machinery and construction, *Vishwakarma*. This shows the importance of religion in various domains of society --- economics, finance,

education, and law enforcement, among others. These and various other such *pujas*, though performed to obtain the deities' blessings, are also social occasions, where people get together, enjoy various kinds of entertainment programs, and also make acquaintances and alliances of various kinds. Thus these functions are also a vehicle of social, business or political interaction.

The region is not highly urbanized. Based on the 1980 census of India, the 1990 estimated population of Guwahati, the largest city in the region, was only 484 thousand [Atlas of India 1990]. As a consequence of the small size of the community, other people and their opinions become a force to reckon with. As I was growing up in Assam, a phrase I heard incessantly was "people will speak ill (of you)" (*manuhe beya bulibo*). The importance of the approval of others is embodied into a person through everyday conversation and decisions. One of my favorite examples in this context is in deciding what to wear. I remember being told many times that it is irrelevant how I think I look in a particular garment. It is how **others** think I look in it that is important. This notion is very different from the general idea of individual expression so common in the United States. This is probably because, in the Assamese context, when people say something negative about somebody, it reflects badly not only on the individual involved, but on the entire family. Conversely, people speaking well of one

enhances family name and family prestige. The approval of others is very important especially in times of arranging marriages. Marriage proposals are often evaluated in terms of reports of trusted friends, acquaintances and neighbors, who label a girl or a boy as "good" or "not very good" ("not very good" usually connoting "bad"). Such reports can make or destroy a marriage negotiation.

Family name and prestige represents an area of constant concern and these are often subtly publicized through one's children. Two arenas where this is played out, especially in the urban areas is in children's high scores in examinations and in their obedient behavior. Most parents are therefore very involved in their children's performance in school. Besides enhancing the family name, being a good student indicates a good job in the future, which in turn signifies good marriage prospects. This is especially true for boys, and parents are very concerned about their sons' economic prospects. Obedience to elders, especially parents, is a virtue most parents strive to inculcate in their children. Parents of obedient (*badhya*) children are often commended on their good fortune (*bhagya*). Obedient children are seen as one of the building blocks for the cultural ideal of a well knit and cohesive family. Conflicts between family members invites speculation and gossip and speaks ill of family honor.

Children are a source of well being as well as

distress for the family. Sons are the chief source of support for parents in their old age. Parents therefore have many expectations regarding their sons, especially the oldest son, the chief among them being obedience, loyalty and economic stability. A daughter, on the other hand, is raised with the expectation that she will be given away in marriage to another family. Hence, her entire socialization revolves around pleasing others and in bringing honor to her natal family by making herself loved, cherished, and admired in her husband's home. Failure to please her in-laws reflect badly on her upbringing and on her mother's training.

Concerns about a son's loyalty and obedience become especially important after a son marries. The wife is seen as a constant threat to a man's allegiance to his mother and sisters. The cultural norms state that a woman gets totally incorporated into her husband's family at marriage --- all ties to her father's family are ritually severed during the wedding ceremony. But at the everyday behavioral level she is often considered an outsider by the immediate members of her new family, who are suspicious of her hold on her husband.

A girl's status changes at marriage from that of a daughter to a daughter-in-law. This entails overnight behavioral changes as she now has to conduct herself in ways appropriate for a daughter-in-law . She is expected to be

of service to everyone in her new family, and be subservient, especially to people older than her husband. She is usually under constant surveillance and judgement by the members of her husband's family. Parents often make a conceptual distinction between a daughter (*jiyori*) and daughter-in-law (*bowari*), treating the daughter with utmost indulgence and the daughter-in-law with stringent rules. These rules spread across different spheres --- everyday speech and behavior, freedom to go out of the house without permission, and even clothes. I talked to a woman whose eighteen year old daughter-in-law was forbidden from wearing anything else except a sari or its Assamese equivalent, the *mekhla chaddar* while her twenty four year old daughter always wore non-Assamese and even western clothes.

Such behavioral and conceptual distinctions generate culturally specific stress areas and contradictions. A close knit family is the ideal family, but inherent in the family structure are sources of conflict --- especially between mothers-in-laws and daughters-in-law and between wives of brothers. As sons and brothers acquire wives, who come from different families, the potential for suspicion, jealousy, competition, and even hatred between them appears. These often get magnified by interferences by other family members or by affines.

Conflict within a family, though attributed to quarrelsome members, are often seen to have an underlying

cause like someone's bad mantras or evil eye or bad planetary configuration behind it. Significantly, such conflicts are also sometimes seen to be the cause of other problems. The sheer force of another person's continual hatred or ill-will, for e.g., is often thought to have the power to bring illness or misfortune to the person on whom the ill-will is directed. Family members are also often suspected of deliberately causing harm to others because of malice, with the help of mantras.

"Doing mantras" in Assam. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, (various terms are associated with "doing mantras" in Assam --- *bej*, *ojha*, *dhanantari*, *vaidya*, and Tantric.) In this chapter I want to discuss these conceptualizations further in the light of my conversations with my informants.

(The distinction between the *bej* and *ojha* is primarily a geographic one ---the word *bej* is used more in Upper Assam, while *ojha* is used in Lower Assam.) The word *Dhanwantari* (arrow-moving) in Indian mythology refers to a deity who is the god of medicine. The system of Ayurveda is attributed to him. In some myths he is called the conquerer of the malignant power of the serpents. The title of *Dhanwantari* was also borne by more than one historical physician [Walker 1968a:274]. In Assam, there are legends of one physician, who was so skilled that he came to be called *Dhanantari* (the Assamese pronunciation of the word). His specialty was



treating poison, especially snake poison, which is the most common and deadly form of poison in the region. Hence, people who treated poison started calling themselves *Dhanantari*. These are the same people who are also called *bej*, *ojha* and *vaidya*. All these terms are sometimes subsumed under the term *asuri* treatment (*chikitsa*). The term *asuri chikitsa* refers to treatment not in accordance with the conventional medical system, and is used especially in contrast to Ayurveda, which is seen to follow a prescribed set of rules, techniques and training program.) However, not too many people can relate to this term. Some have heard it, but associate it with demons (*asuras*), to whom they see greedy *bej* and *ojhas* being affiliated.

(The difference between *bej*, *ojha*, *dhanantari*, and *vaidya* mainly lies in what these terms connote, which in turn stems from the source of these practitioner's knowledge. Broadly speaking, two types of practitioners can be distinguished --- those with a special supernatural power (*shakti*) of their own and those who depend only on their books for their knowledge. Practitioners who deal only with books get results because of their experience in diagnosing from symptoms and in their ability to harness the power inherent in the words by saying the right mantra with the right procedure and pronunciation.) In the case of practitioners with supernatural *shakti*, their personal power is used along with the power in the mantra. Their personal

power is often a degree of spiritual enlightenment which they have achieved. This often gives them *siddhi* (spiritual success) in particular mantras so that the mantras work especially well when said by them. Often they do not even need to say the entire mantra. Other practitioners said that their *shakti* is a *devata*, a being that either came inside them periodically, or just stayed with them all the time. The term *devata*, according to the Assamese dictionary stands for a deity, who can be either a god, or a spirit, including an evil spirit. It is hard to ascertain the nature of the beings that gives the practitioner his *shakti* as most of the practitioners were reluctant to discuss them with me. Whatever the kind of *shakti*, it is obtained only after a great deal of supernatural exercises (*sadhana*). The term *sadhana* is a concept with many related meanings. The Assamese-English Dictionary defines it as the act of worshiping, as well as solicitation, entreaty, or endeavor to attain an object. In the religious context too, it is used in diverse ways. Bharati [1965] variously defines the term as contemplative exercises, spiritual disciplines, spiritual exercises, exercises for final vision, mode of worship, ritualistic procedures, religious exercise, yogic practice, all in the same book. Associated with the word *sadhana* is the word *siddhi*, which Bharati again variously defines as desired success, occult success and spiritual powers. I use the word *sadhana* to mean exercises and

practices directed towards the attainment of some supernatural goal. I use *siddhi* to mean the attainment of special powers or supernatural success by a practitioner. I found through my conversations with practitioners and clients that *siddhi* can be of various forms --- an enlightened view of reality, or competence in particular mantras, or control over supernatural beings.

The clients I talked to did not seem to care very much about the nature of the beings that a practitioner claimed to control, but some of the practitioners did. (There seemed to be a value judgement between *adhyatmic* (spiritual, pertaining to the gods) and *bhoutic* (pertaining to ghosts and spirits) sources of *shakti*. Practitioners who claimed to have spiritual *shakti* saw themselves at a higher level because their power came directly from the gods. According to them, lower level practitioners need to keep ghosts and spirits to do their work for them. They are more likely to give in to greed or malice and cause harm to others.) There is also the idea that the higher level practitioners rarely need the knowledge of *bejali puthis* --- the local level texts. These texts are often associated with bad mantras. Dealing exclusively with such texts suggests limitations in knowledge and judgement. Many practitioners who had started out by inheriting these books and their knowledge from their fathers or relatives have built up on this book knowledge by earning supernatural powers.)

Though all these categories fall under the label of the supernatural, none of these distinctions are absolute. I see them in terms of a supernatural continuum, with the most spiritual practitioners placed at one end, the least spiritual ones, whose power comes from ghosts and spirits in the middle, and those with only book knowledge and no special *shakti* or *siddhi* (spiritual success) at the other end. Many practitioners perceived themselves in terms of such a continuum, and those who saw themselves at the higher end tended to look down on the others.

Some practitioners, especially the "higher level" ones, object to being called *bej*. This is because the term *bej*, in the present times, connotes unscrupulousness, greed, and harmful mantras. One reason for this is the association of the word *bej* and the practice of *bejali* with a place called Mayong, located about twenty miles east of Guwahati. The word Mayong has assumed a sense of notoriety and has become synonymous with evil mantras. Both *bej* and mantras from Mayong (*Mayongiya bej*, *Mayongiya mantra*) are feared all over Assam. In the following section I will elaborate on the cultural conceptualization of Mayong and its role in the connotation of the practice of mantras in Assam.

Mayong. Administratively, Mayong refers to one village in the Nowgong district of Assam --- Roja Mayong. But Mayong, in the context of *bejali*, connotes the entire area,

consisting of about ten to twelve villages around Roja Mayong. People of this area talk about the "jungles of Mayong" (*Mayongor jonghol*) --- the isolated, forest area which is cut off from the rest of Assam for seven months of the year, due to floods. The area is quite out of the way, situated in one corner of the district, with very poor road communication. The railway line and the national highway are at a distance from this area. It was the region as a whole rather than a specific village that gained prominence for its mischievous *bejali*.

Legends of Mayong. As I talked with people in Assam, it was apparent that most of the information about Mayong was in the form of legends and stories --- very few people had any real experiences of the "power" of a *bej* from Mayong. (One of the most common stories circulating about Mayong is that these *bej* have the power of controlling others --- they can keep a person with them forever, making the person forget his or her past life, affiliations, family and friends, and blindly follow that *bej*. The first reaction of most people I talked to regarding my intention of visiting Mayong was an attempt to discourage me from going there. I was told stories of how these *bej* just had to show a person a flower, and the person would become his slave. I was told never to go there alone, and to beware of young men. The *bej* from Mayong were supposedly experts in Mohini mantras --- mantras

used to infatuate others. (Tales are told of *bej* who use Mohini mantras on young men to keep them in Mayong, either as husbands for their daughters or just as their servants. Women are also said to know such mantras, which they use on men. Hence the fear, that if one goes to Mayong he never comes back. Brojen Sharma, an *ojha* who lived in Mayong for a few months, told me that the secrets of Mayong are not taught easily to outsiders. But if an outsider is married to a woman from Mayong, they often give him access to most of their knowledge.)

Punya Barua, a high school teacher from a town about a hundred miles away from Mayong, had heard stories about Mayong from her great uncle, who had learnt *bejali* in Mayong. (He was taught most of their secrets by a woman there with the expectation that he would marry her. When his training was over, though, he managed to run away before the marriage could take place. Though his *guru* from Mayong could not get him back, she did use her powers on him, so that he could not get married to anyone else either --- he stayed unmarried all his life.)

These *bej* supposedly had the capacity to turn human beings into spirits, tigers, goats, or anything else they wanted to. Nibaron Das, a 92 year old resident of Roja Mayong, told me that he had himself seen a *bej* turn a tiger into a bird. He also spoke of *bej* who could "tie up" (immobilize) tigers using mantras. Dharmeshwar Goswami, a practitioner who lives in a village near Roja Mayong said

that the most common way of immobilizing tigers was by using pain-causing mantras (*bikhali-baan*). There seems to be a lot of association of Mayong's *bej* with tigers. The forests of Mayong had tigers in the past, that would often eat the villager's cattle. The *bej* helped in capturing these tigers. Brojen Sharma, as well as various other people, have told me about *bej* who could turn **themselves** into tigers, giants, and other beings. None of them, except Brojen Sharma, claim to have actually seen such *bej* but stories abound of how they turned themselves into tigers, harmed others, and changed back to humans again. One of the requisites of such transformation was that the *bej* who had changed himself into a tiger (or any other being) needed another *bej* to recharge him into a human being, as he himself was incapable of chanting the mantra in the form he had assumed. But often, these days, the stand-by *bej* either out of malice, or out of ignorance do not do the recharge in the proper way. Hence, a lot of *bej* have permanently been trapped in these non-human forms and have either gone into the forest or have been captured for circuses or zoos.

Anecdotes also abound about people of Mayong using mantras to do mischievous tricks to scare and impress strangers. The most common stories are about *piras* (a low stool used to sit on) sticking to people's bottoms when they try to get up, fingers getting stuck to people's mouths while eating, creating fish and other food ingredients out

of bamboo or cane, making food ingredients dance in front of the stranger's eyes<sup>2</sup>, etc. Another common story is about *bej* who could stop moving objects. Dharmeshwar Goswami told me that he knew a *bej* who could stand in front of a charging wild bull, raise his hand, chant a mantra, and the bull would stop. I have also often heard about *bej* who can apparently make cars moving at high speed come to a complete halt<sup>3</sup>.

The *bej* from Mayong are said to be unscrupulous and wicked --- they supposedly oblige clients by doing anything for the right price. A very common fear about these *bej* is that they take money from jealous mischief makers and cause brides and grooms to make fools of themselves by dancing all through the solemn wedding ceremony; sometimes, the bridal couple are made unconscious. Ranjan Barua, a bio-chemist, told me he had seen a bride, who was hale and hearty one minute, become unconscious and deranged the next --- all due to the bad mantras (*ku-mantras*) of a *bej*. These *bej* are said to be able to cause illnesses, set ghosts (*biras*) on people's houses, cause a person to be infatuated with another, ruin entire families, and even kill people<sup>4</sup>.

Mayong in the present times. Mayong today is no different from any other village in Assam. Roja Mayong has a police station, a dispensary, a higher secondary school, and a bank. When I went there, I did not see any magic or tricks.



There were about two or three people in the village who knew mantras, which is common in most Assamese villages. The people of Mayong laughed when I told them that I had heard that everyone in Mayong is a *bej*, that children there learn *bejali* right from the cradle, and that grandparents in Mayong played with their grandchildren by showing them *bejali* tricks. They told me that the legends might have been true in the past, but such *bejali* is not seen anymore. Even if anyone still has such mantras, they do not openly admit it, as the *bejali* of Mayong (*Mayongiya bejali*) has earned a bad reputation. I was also told that a lot of the *bej* who knew such mantras died without teaching their skill to anyone, and hence what they knew is lost forever. The younger generation is often not too keen to carry on the *bejali* tradition, as it involves hard work and restrictions. Dharmeshwar Goswami complained about this to me. He said that he had discarded his bad mantras a long time ago, so all he has now are the good ones. He keeps offering to teach this knowledge to his nephews, but nobody is interested. He is afraid that the knowledge which has existed in his family for generations is going to die out after his death.

There is also a widespread idea that the *bej* have become greedy, and have brought about their own downfall. It is said that if a *bej* starts taking money for his services, his mantras will not work. I have also been told

that most *bej* who do bad mantras end up lame, sickly, and their children never prosper. And if a *bej* does very wicked things, his entire family perishes (*bonsho noroi*)<sup>5</sup>. I met several people who said they used to do *bejali* in the past, but had given up the practice for fear of the consequences. They all claimed that though they never did any bad mantras, they were afraid of unwittingly harming someone, and thus bringing about harm to themselves and to their family.

Specialty of Mayong. Besides Mayong, there had been other pockets in Assam where *tantra-mantra* was rumored to have been practiced --- Garigaon at the outskirts of Guwahati, Lahorighat near Guwahati, and some pockets in the Goalpara district in the north bank of the Brahmaputra, to name a few. But none of these places gained prominence as Mayong did. Most people have never heard of these places. I have heard some people in Guwahati say that the people of Garigaon are wicked (*dusto*), but no one could really tell me why. The general idea was that they were not to be trusted. But there is usually no association with mantras, though there was supposedly a *bej para* (locality of *bej*) at Garigaon in the past.

It was Mayong that became synonymous with mantras all over Assam . One of the questions I asked people who knew something about Mayong was, why did **Mayong** become so famous, even though there were *bej* in other places too? The most

frequent answer was that they knew very bad mantras, and the most common emotion associated with Mayong is that of fear.) The *bej* there are seen to be able to control people's minds, using various kinds of *mohini* mantras (mantras used to infatuate). The *bej* are also seen as greedy, taking money from clients to harm others. (According to Nibaron Das, the *bej* themselves helped in propagating notions of their uniqueness and power to the outside world. They often played clever tricks to impress outsiders. And as Mayong was so isolated, it was easy to create myths and keep them going. Nobody is sure how this knowledge came to Mayong. It is speculated that at one time, possibly because of its isolation, a lot of people used to come to the forests of Mayong to find spiritual fulfillment. The people of Mayong might have picked up mantras from them, started using them, and passed this knowledge down from generation to generation. And by not teaching these mantras easily to outsiders, they cultivated an aura of secrecy associated with *Mayongiya* mantras (mantras from Mayong).) It is possible that some people who set off for Mayong from other parts of Assam to learn mantras often did not go back home. But according to Nibaron Das, this was not necessarily because they had been "kept" back in Mayong by *bej*, but because they had probably been killed by wild animals, on way to Mayong or on their way back. But such instances helped in creating legends and fears. The isolation of the

(place as well as the its inaccessibility to the rest of Assam for a large part of the year due to floods helped in maintaining the esotericity of Mayong.)

I was also told that the *bej* from Mayong were experts in *indrajala* . The Assamese Dictionary defines *indrajala* as a net of mantras (*jala* meaning net), magic, jugglery and illusion. The word *indrajala*, literally, the net of Indra, is associated with the god Indra, who casts his net of magic over his adversaries [Goudriaan 1978:14]. Indra, in spite of being a god did not always use his powers in an honest way, and the malicious side of his character are brought into focus in some Vedic texts [Goudriaan:1978]. In his study of magic and its religious foundations in Sanskrit texts, Goudriaan [1978] states that the god Indra has been conceived of as a great magician, who was able to trick his enemies by their own weapons, for these enemies also possessed this supranormal gift. Indra, by conjuring up appearances, changing himself into all kinds of beings, human as well as animal, succeeded in murdering his enemies, seducing women, and winning riches and glory. The supranormal powers displayed by the god for his ends were felt as exemplary for the human community and attainable by those who sought to imitate them. Goudriaan goes on to say that

the association of Indra with earthly magic appears from the very name given to the performance of occult feats by magicians in Sanskrit : *indrajalam* "Indra's net". Sometimes

this word is used in a broad sense which can be more or less equated with the English "magic". In other places its use is restricted to the performance of spectacular feats like jugglery or the creation of phantasms [Goudriaan 1978:213].

The word *indrajala* appears in the Atharvaveda, as well as in various tantric texts. It is not possible to know for sure how Mayong came to be associated with this term. Though informants talked of the existence of a text called *Indrajala Tantra*, used by many *bej* from Mayong, at least in the past, I was not successful in locating the text anywhere. Goudriaan [1978] discusses an edited volume called *Indrajalavidyasamagraha*, "Compendium of the Magical Science" (ed. J. Vidyasagar's Sons, Calcutta 1915), which brings together several "magical" texts, including one called *Indrajalam*. He states that the text "seems entirely to consist of quotations from other sources; in its present form its consultation seems useless" [Goudriaan 1978: 256].

Dharmeshwar Goswami told me he knew some of the "magic" that the *bej* did to impress people. When I asked him to show me some of the things he could do, he laughed and said it was only *bheleki* (jugglery). Nripen Goswami, a practitioner from the area also saw a lot of these feats as *bheleki*, and said that he never does such "low" things. Very few *bej* from Mayong admit to doing *bheleki*, though people connect them with the feat, and mistrust them because of it.

The sense of mistrust and fear linked with Mayong is

the main reason *Mayongiya bejali* is looked down upon and seen to be of a "lower" level. Bej are seen to wield immense power which they often use to deceive, and, if annoyed or angered, to deliberately hurt or destroy their victim.

In my discussions with informants, it was apparent that people in general do not question the power of mantras very much. Most of them told me that words, when properly used and pronounced by the right person have the power to achieve anything in the world. It is not mantras they disbelieve -- they mistrust many of the people who claim to do mantras these days. A journalist in Guwahati told me that he did not believe in *bej* as there were no real *bej* anymore. Nibaron Das told me that during his lifetime of nearly hundred years, he has seen the practice of *bejali* deteriorate. His father was a very well known *bej* and people came to him from nearby areas for treatment and help. He even had a sort of hospital set up at one corner of their large compound, where he used to keep sick patients overnight if they needed special attention, all free of charge. He never thought of personal gain, and selflessly served others. But such *bej* are not to be seen anymore. *Bejali*, according to him has become a profession now, the main aim of which is to exploit others. He said that exploitative *bej* existed in the past too, but now they are more so. He said that he does not trust *bej* any more,

especially those from Mayong as he has seen how deceptive they are. He also expressed anger at the clients who are gullible enough to get deceived. What is significant here is that it is not people's belief in the efficacy of mantras that he is reacting against, but against what the practice of *bejali*, especially *Mayongiya bejali* [*bejali* from Mayong] has been reduced to.

#### NOTES

1. In many parts of India, one reason why marriage negotiations fail to materialize in the final stages is due to disputes over the amount of dowry demanded by the bridegroom's family. Cantlie suggests a similar situation is Assam when she states that "the bridegroom's family are often in a position to demand substantial sums of dowry including, in some cases, the cost of education abroad" [Cantlie 1984:59]. In my experience, though, I have never heard of dowry demands by Assamese. In fact, one of the ways Assamese distinguish themselves from Bengalis and other North Indians is by pointing out the non-existence of the dowry system in Assam. Though her description and analysis of marriage in Assam is excellent, she seems to have been misinformed on this point.
2. Brojen Sharma told me that when he first went to Mayong, a Brahmin family there invited him for a meal. As he does not eat food cooked by others, the family provided him with the ingredients for him to cook his meal. As he started getting his meal ready, he asked his hosts for some green chilies. They told him the chilies would come to him. As he went back to his cooking, he saw about fifteen green chilies come dancing towards him. He had heard of such stories about Mayong, which made him all the more scared, but he bravely covered the chilies with a large bowl. Soon after, a young girl of the family came to him and

requested him to remove the bowl. She was the one who had done the mantra to make the chilies dance so as to scare him. But now that he had covered the chilies with the bowl, her entire body was burning. Sharma said he removed the bowl only after she promised never to play tricks on him again. He also talked of another instance where, when eating his meal at the home of another family, his fingers got stuck to his mouth. As he unsuccessfully tried to pull them out, he heard snickering in the other room. His fingers stayed stuck for about fifteen minutes.

3. An engineer, working with the Flood Control Department of the Government of Assam, who was temporarily stationed at Mayong, told me of a *bej* who claimed to be able to stop his car. When I tried to get hold of that particular *bej*, however, I was told by his family that he had gone to visit relatives in another village and would not be back for about two months. Brojen Sharma also spoke of a *bej*, now dead, who would stand in the middle of the road, chant a mantra on some dust picked up from the ground, throw the dust in front of a fast moving car, and the car would come to a standstill, unable to move. Sharma had wanted to learn that mantra from that *bej*, but the *bej* refused to teach him. When I asked Nibaron Das about such claims, he said that he has not seen such feats in his entire ninety-two years of living in Mayong.
4. Nibaron Das gave me some examples of fatal mantras still being practiced in Mayong. According to him, there is one mantra, still in secret circulation, which is to be chanted while tying a knot on the soft bark of a particular tree. The bark is then thrown on the ground, and if a cow eats it, the person, in whose name the mantra was chanted, will become ill and die. Another mantra, which when chanted in a person's name, while poking needles on a banana tree can cause the person to be killed or injured. Both Punya Barua and Brojen Sharma told me of a practice in which the *bej* chant mantras on an empty earthen water-pot, then drop the pot in water. The person whose name had been chanted in the mantra will have water accumulating in his or her body. As the pot will take in more and more water, the person's stomach will also keep getting bigger. Unless the pot is taken out of the water in time, the person can eventually die of excessive fluid in the body. There is another similar practice, according to Punya Barua, in which mantras are done to the pot, but the pot is made to gradually get dry. She did not know the details of this practice, but she had heard that as the pot gets drier, the person also keeps



"drying". Eventually the person can get to the stage when he or she is just skin and bones, and might eventually die.

5. Brojen Sharma told me about a *bej* who used to do bad mantras. He had two sons, and both died within a month of each other. The father was so devastated that he stopped doing *bejali*. Dharmeshwar Goswami told me of a concert that had been organized two or three years ago in his village. The performers had been brought from a nearby town. There was a bad man (*kut-manuh*) in the audience, and he did mantras on the performers. Whoever went up to the stage found himself unable to speak or move. The entire party of performers had to be put on a car and taken home. They were in such a state that a *bej* had to be called to cure them. After the incident, there was an enquiry in the village, and this man was suspected. When he was brought before the council, at the community prayer hall, he confessed to having done it. He said he had learned that mantra from someone and wanted to see if it worked. The council then made him eat human excreta as a punishment, and take an oath that he would never use mantras again. Six months later, the man died.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PRACTITIONERS

This chapter addresses the first component of the cultural schema of doing mantras --- the practitioners. In chapter 1, I had discussed the cultural logic underlying the practice --- that the right mantra said by the right person in the right way generates a power. Here, I examine twelve of these "right persons" so as to get a sense of their backgrounds, their qualities, their "power", their perceptions of themselves vis a vis others in the practice, as well as similarities and differences between them.

As stated in Chapter 3, some practitioners make distinctions between themselves in terms of levels. In this Chapter, I use their conceptualization of levels to categorize practitioners so as to give an idea of the similarities and differences between them. This categorization is based on a cultural idea that the practitioners are powerful because they have some form of supernatural training. The minimum of this training is the knowledge of the right technique of chanting the mantras in their books so as to activate the power inherent, but latent in those mantras. This knowledge gives them a degree of supernatural power. Other practitioners go beyond this first level and embody some kind of supernatural power

within themselves through various forms of exercises (*sadhana*). For some, this supernatural power is in the form of supernatural beings who get embodied into the person either permanently or periodically. These supernatural beings may be either *bhoutic* (pertaining to ghosts and spirits) or *adhyatmic* (pertaining to gods). There are still other practitioners who do not have any beings, but who say that their spiritual exercises have given them spiritual enlightenment. Placing them in a supernatural continuum as suggested in Chapter 3, I divide the practitioners I talked to into three groups --- those who have achieved some form of spiritual enlightenment, those with a special supernatural being of their own, and those who only use books. In this chapter, I discuss the practitioners according to this categorization.

#### PRACTITIONERS WITH SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT.

Four practitioners are discussed in this category. All of them claim to have some form of spiritual enlightenment or spiritual success (*siddhi*) in particular mantras, which they see as the source of their power. They also claim that their spirituality keeps them away from greed and malice, and enables them to be able to judge right from wrong.

Amaresh Chakrabarty. Amaresh Chakrabarty is a retired principal of a high school in Guwahati. He is seventy four

years old, a bachelor, and lives with his brother, Samaresh and his brother's family. The household consists of Amaresh, Samaresh, Samaresh's wife, his sons and their wives and children, all living together in a small, two-roomed flat.

Amaresh Chakrabarty got into religion at the age of fourteen, when he had his thread ceremony. He became a *tyagi* (renouncer), did not marry, and upto this day, does not wear shoes on his feet. Following the teachings of his *guru*, he eventually became a tantric worshipper. He inherited most of his healing texts from his father, who taught him the mantras in the texts. A few of his mantras though, he said, he received directly from goddess Kali, during his Tantric spiritual exercises (*sadhana*).

He came to Assam in 1948 from Bengal during the partition of India, when, being a teacher, he was given the choice to go to East Pakistan, or stay in India. His younger brother was working in Guwahati in the Railways, so Amaresh moved to Guwahati. He had brought with him an idol of the goddess Kali, which he and his brother installed under a broken piece of tin roofing in front of his brother's house. He started helping people with their problems in front of the idol, under the piece of tin roofing. People started worshipping the idol, and a month later, there was a proper roof over it, and walls around it, with material and labor donated by the neighbors. Soon

after he reached Guwahati, he got a job as a teacher. During that period, he could only do mantras before and after school hours --- till about nine in the morning, and then again from about four in the afternoon till the last client was gone. Sometimes there were so many people that he was unable to get away till about eleven at night. After he retired from teaching, he started doing it full time --- from six in the morning till about noon, then again from four or five in the afternoon.

As his name began to get known, the number of clients also increased. Besides, he was also beginning to get older. So, after his brother retired from service, Amaresh initiated him and taught him almost all his mantras. Now the two brothers work together everyday. Having Samaresh there is also a necessity in recent years, as Amaresh, having lost a lot of teeth is getting harder to understand. Most of the time, Samaresh ends up having to translate whatever his older brother is saying for the client's benefit. In my own conversations with Amaresh too, I always found it convenient to have his brother around as a translator.

Both brothers insist that Amaresh Chakrabarty's "line" (of work) is involved in serving others. He does not harm others, nor does he push somebody into danger. He also does not demand any money. People give him whatever they want to give. This is something that I observed also. When the

clients were ready to leave, they would touch his feet, and put some money in the top pocket of his shirt. Amaresh would not even look at the money then, and had therefore no way of knowing who has given him what.

The brothers have a ticketing system to manage their massive clientele. The clients get a ticket number as soon as they reach there, and they get attended to in numerical order. He also has a sign in the temple which says that only fifty tickets will be given out every half of the day (*bela*). But most of the days I was there, I saw that the fifty tickets got exhausted by 10 A.M. But people would still keep coming by, and the brothers would attend to all of them, and would be with clients till about two in the afternoon. They attend to an average of a hundred clients a day, squatting on the floor, with the clients squatting around them. Often, Samaresh had to shout at the swarm of clients to keep order. Amaresh Chakrabarty's skill is known even outside Guwahati. People of all religions, and speaking different languages, come to him from all over Assam. When I asked him the reason for his popularity, he said that people knew that his "line" never harmed people. He only tried to get rid of their difficulties (*asubidha bor door kore*). He also said that he was honest about his capabilities. If something was beyond his capacities, he frankly said so. I have seen him do that -- he has frequently sent back clients, referring them to doctors, a

lot of times even telling them which doctor they should go to.

Clients came to him for illnesses as well as all kinds of other problems. I have talked to people whose families have been coming there for the last forty years. A lot of regulars would bring their children there first, in case of fevers, upset stomachs and other common ailments, instead of going to a doctor. During exam time, I saw hundreds of mothers and children come in to get pens and bottles of ink chanted-on for better writing power. For a lot of people Amaresh is the family physician, counsellor and problem solver all combined. Stories abound about the childless women who got children with the help of Amaresh's mantras, even after doctors declared failure in helping them conceive.

Their clients referred to them as *bej*, *ojha*, or Tantric. Neither of them minded being called these names. They said that the nomenclature was irrelevant. What was important to them was the fact that they have been able to help hundreds of people with their problems, and their clients kept coming back precisely because they got relief from whatever they were suffering from.

Neither of them have any beings to help them in their work. Amaresh has *siddhi* (spiritual success) in particular mantras, which makes those mantras very efficacious when said by him. The mantras will work for him even if he makes

mistakes in the recitation (which he sometimes does these days, due to his advancing years). Samaresh, on the other hand, has to be very careful in the recitation, as any mistakes will not only make the mantra useless, but might even harm him or his family. Both brothers have a small piece of bone though, ritualistically obtained from the cremation ground, which they hold in their hand while chanting particular mantras. It is a Tantric device to make those mantras more powerful.

Dayanand Trivedi. Dayanand Trivedi is a high ranking government official, posted in Assam. He is a licensed homeopath, but does not practice homeopathy. He heals through mantras and claims to have treated about five million people. He comes from a neighboring state, where he holds regular sessions at his home city, treating five to six hundred people a day, free of charge. Now that he is away in Assam, two of his disciples are carrying on his work there. Some members of his Guwahati staff, who had accompanied him to his home city told me that shops have come up around his home to cater to the large number of people who come to him to be healed. These shops provide food for people awaiting their turn to see him, as well as things they might need for the session -- bottles of oil, water, amulets, which would be potentized during the session.



Thakur said that he got initiated into spiritual life about twenty seven years ago, after which his outlook in life changed completely. Before initiation, he had a very materialistic attitude towards life. After initiation, he developed an attitude of doing good to others, some amount of desirelessness (his word), and a sense of surrender to the divine. It was this feeling of doing good to others that made him interested in the power of mantras. A lot of his clients told me that he is a Tantric practitioner, but he denies it. Some have called him a *bej* which he also denies. He said that there is no specific name to what he does, but he sometimes calls it "mantra therapy". He does it as a hobby, and not as a profession. During his extensive tours to remote parts of India, he came across people who seemingly performed miracles, using mantras. Most of these people did such "miracles" only for entertainment and for money. He decided to use mantras so as to help people, by curing illnesses instantaneously, and free of cost.

Trivedi told me that he has been doing intense research in "mantra therapy", for the last twenty five years. The basis of mantra therapy, according to him, is phonetics (his word). The words in the mantra often do not mean anything. Even if they do have meaning, understanding what the words mean is not important. He has mantras in languages that he does not understand --- Swahili, Arabic, Persian, Malay,

Bahasa (Indonesian), and various Indian languages.

According to him, it is not the meaning of the words, but the combination of the sound units that creates the power. Each combination of words creates a particular vibration when recited in the right way, and it is this vibration that cures the patient. But to get a vibration that is potent enough, the knowledge has to come from a *guru* who is competent (*siddha*) in that mantra. He used the example of classical music to explain this point. Though the notes are written down, music cannot really be picked up from books. A good teacher is needed to show exactly how those notes have to be reproduced. In the case of mantras too, it is the *guru* who introduces the notes, the right inflections of tone, into the voice of the disciple, so as to get the exact vibration. According to him, the right vibrations are like a missile on a target --- they hit the target and bring about the desired result.

He said that mantras can be used for both good and evil purposes. Because they can be immensely powerful tools, a *guru* has to be very careful in choosing who to pass on his knowledge. The prospective disciple is often tested by the *guru* in various ways on his strength of mind and his attitude towards others. All mantras are not taught to everybody. Trivedi has taught a few mantras to one of his subordinate officers, Prakash, who helps him in his healing sessions. Prakash told me that he had no prior experience

with mantras before he met Trivedi. But now that he has seen people being healed by his mantras, he will continue practicing them, even when he is no longer working for Trivedi.

Trivedi said that he is continuously learning new mantras from people who are practicing them and who are prepared to teach him. He already has thousands of mantras, but is always on the lookout for new mantras to add to his collection. He experiments with mantras and tries to come up with the best mantra for each problem. The difference between his mantras and the mantras of other practitioners, according to him, is that his mantras give immediate results. He has about ten or twenty mantras for each ailment. If one fails to give instant results, he uses another one. He said that the key to selecting the right mantra is in understanding the slightest variation in the manifestation of the same illness. For example, a particular mantra may be more effective for a particular kind of headache than other headache mantras, and will therefore give faster results. One mantra may work better if a problem is hereditary, while another may work better for the same problem if there is no hereditary connection. He therefore has to quickly discern, decide and select the right mantra, and he does this by getting detailed information on the patient's symptoms and illness history. His background in homeopathy helps him in diagnosing through

symptoms and causes and connecting them to mantras. Most practitioners, according to him, do not have the vast pool of mantras that he has. They usually have only one or two general mantras for an ailment, and not specific mantras for variations of the same ailment. Hence, they cannot always produce instant results. The quality of the mantra is also important. The vibrations produced by some mantras are more powerful than others. Thakur said that years of research and experience has enabled him to sort out the most powerful mantras, which he now uses. Besides, he has *siddhi* (spiritual success) in particular mantras, as a result of which he does not even need to recite the entire mantra. These mantras are therefore more efficacious and act faster.

As I sat through his healing sessions, I saw that he does seem to be able to provide instant relief. He treats by chanting mantras and blowing into or hitting the sick part of the client's body. Sometimes he would hit the afflicted part so hard that the client, especially if he or she is frail, would stagger. Sometimes he would hold the client's arm or wrist so hard while chanting the mantra, that the client would wince in pain. When I asked him why he held so tightly, he said that his hold was not tight at all --- it was the mantra going into the person's body and acting on the affliction that gave the client a temporary feeling of pain. He blew, hit, massaged, slapped the mantra into the person's body. He also uses other mediums for the

mantra, the two most common being water and oil. Mantras are chanted on a bottle of water or oil, brought by the client, and given back to the client to take home. The water is to be ingested and bathed with, while the oil is for external uses like rubbing on joints or other painful parts of the body. He said that the need for a medium is because the mantra often needs to get inside the person several times a day, but people cannot come to him everyday. Hence, he keeps the treatment going through the medium. Some mantras need specific mediums. The mantra for diabetes needs sealing wax to contain it --- the client has to wear a lump of potentized wax as an amulet. Some mantras are chanted into amulets of brass or other metal. A brass plate with mantras chanted on it is needed for sciatica pain, and the client's back needs to touch the plate for sometime each day.

Mantras, according to Trivedi, act on everything --- nature, human beings, planets, animals. Hence they can solve all kinds of life problems. But he confines his work to only to curing bodily illnesses, as, dealing with people's life problems may create complications in his role as a government official.

Satyen Goswami. Satyen Goswami is a high school teacher, a priest, an astrologer, and also does mantras. He has long hair, long beard, and dresses in a dhoti and shirt, often

saffron colored, thus giving the impression a very religious person. He lives at the top of a hill, with a path leading up to the house. The path gets rather precarious, especially when it rains, but that does not stop the stream of clients climbing up the hill to consult him. He has a shed outside his house, where he talks to clients. There are rows of chairs both outside and inside the shed, for clients to wait their turn.

He said that the knowledge of "mantra-tantra" existed in his family for many generations. His forefathers did it, and his father still does it. He learned his skill from his father, when he was about twenty years of age. He now uses mantras as a divinatory tool and as a remedy. The mantras existing in his family are *bejali* mantras. But he also has tantric training and uses tantric mantras more than *bejali* mantras as he feels that tantric mantras work faster and are more effective. Both *bej* and Tantrics do the same things, according to Goswami, but Tantrics are more powerful. The source of their power (*shakti*) is their *sadhana* (spiritual exercises). He also feels that though *bejali* can do good things, most *bej* have fallen into the trap of greed and money. But a pure tantric, even if he has the knowledge of the Six Acts of Tantra (*Satkarma*), cannot use them to harm others without genuine cause. The prolonged and rigorous exercises of Tantric training disciplines his mind so that he obtains a natural sense of

judgement which is not swayed by the lure of money, or by feelings of revenge or spite. Besides, the source of power of a lot of *bej* are beings like ghosts and spirits (*birha*, *bhoot*) whom they keep to do their bidding, while Tantrics get their power from the gods. This also helps them discern right from wrong. When I asked him why a Tantric would take the trouble of mastering the Six Acts if he could never use them, Goswami said that there are times when these mantras can be used. If a person is harming the country or his fellow beings, the mantras can be used to punish, stop, or even kill him, depending on the intensity of the harm he has caused. That is where the issue of proper judgement comes in.

Speaking about the power inherent in the mantras, Goswami said that often, the words of the mantra have no meaning. But the arrangement of words create a vibration in the ether, which brings about action (*kriya kore*). Even when the words mean something, it is the configuration of the syllables, and not the meaning that is effective. If the mantra is translated into another language, and the translation is chanted, the desired result will not be obtained.

Discussing the difference between an *ojha*, a *bej* and a *vaidya*, he said that the difference is just one of degree. Both *vaidyas* and *bej* use both mantras and herbal medicines, but *bej* use more mantras and less medicine, while *vaidyas*

use more medicine and less mantras. *Ojhas* are the same thing as *bej*, but they use no herbal medicines. Though Goswami does mantras as well as gives herbal medicines, he does not like being called a *bej*. When I asked him what he was, he said he was an astrologer. He explained that astrology has stipulated three kinds of remedies to alleviate problems caused by planets (*grohor dosh*) --- mantra, yantra, and medicines. Depending on the person's horoscope, he uses one or more of these remedies. He also uses a branch of astrology, called horary astrology to answer client's questions, in which the person's horoscope is not needed. Predictions are made by making calculations based on the exact time at which the question was asked.

Dharmeshwar Goswami. Dharmeshwar Goswami lives in a village a few miles away from Mayong. He is eighty seven years old, and is known in that area as Mayongiya Babaji Gosai (the ascetic spiritual guide from Mayong). He is the Gosai of a *satra*, and is also a writer, writing both prose and poetry. He talks and writes in a very philosophical manner. People come to him for treatment from all kinds of illness and life problems. He is well known for his treatment of problems caused by ghosts and spirits.

He said that being born and raised around the jungles of Mayong, he had seen all kinds of *bejali* feats being performed all his life. There were a lot of *bejali* texts at



home which he learned to use. About fifty years ago, when he was a young man, he met an ascetic in these jungles, from whom he got initiated into spiritualism. He continued doing rigorous spiritual exercises, spending eight months in a pit he had dug in the forests. As a part of his exercises, he maintained complete silence (*mauni*) during those months, not speaking a word to anyone. After those eight months, he emerged as an enlightened person. He realized that a large number of mantras and *bejali* texts he had in his family home dealt with the realm of ghosts and spirits. The mantras were of a lower nature, and focused on harmful things. In his enlightened state of mind, he could comprehend their harmfulness in a way he could not in the past. He found that he could never use such mantras. He also realized that having such mantras in the house was dangerous --- though he never used them, someone else may be tempted to do so. He therefore took all those texts and destroyed them by dropping them in the river.

He sees this sense of enlightenment as a *shakti* that separates different levels of *bej*. Lower level *bej* do not have much sense of distinction between right and wrong. They are less able to control greed and are therefore easily prone to use harmful mantras. He does not mind being called a *bej*, but he specifies that people do not see him as a wicked *bej*. In his definition, *bejali* is using mantras or medicines to help or harm. Thus, *dhanantari*, *bej*, *ojha*,

*vaidya*, Tantric, are all same, as they all use mantras. The differences that people have created are without much basis. The only difference he sees is the difference in levels.

Mantras, according to him, are words, through which things get done. But merely having the words is not enough. The people who do mantras need to awaken some sort of *shakti* inside them. Using the example of shooting an arrow, he said that just having the proper combination of the right arrow for the right bow is not enough. The person shooting the arrow will have to know the correct procedure to shoot. Thirdly, the person shooting the arrow will need to have the physical strength (*shakti*) to be able to shoot with enough force to hit the target. If any one of these is missing, the arrow will either not move at all or will not reach the target. And to be able to continue hitting the target and maintaining his technique, the person will also need to keep practicing constantly. This I thought was a perfect metaphorical description of the cultural logic behind the practitioners' power.

#### PRACTITIONERS WITH BEINGS OF THEIR OWN.

This group of practitioners claim to derive their power from some being (*devata*) that either stays with them all the time, or enters their body periodically. All of them referred to these beings in a very reverential manner. The term *devata*

could mean a god, a ghost or a spirit but all of these practitioners refused to tell me the exact nature of their beings. All these practitioners spoke of undergoing supernatural practices before being able to keep or control these beings. They also agreed on the need to maintain various kinds of restrictions in their daily life so as to keep themselves worthy of receiving these beings.

Nripen Goswami. Nripen Goswami lives in a small town about 20 miles from Mayong. He is sometimes called Mayongiya Gosai (the spiritual guide from Mayong) by people of the area. He is about sixty five years old, but looks younger. He has a very large clientele, and it is very hard to get hold of him easily. I had to try six times before I could finally meet him. He is often taken to different places by his clients -- sometimes even out of Assam. The day after I met him for the first time, he was supposed to leave for Calcutta because a client's mill was having financial and labor difficulties and hence they needed his services.

When he is home, he sees clients every tuesday and saturday. I have always visited him on these two days. He has an average of about thirty clients a day. A lot of his clients come by cars from other parts of Assam. The fact that his house is right on the National Highway makes it easier for clients to stop by and see him. He talks to people individually inside a small, closed room in his

house. The room has a table and a chair where he sits, and two chairs for the clients. There is a bookshelf lined with books on one side of the room, and pictures of gods on the walls.

He said that he used to work in a tea-garden, before he got into spiritual life. One day in 1963, he was "shown" a dream, in which he was told to leave his job and come back home as his father and son would die very soon. So he left his job and came home. Soon after, his father and son did die. He was mentally very hurt when his son died. He started worshipping Shiva and Durga from then on, in a small Shiva temple that he set up at his courtyard. With the passage of time, he realized that he would get certain numbers in his head, which, when calculated in a particular way, enabled him to find solutions to problems. He started using his ability to help people. Gradually his fame spread, and now people have great faith in him and the temple in his courtyard. As a result of people's donations, the temple is a fairly big one now.

He claims that he does not do anything himself. A *shakti* (power) whispers everything to him. The *shakti* gives him the numbers to calculate, and based on the numbers, he makes his diagnosis. The *shakti* also tells him what remedy to give, what mantra to use to prepare the remedy, and in which page of the *Tantrasaar* (the text he uses most) the remedy will be found. The remedies he gives can be a

potentized flower, an amulet, a fruit, and a range of other things. He deals with everything, from illnesses, to finding lost articles, to getting rid of the effects of bad mantras.

He uses both local *bejali* texts as well as Tantric texts. According to him, there is no need to have too many mantras. Just a few basic mantras, when combined with the spiritual success (*siddhi*) of the person is enough. The spiritual power of the person is very important --- without it the mantra, no matter how powerful the configuration of words, is useless. And if the person has *siddhi*, he does not even have to say the entire mantra --- just saying one word can be efficacious. But the person has to strive hard both to obtain this power as well as to maintain it. Giving his own example, he said that he has to perform a few hours of spiritual exercises every morning before he can even eat anything. He has given up eating fish and meat, and cannot eat anywhere and everywhere.

I have heard him being referred to as *bej*, *dhanantari*, and *vaidya*. When I asked him how he saw himself, he said he had no objection to being called a *dhanantari* or a *vaidya*, but he gets very uneasy at being called a *bej*. *Bej* harm others, they can kill people, and are greedy. *Vaidya* and *dhanantari* only do good to others. He said that all three did mantras --- the difference lay in the level and in the procedures followed.

Brojen Sharma. Brojen Sharma, about fifty two years old, is an ojha and a priest. He lives in Guwahati, where he works as a clerk in a government office. He told me that people call him a Dhanantari ojha. The knowledge of this technique has existed in his family for eight generations (*aath purush*). Sharma learnt it from his cousin (*dada*, older brother), who "gave" it to him before he died. The cousin had learnt it from his father's brother (*dangor pita*), who had learnt it from his father, and so on. His great grandfather's uncle (*aju aatar jetha*) was the first Dhanantari in the family. Sharma was about twenty two years old when his cousin "gave" him the knowledge and taught him how to "direct" the mantra books existing in the family. Learning it was a tedious process. His cousin would recite a line, then ask Sharma to recite it exactly like him. If the words were not pronounced right, or if he left out a syllable, he had to start all over again. His cousin also warned him not to use certain mantras in the books, as they were either not good, or the ingredients needed to make those mantras effective were not available any more.

Sharma said that he also does Tantric mantras, and he was formally initiated into these by three separate *gurus*. He was first initiated into tantric practices by a *guru*, Tarapodo Sharma, at a Shiva temple there. His second *guru* was Chinmoy Goswami, who was also from Bengal. After his second initiation, he became very ill. His mind was taken

away from him, and he had become "brainless" (his word). His illness was suspected to be caused by someone's bad mantras, so he was sent to Mayong for treatment. In Mayong, his illness was diagnosed as being caused by someone who had done "medicines" on him. "Doing medicines" (*aushad kora*) is a term used to denote someone harming someone else by deliberately feeding them food that had bad mantras (*ku mantras*) chanted on it. (Karuna Goswami, a woman tantric worshipper (Tantric *sadhika*), diagnosed his illness. She was not a *bej* or an *ojha*, so she did not have the power (*shakti*) to cure him, but she had the power by which she could tell him who had the remedy.) She gave him the name of a Muslim *ojha* who lived about a hundred and twenty miles away from Mayong. He went to this *ojha*, who cured him by getting rid of the bad "medicine" which had been fed to him. This was done by the *ojha* giving him a fruit which had mantras chanted on it. The fruit made Sharma vomit out the bad medicine from inside his body. (After he was cured, he went back to Mayong and stayed there for six months, as a disciple of Karuna Goswami. She was his third *guru*. After she initiated him, and taught him all she had to teach, Sharma went back to his village and continued doing the exercises she had taught him.)

Sharma uses his knowledge now to treat different kinds of illnesses as well as other problems like startling (*sok khowa*) and evil eye (*mukh loga, nozor loga*). He also has

mantras which are very good in making spirits admit their presence inside a possessed person. If needed, he also uses herbal medicines along with chanting mantras. The mantras, as well as the details of the herbs to use and the techniques to prepare the medicines, are in the texts (*bejali puthis*) he uses. He has about forty two such texts, which together cover a wide range of problems. The texts are all written in Assamese, and have been inherited from his cousin. According to him, there is no difference between *bej*, *ojha*, *dhanantari*, and *vaidya* and all these are Tantric things (*Tantric bostu*).

Sharma said that ordinarily he diagnoses his clients problems and decides which mantra to use on the basis of the client's symptoms. But for complex problems, such as treatment of childlessness, or for an illness that he has not been able to cure using his regular mantras, he has a special *shakti* (power) that he can invoke upon himself, which enables him to diagnose what the problem is. His special *shakti* tells him why a couple is childless and what can be done about it, or in case of an illness, why he is having problems curing it. Sometimes the *shakti* may tell him to use a particular mantra, or, if the problem is incurable, to give up. And if his *shakti* tells him to give up, he gives up. He also invokes his *shakti* to identify the cause of problems that a person or a family may be going through --- spirits, someone's bad mantras, or evil bundles



buried in their house or courtyard. Sharma also said that sometimes, when he goes to someone's house, he gets an uneasy feeling as though something is not right. He then invokes his *shakti* to find out if anything is wrong. It often turns out that there are buried evil bundles, or a spirit lurking around, which the family was unaware of.

He obtained this *shakti* through his own efforts, as a result of his *sadhana* (spiritual exercises). It is not a power obtained from books, but learned from his *gurus*. The power belongs to a deity (*devata*) who enters into his body when invoked. In order to ensure that the deity will continue coming into him whenever invoked, Sharma has to perform certain rituals on a daily and monthly basis. To do these he has to get up at dawn every morning, and once a month he has to go to a cremation ground to perform rituals. He also has to follow a lot of commensal restrictions to maintain bodily purity so as to accommodate the deity in his body. As cooked rice is a key avenue of pollution coming into the body, he does not eat food cooked by anyone else except his wife, and never eats at restaurants. He has one major meal in the evening, and no rice or rice based foods during the day. He also has to be pure in thoughts and action, not think or do bad things, and never harm others deliberately.

Besides doing mantras, he also does *pujas* and other rituals for clients, though neither of these are a major

source of income for him. The *dakshina* (gifts of cash and kind given to a brahmin at the conclusion of a ritual) he gets for doing *puja* differ from family to family, and he accepts whatever he is given. In the case of doing mantras, clients give him a token payment when he only chants mantras. But if he gives them an amulet, he charges for the materials needed in that amulet.

Nabin Mahanta. Nabin Mahanta is about sixty five, and lives in a small Upper Assam town, about a hundred miles from Guwahati. He is a retired principal of a local primary school. He is very impressive in looks -- tall, with long hair that fall to his shoulders. He seems to be doing quite well economically, having a fair amount of agricultural land, and sons owning small business concerns. He is very well known, and is often taken by clients to their homes in different parts of Assam to solve problems. During my visits to his home, I met people from all over Assam, as well as from the neighboring state of Nagaland. His clients ranged from people suffering from chronic illnesses to all kinds of life problems. Besides other things, he is seen to be very good in finding missing persons, in getting rid of the effect of bad mantras, curing madness, as well as helping with job related problems like boosting the chances of an expected promotion, or changing an unwanted transfer order.

He told me that he does not do anything himself. He has certain *shaktis* (powers), who do his work for him. He refers to these *shaktis* as he would refer to some respected person. There are three of "them" who stay with him at different times of the day. Two stay from six to eleven in the morning, while one comes at one in the afternoon. It is "they" who diagnose the problem, and prepare the remedies. He only follows their instructions.

Mahanta uses a room in his home to talk to his clients. There are benches all around the room for people to sit. He sits at a desk on one side of the room and talks to people, from 6 A.M to 11 A.M. He is often referred to as the "telephone *bej*", because of his style of interaction. He sits at his desk holding a few ancient silver coins to his ear, as though he is holding a telephone receiver. He says that "they" (his *shaktis*) are inside those coins. In the "telephone conversation", he asks the *shaktis* about the patient, and they answer him through the coins, diagnosing the problem and suggesting remedy. No one else in the room can hear these *shaktis* though. On the dot, at 11 A.M, they leave. He then retires to an inner room, where he has a shrine, to prepare the remedies. When they are ready, he comes back to the outer room, and hands out the remedies -- a flower, a potentized garment, a potentized bottle of water, an amulet, barks of trees, and a range of other things.

He said that it was not easy to get these *shaktis* to work for him. He had been communicating with them since he was about forty five. They had come to him in his dream and had told him they would stay with him. So he went to a particular temple about eighty miles away, just as they instructed him to, and "brought" them with him. They told him to go to a specific *guru*, who taught him certain *bij* mantras, and following the *guru's* instructions, he started doing his spiritual exercises (*sadhana*). He said that at time "they" had given him the power (*shakti*) to see and hear them, but he could not make them do his bidding. He just kept them and tended to their needs (*puhi rakhisilu*). It was a few years later, after he had mastered the exercises learned from his *guru*, that they started obeying him.

He told me that though he can get rid of the effects of bad mantras, he does not say any mantras himself. The power of his remedies come from his *shaktis*. It is they who prepare the remedies, he only puts the ingredients together. But he refused to tell me how exactly they prepared the remedies. He specified that he was not a Tantric, and I noticed that the pictures and idols in his shrine were of Vaishnav deities. He vehemently stated that he was not a *bej* as he did not do any chanting (*jora phooka*). It was "they" who potentized the oil (*tel jari diye*) or "cut" water (*pani kati diye*) by chanting, not him. According to him, *bej* are those people who do *jora-phooka* from *puthis* (texts).

They do bad mantras and harm people. But he never uses *puthis* and "they" never harm people. He emphasized that his *shaktis* are always trying to help people. *Bej*, according to him, are not so benevolent. Besides, *bej* are greedy and harm others for money. He never demands any money from anyone. There is a box on his table, where people put in whatever they want to give him. But I have been told by clients that he sometimes asks particular clients to bring him ancient coins for particular services. He has quite a collection of such coins, where he says "they" reside.

Birendranath Sharma. Birendranath Sharma is the priest of a well known Shiva temple about two hundred miles away from Guwahati. He lives in a small house near the temple, and people from all parts of Assam throng there at dawn everyday to consult him. He said he has a *shakti* that comes into him everyday just before sunrise and stays till just after sunrise, that is from about 3 A.M till about 5.30 or 6 A.M. During this period he has the power to tell people whatever they want to know, by divining with five cowrie shells. Referring to his *shakti*, he said that it enables him to understand what the configuration of shells thrown on the ground foretell. After sunrise, the divinatory power leaves him, but he can still prepare the remedies that his *shakti* had suggested. The remedies include amulets, water, oil, rice, and even bottles of perfume with mantras chanted on

them. Sometimes he just gives advice, depending on the problem.

According to him, he has had the *shakti* with him for the past twenty-five years. He was told in a dream to come to this temple and to worship the deity there. He did so, and for one month came there everyday at 3 A.M to do his spiritual exercises. After a month "he" blessed him with the *shakti*. Birendranath Sharma refused to tell me anything more about who "he" was, and about his *guru*, even though he did mention a *guru*. When I tried to probe further, he started jerking and shaking, seemingly involuntarily, and told me that this was happening because the *shakti* did not want him to answer my questions.

He told me that he was not a *bej* as he did not chant mantras from books and did not keep ghosts or spirits --- his *shakti* came from god. A lot of clients I talked to though said that he could be called a *bej* as he did things that *bej* do --- like giving amulets, giving chanted water (*pani jora*), and so on. One client said that there are different kinds of *bej* --- some that dealt exclusively with books while others that did not. He saw Birendrenath Sharma as belonging to the second category. He said that sometimes the client may need a book mantra. Then he directs the client to a *bej* who has that mantra.

Gobordhon Deka. Gobordhon Deka lives in a town about a hundred-and-fifty miles from Guwahati. He is about fifty years of age, is a farmer, and also has a small business selling Ayurvedic medicines. He has a reputation as a *bej* in the surrounding areas. He first learnt *bejali* when he was thirty. He was never initiated into spirituality, but his *guru* initiated him according to the *guru's* own requirements. Besides teaching him *bejali* mantras, his *guru* also taught him to communicate with a supernatural being (*devata*). He told me he could cure different kinds of illnesses and other life problems, and people would come to him for help. When I asked him what brought about the cure, he said that it was the attributes (*guna-gun*) of the words themselves and the procedure of saying them. For example, to get rid of evil eye, he would chant mantras over a bowl of water, making cutting motions over the water with a twig. Then he blew on the water. The cutting motion and the blowing (*phook, phooka*) both put the power (*shakti*) of the mantra into the water, thus making the water potent. The beings he communicated with helped him in identifying problems and their causes, and also in getting things done for him.

According to him, there is no difference between *bej*, *vaidya*, and *dhanantari*, as they all do tantra-mantra. But an *ojha* is different. An *ojha*, to him is a drummer, and has no connection with doing mantras. When I talked to him,

though, he told me that he had stopped doing *bejali*, as it was a very dangerous profession. If a *bej* does not say the mantras right, or if he gets greedy and becomes tempted to take money for his services, harm comes to him and his family. He did not feel like taking such a risk, especially since clients would often seek his help in harming others. He kept refusing to help them, but was afraid that he might give in to temptation some day. As he got deeper into the field, he also found that communicating with supernatural beings involved a lot of restrictions in his own life. He got scared of the power of those beings and started worrying about what would happen to him and his family if he made mistakes in following those restrictions. He therefore stopped practicing *bejali*.

What I found significant, though, was that he stopped doing *bejali* not because he lost faith in its efficacy, but out of fear for the consequences. He and his family members still go to other *bej* in times of illness or troubles.

#### PRACTITIONERS WITH ONLY BOOK KNOWLEDGE.

Almost all the practitioners I have discussed so far use books to a certain extent. The only exceptions are Nabin Mahanta and Birendranath Sharma who claim that it is their *shaktis* who do everything for them and hence they do not need books. The three practitioners I will discuss now use only books --- they do not have any spiritual



enlightenment or supernatural beings to give them power. Practitioners of this category are seen to be of the lowest level by practitioners of the previous two categories.

Jitendra Das. Jitendra Das is a mechanic living in a small town about a hundred and seventy five miles from Guwahati. He owns a small garage, and lives in a two-roomed house in the garage compound. There is a Kali temple and a Shiva temple next door that he had helped establish with donations from people, and he does the daily worship (*puja*) in both. He is a frail man, about 65 years old, with long matted hair and a long beard. He gives the impression of a religious person. He learned his skill from a guru, Naren Talukdar, when he was about thirty years old. During that period, his family was going through a lot of trouble -- the members of his family were seriously ill, and it was due to someone's bad mantras. In his words, his family was in ruins (*sarkhar hoi goisil*). He therefore went to Naren Talukdar for remedy, and soon after, his troubles decreased. He was very impressed by what Talukdar did for his family, and so asked him to be his guru. Talukdar first tested him and finding him suitable, taught him his mantras. After he got initiated in mantras, he also got initiated into tantric practices from another guru, and after some time, established his Kali temple in 1962. He has been leading a very religious life since then.

Though he treats illnesses too, Das specializes in problems caused by bad mantras (*ku-mantras*) and by ghosts (*bhooote dhora*). He first diagnoses the problem by chanting mantra on the nails of a person acting as medium, who can then see images come up on his nails. Based on what those images say, Das gives his remedies. He has particular mantras which when chanted while sprinkling mustard on the ground, can lift out bundles of harmful items buried under the ground by unscrupulous *bej*. He does not hold regular sessions with clients; people come to him whenever they need his help. His clients call him by many names --- a priest (*pujari*), a Tantric, a *bej*. He does not like being called a *bej* though, because though he does *bejali*, it is not his profession. He has a garage to meet his financial needs and he looks after two temples. So he does not go from house to house doing *bejali*. Besides, he added, *bej* usually get greedy and do harm to others.

According to him, keeping away from greed is a very important aspect of doing mantras. The effectiveness of mantras depend not only on the power inherent in the words, but also on the power of the person saying them. The person therefore has to continuously maintain his own power by leading a pure life.

Mihir Sharma. Mihir Sharma is a priest in an Upper Assam town. He is about 60 years old -- a small, thin man, with

a few teeth missing due to age. He speaks very fast, because of which he is often hard to understand. He learned his skill at about thirty years of age, from a *guru*, a few years after his spiritual initiation. He does not hold regular sessions to talk to clients. He already has a set of clients for whom he does *pujas*. Most of the people for whom he does mantras come from this group. They come to his house, or more frequently, call him over to their house, whenever they need his services. He is often called upon to potentize water to get rid of evil eye and in times of pox, and potentize oil to relieve pain. He said he had no objection to being called a *bej* as people know that he is not a *bej* like those from Mayong, who usually do harm. *Bej* like him, on the other hand, only help others.

Gojen Barua. Gojen Barua lives in a small town about a hundred and seventy five miles away from Guwahati. He is about fifty years old and works in a government office. His father was a famous *bej*, who died about fifteen years ago. His father had learnt his skill in Mayong, which is about hundred miles away from the village where the family lived then. His father was a very quiet and sober person (*thanda manuh*), and a *bej* from Mayong, who had been visiting them persuaded him to go to Mayong and learn mantras so as to help others. After his return from Mayong, he started treating problems like evil eye, burns and other injuries,

excessive bleeding, snake bites, caterpillar sting, fish or thorn pricks, worms in the teeth (tooth decay) and various kinds of illnesses. He also helped people who were having trouble getting their daughter married, or who were having marital conflicts, or when there were threats of a joint family breaking up due to the members fighting among themselves as well as getting rid of spirits or the effects of other's bad mantras.

Gojen Barua started learning these skills from his father, at the age of sixteen. His father tested him before giving him the mantras, often slapping or shouting at Gojen for no reason, just to see how Gojen would react. Initially, there were times when Gojen would retort back, or get angry at his father. But gradually he learned to curb his anger and stay calm even when provoked. After his father was convinced that his son had enough self-control so as not to use his mantras against others in anger or retaliation, he started teaching them to him. It was a long process, as Gojen mastered the mantras one at a time, so as not to confuse the lines of one mantra with another. He does not have any spiritual initiation, but he was told by his father to always think pure thoughts. He has to maintain some restrictions, in food and drink, such as abstaining from alcoholic drinks, pork, and chicken, and fasting on sundays and mondays -- so as to make his mantras more effective.

He said that his practice does not have any specific name. He simultaneously calls it *bejali*, *tantra-mantra*, *jhar phook*, and *jadu-vidya* (the knowledge of magic). Though he often call his practice *tantra-mantra*, he does not know anything about the Tantric *satkarmas*, as he is a Vaishnav and does not worship goddesses as such. He said that people call him *bej*, *vaidya* or *dhanantari*. And they call him by these names because of what he does --- mantras. He has all the mantras he uses memorized, but they are also in books, hand written by his father, which he has inherited. His father had copied these mantras from his *guru* in Mayong. Gojen does not use any methods of divination, nor does he have any special *shakti* to help him. He listens to the client's problem and the symptoms, and based on those, decides on what to do. He potentizes water, gives amulets, and chants mantras on the person, depending on what the specific problem needs.

He said that though he dealt with all kinds of illnesses and problems, he is quite well known for his treatment of pain, evil eye and his *Raj Mohini* amulet (attraction amulet). He has given this amulet to a lot of people, to bring about good relations between them and their enemies. He does not take any money from his clients as his knowledge is not for sale. Besides, he said that if a *bej* takes money, his mantras will not work, and his family never prospers. But he can charge a client for things that have

to be bought --- like the gold and silver amulet shell needed for the *Raj Mohini* mantra, or the copper or brass shells needed for other mantras.

Gojen told me that he never did bad mantras. He talked to me about the virtues of his *Raj Mohini* mantra to me in terms of its role in getting rid of conflict and bringing people together. But when I talked to other people in the town about him, I found that he invoked mixed reactions in people. There is an element of fear associated with him. According to some informants, he is not to be trusted, especially when it comes to his *Raj Mohini* mantra. The lady who introduced me to Gojen has three beautiful teenage daughters. She told me that she does not like Gojen coming to her house, as she has been warned by her relatives and neighbors against him. They all felt that he could be unscrupulous enough to use that mantra, for a price, on one of her daughters, and get her infatuated with an unsuitable person. On the other hand, I also met a couple who said that Gojen had solved their marital conflicts using his *Raj Mohini* mantra.

#### CONCLUSION

This description of the various practitioners show distinctions as well as similarities among them. All of them have had some kind of formal training in doing mantras.

Some have gone beyond the first level training from books and have also performed various degrees of spiritual exercises. Many of them got into mantras by inheriting the knowledge existing in the books owned by their family. Irrespective of whether the knowledge is acquired from family members or from other *gurus*, it is apparent that the qualities of the person learning the mantra becomes an important consideration when teaching mantras to a disciple. Most *gurus* test their disciples before giving them the mantras, even if the disciple is their own son, so that the disciple does not misuse the mantras he has learned. Even after obtaining the knowledge they have to continually maintain purity of thought and action so as to make the mantras work for them.

These practitioners are seen to be powerful because their training gives them the power to harness the supernatural forces inherent in the words of the mantras and in the beings they control. The beings that they control and the spiritual success they have achieved also places them (the practitioners) in the category of the supernatural. It is also noticeable that the more spiritually oriented practitioners are more prestigious than others. This is because of the general idea, both among practitioners and clients, that a spiritually enlightened person is less likely to give in to revenge and the lure of money. All the practitioners I talked to said that they

never demanded money, and took whatever the client gave them. What was significant was that though they did not demand money, the clients always gave something, even if it was a very small amount. There seems to be a general feeling that the remedy may not work if obtained without a price. This idea probably stems from the concept of *dakshina* --- a gift of cash or kind given to a brahmin at the conclusion of a ritual, without which the ritual is considered incomplete. Goudriaan, in his analysis of the religious foundations of magic in sanskrit texts mentions that the client

should not forget the ritual gift (*daksina*) by which he counterbalances the performer's services. The *Mantramahodadhi* (by Mahindhara, ed. Khemararaja Srikrnadasa, Bombay 1962), 25, 49ff, the only authority on the subject in the passages studied by us specifies that, the more evil the rite, the higher should be the *daksina* [Goudriaan 1978:272].

The only practitioner I saw who was strict in not taking anything from his clients was Dayanand Trivedi, and the reason he could prevent people from offering anything was the protocol involved in interacting with a government official of his stature. Even then, people would often bring flowers, which they would place at his feet as an offering. Practitioners like Dayanand Trivedi, Amaresh Chakrabarty, Dharmeshwar Goswami, Nripen Goswami, would often have clients touching their feet in reverence, for their blessings. But I have never seen anyone touch someone



like Gojen Barua's feet, probably because he is known to do bad mantras. The aura of reverence that the practitioner creates is itself an example of the sense of power he suggests. Such an aura comes from his reputation as a good, pure and *siddha* person (one who has achieved spiritual success). For most clients, a remedy given by such a powerful man is bound to be efficacious.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE PRACTICE

As already mentioned in Chapter 1, the interaction between the practitioner and the clients constitute the practice of mantras. In this chapter, I will analyze the structure of this interaction, which I see as unfolding in a more or less fixed pattern, of divination, diagnosis, and remedy. These three often follow one after another, though sometimes they may not. The aim of this chapter is to lay out the assumptions about reality on which the practice of doing mantras is based.

#### DIVINATION

One of the key tools of diagnoses used by most of the practitioners I talked to is divination. Various forms of divination are practiced, and the form used differs from practitioner to practitioner. Some use only one form, while others use more than one, depending on suitability.

The term most commonly used to refer to divination is *basoni soa* (looking by selecting). Divination is the chief means of diagnosing the cause of life problems, based on which remedies are suggested. It is an aid to counselling, and enables the practitioner to tell the client what he or she wants to know about the outcome of situations. It is

also used to diagnose the cause and remedies of complicated illnesses.

Most practitioners I talked to saw a distinction between normal illness (*enei bemar*), which a person can get for no particular reason as such (*enei hoi*), and illnesses having specific underlying causes, such as spirits (*bhoot*), bad winds (*hawa botah*), bad mantras (*ku-mantras*), startling (*sok-khowa*), and evil eye (*nojoor loga* or *mukh loga*). Normal illnesses are relieved by looking at the symptoms and using the remedies, mainly mantras, specified in the texts for those symptoms. Eliciting symptoms is important, as efficacy depends on using the right mantra for the right ailment. But often, even the right mantras do not bring results. Then divination is resorted to find out if there are any underlying causes. In Brojen Sharma's words,

ojhas can make out by various means whether the problem is just an ailment (*enei bemar*), and has happened just like that, for no reason (*enei hoise*), or has somebody done something deliberately (*ku-montro*), or is it startling (*sok khowa*), or other such things.

According to Amaresh Chakrabarty, divination helps in understanding whether

some wind has touched the person (*hawa-botah lagil neki*), or has some mischievous spirit taken refuge in the person (*kono opodebota ashroy hol neki*), or has somebody done bad mantras to harm the person (*konobaye ku-montro korile neki*), or has the person caught someone's eye (*karbaar nojoor lagil neki*), or is it just illness (*enei bemar neki*), or is it the result of bad planets (*grohor dosh*).

Divining by picking up matches (Deslai kathi tola).

Amaresh Chakrabarty and his brother use match sticks for divination. They ask their clients to first open a new box of matches. They should then fold three fingers of the right hand into a fist, leaving the thumb and forefingers straight. Then, thinking about the problem (e.g. why is my husband not getting a promotion, when will my son get a job, will my daughter pass this exam, and so on) each time, the person has to pick up a few matches from the box, thrice. The three sets are then to be mixed together, wrapped in a piece of paper, and brought to the brothers. They lay the matches in groups of three on the floor, and, calculating the number of groups that came up, and the number of matches left over at the end (one or two), they can make predictions. The requirement for this procedure is that the matches need to be picked before 9 A.M. People who come to see the brothers after 9 A.M already pick the matches at home, while those who come before 9 often pick in front of them. The brothers prefer clients picking up matches in front of them, as it ensures that the right procedures are being followed. If the matches are not picked in the right way or with the right fingers, the prediction will be incorrect.

Looking on finger-nails (Nokhot soa). This form of divination needs two people --- the practitioner and a

medium. The practitioner first chants mantras on some oil and pours the oil on the medium's finger nails. He then holds the medium's head with his hand and keeps chanting. As long as he is holding the medium's head, the medium can see things on his nails, "just like seeing something on television", according to Satyen Goswami. He can see where harmful things are buried in people's houses, in case of thefts he can see the entire scene of when, how, and by whom the theft was committed, and so on.

The crucial factor in "looking on finger-nails" is the medium, as it is only the medium who can see what appears on the nails. Others, including the practitioner, see nothing. Not everybody can be a medium. Though there are no specific characteristics of a person who can be a medium, he generally has a "weaker" astrological sign like *tula* or *bikh*, and is usually a simple-minded person. The only way to know whether a person can be a medium or not is by pouring the oil on his fingers-nails and testing whether he can see anything. Jitendra Das, who uses this means very often, has his own medium, whom he found after testing several people. Satyen Goswami, who occasionally uses this method does not have a regular medium. He depends on the client to provide him with one.

Looking in water (Panit Soa). This means of divination can be done with or without a medium. This is the method Brojen

Sharma uses, and he does it without a medium. He said that the reason he does not need a medium is because his special *shakti* works for him. He takes a big bowl of water and chants the appropriate mantra on it, then he can see things in the water. Satyen Goswami uses a medium to see things in the water. Goswami chants mantras on a bowl of water, gives the bowl to the medium, and the medium looks in the water and tells him what he sees. Goswami does not need to hold the medium's head for this method, but he feels that this method does not give as clear a picture as nails do. Brojen Sharma, on the other hand, feels that nails do not give as good a picture as water does!

Chanting-on bowls (Baati Jora). This is another method of divination used by Satyen Goswami, which is usually used to help find lost or stolen articles. He needs some fresh earth dug up by field rats for this. The person who has lost something is asked to write down the names of all those whom he or she suspects of stealing the article. The names are written on separate pieces of paper, and the paper pieces are laid out in a row, face downwards, not very close to each other. A small bell-metal bowl (*kahor baati*), is filled with the rat soil, and a specific mantra is chanted on it. The bowl is given to the medium, who holds it lightly. The bowl starts moving, pulling the medium's hand along with it, and stops in front of the paper having the

thief's name. If it just moves about at random, and does not stop in front of any name, it shows that either the article is not stolen, just lost somewhere, or that the thief's name is not in the list of suspects.

Chanting-on rice (Saul Jora). This is another method used by Satyen Goswami to find out the identity of a guilty person in case of thefts, or to decide who deliberately harmed someone by doing bad mantras. Uncooked grains of rice are chanted on and given to suspected persons. They are told to chew the grains and then spit them out. The innocent person will spit out a mixture of saliva and broken bits of rice. But the guilty person will not be able to chew the rice at all, and will spit out the whole rice grains in a dry form, with no saliva.

Chanting-on hands (Haat Jora). This method is sometimes used by Satyen Goswami to find out the location of harmful items planted by other *bej* in the client's house. Mantras are chanted on the medium's hands, who is then made to sit on the floor with both his hands spread out in front of him. The hands start moving of their own accord across the ground, and stop at the place where the items are buried. Digging up that spot will reveal those articles, which can then be got rid of, thus ridding the client of the bad effects of the mantra.

Horary Astrology (Prasna Vigyan). Though he uses these various methods of divination once in a while, the method Satyen Goswami is very competent in, and with which he claims to have achieved 99 percent accurate results, is horary astrology (*prasna vigyan*). In this kind of astrology, one particular question can be answered at a time. The kind of questions answered can be wide ranging, as in Satyen Goswami's words,

my daughter is not getting married, when will she be married, how will the bridegroom be, where will the bridegroom be from; or I have lost a gold chain, where can I find it, has it been stolen, or just lost, or what; or someone is ill and the doctors are not being able to diagnose the problem, will the illness get cured, and if it does get cured, by what kind of treatment will it get cured --- doctori (by medical doctors), homeopathy, *asuri*, or what, what kind of practitioner will cure the person, the age, caste, of the practitioner, in which direction can the practitioner be found, when will the cure take place, will I have to go out of town to get cured, or will I be cured right at home; or a person is missing, is he or she dead or alive, has he or she run away, committed suicide, has been kidnapped, will he or she come back or not and so on.

The key factor in horary astrology is time (*kaal*) --- calculations are done on the exact time the question was asked. According to Satyen Goswami, time (*kaal*) is the determiner of our birth, our fate, our death --- birth, life events, death, all happen at particular junctions of time. Time therefore can tell us things --- whether it is birth time (horoscopes), or the exact time when a question is asked in eagerness or agitation (horary astrology). As soon



as the client asks the question, Goswami looks at his watch and checks the exact time. He then does his calculations based on that time, and comes upon the answer. After he told me all this, I asked him if I could ask him a question, right then, just to see how the procedure worked. He said that for the procedure to work, the question has to be asked in eagerness or agitation (aabeg), in other words, the person has to be in a worried, agitated, eager, frame of mind regarding the problem he or she had come to ask him about. As I was deliberately asking the question as a test, it was not possible for me to create that state of mind at that time, so the procedure would probably not work for me. But he also said that the scriptures had a remedy out of the situation. After I go home, if the problem I was going to ask about was big enough, it will come back to my mind again, along with a state of worry, or agitation about it. At that moment, I should pick a flower, and note the exact date and time that the flower was picked. Examining the kind of flower, the date, and the time it was plucked, he will be able to answer my question. The key factor, therefore, according to him, is time, but the correct time based on which the calculation is to be done, is determined by emotion.

Divining by numbers. Nripen Goswami also uses complex calculations like Satyen Goswami, but the calculations are

based on the first letter of the person's name, and a random number that comes to his head, which he says, is suggested by his *shakti*. The first letter tells him the person's astrological sign, and each astrological sign has a number. Using this number and the number his *shakti* has put in his head, he does some additions and subtractions (*jog-biyog*), and comes up with a final number. The final number is the number of the page in his text in which the mantra and the procedure for the remedy can be found. Based on that remedy, he knows what to give the client --- a flower or fruit that has been chanted on, an amulet, or anything else.

Divining with cowrie-shells (*Kori di soa*). Birendranath Sharma diagnoses his client's problems by throwing cowrie shells on the ground at dawn. He says that he gets a special *shakti* every morning that enables him to understand what the cowries say. But the *shakti* leaves him soon after the sun rises, and he claims that later in the day he does not remember anything of what he does in the morning. Cowries can tell him why a particular woman is childless, where a lost object can be found, why there is conflict between the members of a family, why a person is ill, will a person get a promotion this year, and so on.

Divining by a pot (*Tekeli jora*). This is a method of divination Brojen Sharma told me about, by which a guilty

person can be identified. A pot (*tekeli*), fresh from a potter's kiln is chanted on and then dropped in a water tank (*pukhuri*). As the pot sinks deeper and deeper into the water, getting filled with water in the process, the guilty person's stomach also keeps getting filled with "water". After some time, he gets so bloated, that he cannot breathe. He is then forced to confess, because he knows that if he does not he will die, either by being unable to breathe, or by bursting because of the excess water inside him.

Divining with a cane stick (*Bet jora*). This is a form of divination very similar to the previous one, to identify a guilty person or the place where amulets or bundles, with evil mantras (*ku mantras*) chanted on them, are buried. There is a particular kind of cane (*bet*), which is first chanted on, and then given to a suitable medium, having the astrological sign *tula*. The medium takes it to the house of the client and the cane searches around the house and the courtyard, pulling the medium along with it, finally stopping at the place where the harmful items are buried. If it is searching for a guilty person, it stops in front of the person and starts beating him or her till he or she confesses guilt. Brojen Sharma, who told me about this procedure, also said that the particular kind of cane needed for it is not easily available anymore, and so this form of divination is very rare these days.

Divining by special powers. The practitioners who claim to have special *shakti* primarily use it for divination. As already described, these *shaktis* enable the practitioner to make predictions using a bowl of water, cowrie shells or numbers. Sometimes, these *shaktis* simply whisper answers to client's questions as well as remedies into the practitioner's ears, as in the case of Nripen Goswami, or Nabin Mahanta. Nabin Mahanta claims that his *shaktis* can go anywhere in the world in seconds to check things out. If a *bej* has set out a ghost (*birha melise*), or buried a bundle of bad things in someone's house, he (Mahanta) could get rid of those things, just by sitting at his house. He just had to send "them", and they will find the ghost or the bundle immediately. If a person is ill, they go into the person's stomach and identify the problem instantly --- whether someone had fed the person something bad to make him or her ill, or if it is just an illness. If a person is missing, they can immediately find out where he or she is. And since they operate so fast, they can immediately tell him what is wrong, and what should be done about it.

This listing of various forms of divination is not exhaustive. These are the forms used by the practitioners I talked to. Other practitioners may be using other forms. Each practitioner uses the form or forms that work best for him. Divination is mainly seen as a means to an end. In the next two sections, I will deal with the diagnosis and

remedies suggested by these divinatory processes.

### DIAGNOSIS.

The practitioners I talked to followed different means of divination and diagnosis, and identified themselves in different ways. But people came to them for relief from similar problems, and the language of diagnosis that both the client and the practitioner use is usually very similar. In this section, I examine the most common of these conceptualizations that practitioners and clients have of the cause of the problem at hand. Though I have a separate section on the different kinds of remedies given, I also mention a few remedies in this section as they apply to the particular category of diagnosis described.

Evil eye (nojor loga/ mukh loga). The most common reason people resort to mantras is to counteract effects of attracting (loga) other's eye (nojor) or mouth (mukh). Mukh loga or nojor loga are not caused deliberately by anyone. It is based on the victim's personal appearance, beauty, achievements, good health, good relationships --- anything that can catch another's "eye" or invite the "mouth" to make a comment. The victim can get it from people who are envious of him or her, or from people naturally thought to have an "evil" (beya) eye or an "evil" mouth, and even from domestic animals, especially if they

are watching the victim eat. People who have an "evil" eye or mouth are usually not aware of it, and they do not deliberately harm others. But their innocently said words, or their desirous feelings have the power to cause harm. Brojen Sharma characterizes such people as having all thirty-two teeth, as opposed to most people, who have only thirty teeth in their mouth. Roma Barua called such a mouth a pulverizing mouth (*khunda mukh*) --- words coming out of such a mouth shatter the object they are directed at. When such a person sees something beautiful, something compels him or her to make a compliment --- and that compliment causes harm. If such a person sees someone eating, all he or she has to say is something like, "that curry you are eating looks great", and the person who was eating that curry will soon have an upset stomach. If such a person compliments a woman on the beauty of the cloth she is weaving, or on the rice cakes (*pitha*) she is making, she will never be able to weave well, or make good rice cakes (a very common snack item) again. Brojen Sharma told me he has a friend in his village, who used to craft very beautiful things out of cane. One day, about ten years ago, when he was making something while sitting in the courtyard of his house, an acquaintance passed by and profusely praised his work. Minutes after the acquaintance left, the cane maker's fingers became crooked. According to Sharma, they are crooked to this day. A very common story is about people

who compliment the owner on a beautiful bunch of bananas growing on his or her tree, and the bunch falls off the tree even before the person who gave the compliment reached home.

As I was growing up in Assam, I was never allowed to eat anything in the street or sitting outside the house, in case what I was eating caught some hungry or covetous person's eye and made me ill. This kind of evil eye is not necessarily caused by a person who has a "bad" eye and is prone to causing evil eye, but because of the force of the person's desires. A person, a family, an entire household, a garden, even someone's cowshed, can be the recipient of such an evil eye. Informants told me that sometimes the floor or the doorway of one's house can get someone's evil eye (*mojiyat nojor lagibo pare*), bringing harm to the people who live there. Sometimes a family's cooking stove (*souka*) can catch someone's evil eye --- the family members will not be able to digest (*hojom nohobo*) food cooked in the stove. A family doing very well economically, or a family which is free from conflict between its members are often prone to "catch someone's eye". I have heard stories about well to do people reduced to financial ruin and harmonious joint families breaking up because of evil eye. Fear of evil eye is so inherent, that most people are afraid to praise their families or even think, let alone talk, of how well their life is going. A large black dot is always put on a baby's forehead to ward off evil eye. The person most likely to

give evil eye to babies is the mother, as she is always marvelling at the wonders of her child.

*Nojor loga* or *mukh loga* is generally diagnosed by divination. Sometimes, if the case is clear cut, the family makes the diagnosis themselves, and divination is not needed. For example, if a person gets ill immediately after eating something while someone else was watching, or if someone gets ill just after achieving something covetous, evil eye is immediately suspected, and a practitioner is resorted to.

Bad mantras (ku-mantras). A very common cause of life problems and chronic illnesses are seen to be the result of someone deliberately causing harm to another, using bad mantras. These mantras are done by unprincipled practitioners, for a price. The fear of *ku* mantras is ubiquitous and unexplained misfortunes are often attributed to it.

*Ku* mantras are often called *baans* (arrows), which, when said in a person's name hits the person like an arrow. They are done for various purposes, and to bring about problems ranging in different levels of intensity. They are induced into the person or family, usually with the help of some other object acting as a medium. A very common way of inducing *ku* mantra is by feeding the victim something that had bad mantras chanted on it, a process often referred to



as "doing medicines". Brojen Sharma, Dharmeswar Goswami and Gojen Barua told me about a *baan* called *agni baan* (fire arrow), which causes intense burning sensations in the victim's body. Mantras are chanted on uncooked grains of rice, which are then heated in the sun till they become dry, puffed, and light like *muri* (the American equivalent of *muri* is Rice Crispies). Even one grain of that rice when sneaked into someone's food, will give that person the *agni baan*. There is another similar *baan*, called *bikhali baan* (pain arrow), which makes the victim immobile with pain. "Medicines" are sneaked into the victim's body mixed with regular food, like meat, eggs, fish, but these items do not get digested. They just stay in the stomach in the form in which they were fed --- as chunks of meat, a whole egg, or a whole *magur* fish. Once inside the stomach, they make the victim constantly ill --- these illnesses look like common illnesses, but no medical doctor can cure them. *Magur* fish, which I was told is used very often, is a very commonly found fish. It can stay alive in a minimum amount of water, and one of its characteristics in the fish market is that it jumps about in the fisherman's basket, turning somersaults, making a loud splashing noise, and violently shaking the basket every now and then. The same resemblance is made in describing the state of the victim's stomach when fed "medicines" through this fish --- the fish becomes alive and whole in the person's stomach and splashes and turns about

just as it does in the fisherman's basket. The victim thus has a very uncomfortable sensation in his or her stomach all the time.

Another common form of *ku* mantra is *aahudi* (philter), in which mantras are chanted on some commonly consumed item, usually betel nut or a cup of tea, in the name of the victim and the client. This potentized item, when fed to the victim, will cause him or her to be infatuated with or subjugated to, the client. Good looking, young, and unmarried people are especially susceptible to *ahudi*. Mothers-in-law often resort to it to make their son or daughters-in-law subservient to them. I was often told by well wishers not to eat or drink anything offered by practitioners when I went to talk to them, or sat through their healing sessions, just in case they tried to do *ahudi* to me.

"Medicines" are also often done to people so as to make them disinterested in their work, in their families, or in life in general. As already mentioned earlier, Brojen Sharma said he had "medicines" done to him so as to make him "brainless". I have also been told of brides or bridegrooms being fed "medicines" that made them scream and shout and run away from their new spouse.

Another way of administering *ku* mantras into someone's family is by burying potent items in people's courtyards or houses. These items could be bundles containing human hair,

nails, bones from the cremation ground, and various other things which differ, depending on the purpose and the practitioner. Or they can be amulets with mantras written or chanted inside them, and hidden inside the house. Or they may be any other medium that can hold the mantra. Nripen Goswami told me of a method by which a practitioner needs to get some soil from a cremation ground, from the cremation spot of a person who died on a Saturday or a Tuesday. Saying a particular mantra in the name of the victim, on that soil, and blowing on the soil three times, he leaves it on the victim's house or courtyard on a new moon night, on a tuesday or saturday. These *ku* mantras can create a wide range of problems and can even bring a family to ruin. He also spoke of another set of mantras, which unscrupulous *bej* use to help thieves or lovers. These mantras, when chanted on some soil collected while an earthquake is going on, and thrown on the roof of a house, will make the owners of the house sleep through a theft or a lover's rendezvous. Practitioners who use these mantras therefore collect the soil during an earthquake and stock it to chant on later whenever needed by a client.

Some *ku* mantras do not need a medium such as food, soil, a bundle or an amulet. Dharmeshwar Goswami told me about a mantra he possessed, which he had to chant in a victim's name on a glass of water. Then, if he (the practitioner) drank that water, looking at the sun and

thinking of the victim, misfortune and danger (*bipod*) will come to the victim. He said that this and several other such mantras were in the collection that he destroyed when he gained spiritual enlightenment.

*Ku* mantras can be done to "tie" (*bondha*) up a person in various ways. A very common form is to "tie" up a person's marriage (*biya bandhi thowa*) so that he or she is unable to get married till the "tie" (*baandh*) is removed. A woman's womb is often "tied" up (*gorbho bandhi thowa*), thus making her childless. A student's education can be "tied" up (*vidya bandhi thowa*) so that he or she cannot do well in studies.

*Ku* mantras are diagnosed through divination. Besides ascertaining whether the person's problems are due to *ku* mantras or not, divination can tell how the bad mantras were administered, and where the bundles, or amulets containing bad mantras are buried. Divination can sometimes help in identifying both the practitioner who administered the bad mantra as well as the person who hired the practitioner. But a lot of clients told me that practitioners would often not tell them the name of the person who had the bad mantras inflicted on them. This they said, was to maintain harmony within friends and relatives, as most of the time, it was this group that hired practitioners to cause harm, because of envy or enmity. Clients have also told me that they themselves would rather not know who did them harm, as the

knowledge would only create a conflict situation.

There are mantras to counteract the ku mantras, and that is what all the practitioners I talked to said they did. After getting rid of the bad mantra, some of them also "tied" a client with good mantras so as to protect the victim from such mantras in future. An observation I made though was that in some arenas the line between good and bad was hazy, and contextual. I saw Samaresh Chakrabarty refuse to help a woman who wanted something to make her son-in-law pay more attention to his wife's opinions rather than his mother's. But he gladly helped a woman who wanted something to make her son and daughter-in-law subservient to her. When I asked him why, he said that a man's duty is to be obedient to his mother, and not to his wife --- he is his mother's son, not his wife's. Hence, it would have been wrong for him to help the first woman, as his mantras will cause the son to neglect his mother. On the other hand, it is a daughter-in-law's duty to serve her mother-in-law. Since she was not doing that, he helped the mother-in-law to make her subservient. Most practitioners also saw no harm in helping their clients influence their bosses' decisions through mantras, especially in times of crucial promotions or to counteract transfer orders. The most common explanation given is that they are helping their clients to solve their problems, and not helping them harm others.

Ghosts (*Bhooote dhora*) and Spirits (*Bira loga*). One of the reasons *bej* and *ojhas* are feared is because they can set up ghosts and spirits (*bhoot*, *bira*) on people. The terms *bhoot* and *bira* are often used synonymously, but some people make a distinction that *biras* are always owned by *bej* or *ojhas* and are always deliberately inflicted by them. Both *biras* and *bhoots* may be spirits of dead people, or they may also be other supernatural beings. *Bhoots*, though sometimes owned by people, are usually independent and may mischievously or accidentally inflict themselves on someone. When *bhoots* inflict themselves upon humans, they are often referred to as "winds" (*hawa botah*) or a "bad wind" (*beya hawa*) because they touch a person suddenly and unexpectedly, like a breeze. Such "winds" can cause a person to become ill or behave in uncharacteristic ways or go insane. Ghosts may, among others things, be attracted by or caught in the long, flowing hair of a woman, especially if she is out alone at noon or at night, or by a person who passes under a banyan tree late at night, or by a small child left alone outside the house. A menstruating woman is especially vulnerable to "winds", and women in that condition are usually told not to go under large trees.

Ghosts and spirits that are deliberately inflicted are tamed and owned (*puhe*) by the *bej* or *ojha* who use them. Brojen Sharma described one of the procedures used by these practitioners to make these beings work for them.

Suppose there is a man who is strong, healthy, and I want his spirit (*atma*). Dhanantari texts have certain techniques by which the *ojha*, using mantras, can shoot at (*baan maribo*) that *atma*. The *baan* will make the person "dry out" and eventually reach the point of death. Just before the person dies, the *ojha* will then establish contact with that *atma*, and show it some kind of bait, usually food. The *atma* then, on leaving the body, follows the *ojha*. For twenty-one days the *atma* will be kept in a specific place, like a cremation ground, or under a tree, "tied" to the place through mantras. During those days, the *ojha* will not go to the place at all, and the *atma* will be totally isolated. After twenty-one days, the *ojha* will teach things to the *atma* through mantras. These lessons are only possible through mantras. After about six months, the *atma* will be tested by the *ojha*, who will give it a tub of water and ask it to throw the water at some specified place. If the spirit obeys, the *ojha* will know that it has become a *bira* and has been subjugated. It will do whatever he tells it to do and he can inflict this *bira* on others. But all this is done through mantras. Even the orders are given through mantras.

Once inflicted, *biras* can cause problems ranging from simple, mischievous acts, like things disappearing in front of people's eyes, or beds forcefully shaken at night, startling the sleeper, to causing conflicts, various kinds of illnesses, as well as madness in the family. In my observation, though, a lot of the stories and anecdotes of people's experience with *biras* revolve around *biras* harassing and tormenting victims by scaring them. A very common mischief reported to be caused by *biras* is having flames come out all around the house, or curtains catching fire all of a sudden. *Biras* are sometimes subsumed under *ku* mantras, as it is the bad mantras that set the *bira* on the

person or family in the first place. For some practitioners, setting a *bira* means setting a force on some family, a force which may not necessarily be a supernatural being. Nripen Goswami showed me a mantra in one of his texts, in which no spirits of dead people or other beings were necessary to set a *bira* on someone's house. At midnight, on a saturday or tuesday, the practitioner had to chant that mantra a hundred times, in the victim's name, on some home husked rice. These rice grains, when buried under the victim's courtyard or house, will keep bursting like fire crackers all the time. The distinction between *biras* and other forms of *ku* mantras seems to be that *biras* often make their presence felt in sudden, perplexing and dramatic ways. Other *ku* mantras, though often more harmful, manifest themselves in more subtle ways.

*Biras* and *bhoots* can be identified through divination. Sometimes, especially when the *bira* is inflicted by some other supernatural force rather than a supernatural being, merely saying the mantras may be enough to get rid of it. But when the person is caught by a supernatural being, the *bej* has to first make the being confess to who it is and why it has caught the person. If the *bej* is a good one, he can very quickly get the being to confess, and, if it had been deliberately inflicted by someone, give the name of its master. The being will speak through the person it has caught. If it is the entire household that it has been



inflicted on, the *bej* chooses a particular family member, and using mantras, makes it speak through that person. Once the being has confessed, the *bej* through his mantras makes it go back to wherever it came from. Practitioners told me that they conducted a two-language conversation with the being. Questions, like "who are you?", "where have you come from?" are asked in Assamese, and everyone present there can hear and understand these exchanges. But in between these questions, the practitioner chants mantras so as to enable the being to respond to those questions. After the being leaves, the practitioner "ties" the victim or the family with good mantras so that it cannot catch them again. When the practitioner makes the being leave, he also asks it to show a sign that it is gone, like breaking a twig in a tree, or eating some food that he leaves outside the compound fence. I have had both practitioners and clients tell me that they have seen twigs break, or food left outside disappear soon after the being left.

Startling (*sok khowa*). *Sok khowa* occurs when a person gets startled by sudden surprise or fright. Startling may be caused by a variety of reasons. Brojen Sharma described some of the circumstances that could lead to *sok khowa* as followed:

Suppose you are going on the road. Suddenly someone says something very loudly from behind, startling you. That is very bad. Or suppose you are going on a boat and you see your shadow in the

water. You think it is something else, and get startled. Or you are walking along some lonely place, or through a cremation ground. You suddenly see the shadow of a tree moving in the wind, and thinking it is a ghost (*bhoot*), get scared and run. That then makes you ill by startling. Or if it is raining, and you slip and fall on the slippery road, you can get startled. Anything that scares you suddenly can give you *sok khowa*. But you are more prone to become ill because of it, if the startling occurred at noon, dawn or dusk. These three moments of time (*khyon*) are very bad.

According to Nabin Mahanta, fear can cause a person to get startled, which later turns into an illness (*bemar*). Most practitioners agree that persons afflicted by *sok khowa* become very sickly, get frequent fevers, do not feel like staying at home, have difficulty falling asleep at night, and wake up startled whenever they manage to fall asleep. They are constantly scared, and cannot stay alone at night. In severe cases, the person becomes delirious, and can eventually become mad. \*When children get startled, their stomach gets bloated, they lose their desire to eat, and cannot sleep.

Though *sok khowa* seems to be like any other illness, there is a general idea, both among practitioners and clients, that these symptoms are only curable through mantras, and not by a medical doctor. Brojen Sharma, Nabin Mahanta, Gobordhon Deka, Mihir Sharma and Jitendra Das use a similar procedure for curing *sok khowa*. They do mantras on a bottle of water, and tell the client to mix that water with more water that the client has to get from one or more

ponds (*pukhuri*). The number of ponds differ with the practitioner. Nabin Mahanta needs the water to be got from seven ponds, while water from only one pond is enough for Sharma. The number of ponds specified by other practitioners range from three to five. All of them insist that though the water chanted-on can be from a tap, the chanted-on water is to be mixed with pond water, and not tap water, for *sok khowa* to be cured. The startled person has to drink sips of the mixture of pond and chanted-on water and bathe with this mixed water. The number of sips of water also differ with the practitioner, ranging from three at a time to seven. Mantras are also induced into the person through the medium of fruits, particular seeds, or even a garment, which the startled person has to eat or wear.

Planetary configuration (*groh*) Illnesses as well as life problems are often caused by bad planetary configuration. Unemployment, the unmarried state of a person, continuous misfortunes, chronic or severe illnesses, childlessness, and a multitude of other sources of suffering are all attributable to unfavorable planets (*grohor dosh*). The most common way of diagnosing *grohor dosh* is through astrology, by studying the person's horoscope. In the context of doing mantras though, most practitioners used their own *shaktis* or their regular method of divination to identify *grohor dosh* as a possible cause of the client's problem.

Amaresh Chakrabarty, in spite of knowing how to read a horoscope, used match sticks. Birendranath Sharma used cowrie shells, Brojen Sharma, Nabin Mahanta, and Nripen Goswami used their own *shaktis*. Among the practitioners I talked to, only Satyen Goswami used astrology for diagnosis. He told me that astrology gives a more in-depth diagnosis of *grohor dosh* --- it can say which planet is causing the problem, which planet is protecting the client, what planets will cause problems or do good in the future, and so on. Other methods of divination only give a general indication that some planet is causing the problem. They cannot specify which planet, nor can they say anything about the future.

Whatever the method of diagnosis, the practitioners claim that *grohor dosh* can be counteracted by mantras, usually inserted in an amulet. Though afflictions may occur because of bad *groh* (planets) alone, there is also the general idea that *grohor dosh* makes the person vulnerable to other causes of afflictions, such as evil eye, bad mantras, startling, ghosts and spirits, or illnesses. Remedies for bad *groh* therefore often go hand in hand with remedies for these other problems.

Normal illnesses (*Enei bemar*). One of the reasons people come to these practitioners is to get relief from illnesses. Most normal illnesses (*enei bemar*) are diagnosed through

symptoms. For a particular set of symptoms, particular mantras are prescribed in the texts, which the practitioner has to chant in the prescribed way. The key is in proper diagnosis. If the symptoms are not accurately matched with the right mantra, the cure will not come about. If a cure does not come about with the right mantra said in the right procedure, the illness moves from being *enei bemar* to one that has an underlying cause behind it. Divination is then resorted to find out that underlying cause --- *ku* mantras, *birhas*, *grohor dosh*, and so on. In contrast to Ayurveda, none of the practitioners I talked to thought in terms of humoral imbalance bringing about illnesses.

Though all the practitioners I talked to treated illnesses, many of them have their own specialties. The mantras used, the treatment procedures as well as the "medicines" given also differ with the practitioner and his training. Besides mantras for ailments like headache, stomach ache, nosebleed, boils and carbuncle, some particular categories can be seen. Some of these categories are common to most practitioners, while others differ.

One of the categories many practitioners relate to is *pohuta*. Though differing in the exact description of *pohuta*, most of them see the symptoms as upset stomach, indigestion, general weakness, acid burps and "drying out", a common illness category that I will address a little later. Women are most susceptible to *pohuta*, especially

after childbirth. The remedy is to chant mantras (*jora*) all over the client, waving a twig, a hand, or a powerful item like the piece of bone that Amaresh Chakrabarty uses, around him or her. Amulets and potent water ("cut" water) is also given by some practitioners.

Another illness very commonly treated through mantras is *baat*. The Assamese English dictionary refers to *baat* as rheumatism as well as gout. The symptoms that the practitioners go by to diagnose the ailment is pain around the body. I have talked to many clients who claimed to be totally cured of their constant and extreme pain through mantras. All the practitioners treated pain by first chanting mantras on the person (*jora*), and then giving some "medicines". The medicines differed with the practitioner. Dayanand Trivedi gave oil with mantras chanted on it, which the clients had to rub over the painful areas. Amaresh Chakrabarty gave chanted-on, uncooked rice grains a few grains of which had to be chewed each day and swallowed with chanted-on water. He also secured a particular root to seven strands of black or white thread (*jaap*), each strand having a mantra chanted on it. The strands with the root are tied to the person's waist, ankles or wrists till the pain subsides.

Jaundice, a very common waterborne disease in Assam, is treated by mantras very frequently. I have talked to highly educated, westernized Assamese, who have resorted to mantras

when their children have had the disease. Different practitioners have different treatments for jaundice, but the common element is the use of mantras to get rid of the yellowness inside the body, which is seen to cause the disease. The yellowness is got rid of in different ways. The most common way is to have the client wash their hands with potent water. I have seen Amaresh Chakrabarty use this method. The treatment has to be done early in the morning, before six A.M. Mantras are chanted on a bucket of water, and on some mango bark. Samaresh Chakrabarty pours water from the bucket into the client's hands while chanting mantras and the client "washes" his or her hand with the bark, using it as though he or she would use a piece of soap. This treatment is repeated for several days. On the first day the water that emerges from the hand washing is very yellow in color. With each passing day of treatment, this water becomes less and less yellow, and finally, when the client is rid of the jaundice, the water emerges clear. Brojen Sharma, Jitendra Das, and Gojen Barua also recognize this technique and said that they used it.

"Women's illness" (*maikimanuhor bemar*) is a category these practitioners are seen to be very good at treating. The predominant problems treated as "women's illness" are painful menstrual periods, menstrual irregularities and leukorrhoea (*boga saab*). The English term leukorrhoea was used by Samaresh Chakrabarty to explain the illness to me.

Besides the physical symptoms of a white discharge, a woman having this illness also gets very emotional, feels sad (*bejar pai*) when anyone says anything to her, feels dizzy and sees dark patches in front of her eyes. She also starts to "dry out". Most of the practitioners I talked to called these "women's illnesses" very serious conditions in a girl or a woman, especially since they could lead to childlessness. In fact, treatment for these conditions often went prior to treatment for childlessness. These practitioners are also often resorted to in times of childbirth, to get an amulet or potent water to ease the process of giving birth. The treatment for "women's illnesses" involve chanting mantras on the woman, as well as on some medium, usually bananas, water, or betel nut which the client has to eat or drink. Often an amulet also has to be worn.

A category both practitioners and clients relate to is that of a person "drying up" (*sukai jowa*). Though the term "drying up" is sometimes used in conjunction with the term for getting thinner (*khinai jowa*) to refer to a person rapidly losing weight for no apparent reason, it has a much broader connotation. A "dried up" person's skin becomes very sallow, and he or she lacks the sparkle and lustre of life. In extreme cases, the person loses so much weight that he or she is reduced to just skin and bones. "Drying up" can be brought about by normal illness, inadequate diet,



worry, or by other causes such as evil eye, bad mantras or ghosts and spirits. Amaresh Chakrabarty diagnoses illnesses caused by "drying up" by examining the person's chest bone. If the end of the chest bone protrudes out of a bony chest, he calls it *haar barha* (enlarged bone). *Haar barha*, for him, is both a cause as well as a symptom of "drying up". The remedy for it is that the client has to wear a cowrie shell with mantras chanted on it as a locket, so that the shell sits on the "enlarged" bone. Samaresh Chakrabarty claims that the bone enlargement subsides after the shell is worn continuously for a few weeks, and clients testify to the validity of the claim. Another reason a person can "dry up", according to the Chakrabarty brothers is because of the liver getting "elongated" (*liver to dighol hoi jai*). They use the English word liver to mean the stomach area, and the sign of "liver enlargement" is that the stomach protrudes out, feels hard and makes a hollow sound when patted. A symptom of liver enlargement is constant stomach problems, and both children and adults are prone to the condition. One of the causes of an "enlarged liver" is faulty digestion, brought about by inadequate or improper diet, like too much fried or spicy foods. Sometimes children who are breast fed get it from their mothers, especially if the mothers have *pohuta*. The remedy for this ailment is to hang a chanted-on raw banana stuck with date thorns over the cooking stove and to feed the sick person chanted-on salt

and water. *Haar barha* and "elongated liver" often go together, one leading to the other. Therefore, the two are often treated together.

A person may also "dry out" if they pass bodily substances (*dhatu*) like blood or semen out of the body, usually through the urine. Young men are specially prone to it, and there is a general idea that constantly passing out *dhatu* may make a man impotent. Leukorrhoea is also seen as a way of *dhatu* loss. *Dhatu* loss is a condition that is seen to be incurable by medical doctors. The remedy for it is mantras chanted on some medium like salt or water, that the client has to ingest.

Bites, Stings and Pricks. Snakebites, animal bites, or stings and pricks from insects, fish or plants form a category of problems perceived to be very easily curable by mantras. Snake bites are often put in a different category from other bites. I was told that not all practitioners treat it, as these mantras were originally owned by a special group of people, and the knowledge was not easily available to all. I was also told that the practitioners using these mantras need to perform special exercises to maintain their efficacy. Of the practitioners I talked to, only Dayanand Trivedi, Gojen Barua, and Dharmeswar Goswami claimed to cure snake bites. Dayanand Trivedi is so confident of his *siddhi* (spiritual success) in snake mantras

that he claims they work even if he chants them on the telephone. But I was told by an informant that to maintain this *siddhi*, Trivedi has to perform special spiritual exercises (*sadhana*) every six months.

The most common method of treating snake bites is that the practitioner first chants a mantra and then slaps the bitten person just above the wound. The slap pushes the mantra inside the person and prevents the venom from moving upwards. The practitioner continues chanting, and gradually the venom disappears into the ether.

Most practitioners seem to be able to treat pricks and stings, especially the painful pricks caused by a fish called *singi* fish, fish bone stuck to a person's throat, thorns, sometimes even poisonous ones, from plants, and allergy caused by caterpillar hair. These are very common everyday occurrences, and are seen to be instantly cured by mantras. Practitioners usually chant mantras on a bowl of water and clients claim that they have seen the offending bone, or thorn or hairs come out of the client's body and fall into the bowl, as if from nowhere.

#### REMEDIES.

After the problem has been diagnosed, the practitioner needs to remedy the situation. In this section, I describe the various forms of remedies that practitioners use, to ease their client's suffering. None of these remedies are

mutually exclusive, and more than one of them are used simultaneously, or one after the other. But for purposes of analysis, I lay them out as separate categories in this section.

Chanting and Blowing (Jora Phuka). Doing mantras is almost synonymous with *jora phuka*. *Jora* refers to potentizing something by chanting mantras into it while waving a hand, or a blade of grass, or some other item over it. *Phuka* refers to potentizing something by chanting mantras and then blowing the mantras into the object to be potentized. *Jora phuka* can be done on humans, or on any other medium. Most remedies given by practitioners involve some form of *jora phuka*. They are the means by which the mantra gets into the person or object to bring about a desired effect.

The most common form of *jora phuka* is *pani kota* ("cutting water"). The term gets its name from the procedure used to potentize the water. The practitioner chants mantras over a bowl of water, while making cutting motions over it with a blade of grass. Cutting the water with the blade of grass enables the power of the mantra to go into the water. This "cut" water, when mixed with normal water, potentizes that water. The client has to drink sips of this potent water and bathe with it. Rubbing this water into afflicted parts of the body is said to give relief. "Cutting water" is the most basic *bejali* technique with

which all practitioners start their training. But I have noticed that practitioners like Dayanand Trivedi, the Chakrabarty brothers, and Nripen Goswami do not make the cutting motions. They simply chant the mantras on a bottle of water and the power of the mantra, combined with their own power gets into the bottle. This ability, they say, come out of their *siddhi* (spiritual success) and practice. Lower level practitioners, according to them, need to go through the entire routine. *Pani kota*, also called *pani jora*, is used to counteract evil eye, bad mantras, startling, ghosts and spirits, illnesses as well as for problems like a client's trees not producing fruits.

*Jora phuka* is also done on people to get rid of their ailments. Clients claim to get relief when mantras are chanted on (*jora*) or blown into (*phuka*) ailing parts of the body. Sitting through Dayanand Trivedi's healing sessions, I have seen clients come in with so much pain that they have to be half carried into the room. After Trivedi's chanting and blowing, and sometimes even hitting mantras into their bodies, many of these clients would hobble out of the room without anyone's support. The Chakrabarty brothers constantly chant mantras into clients for ailments, for general well being, for concentration and better memory while studying for exams (*vidya jara*), as well as for making children obedient to their elders (*kotha suna*). I have seen mothers bring their children to the brothers when they

have fever. The remedy for fever is to *jara* the person for three consecutive days, and to give "cut water". The mantras for the three days follow in a sequence, and there is a different mantra for each day. The mothers claim that the fever gets better each day, and by third day of chanting, it is usually gone.

"Medicines" (Aushad). The term "medicines", in the context of *jora phuka* and doing mantras, refers to mediums on which mantras are chanted, and which the client has to ingest, so as to get the power of the mantra into his or her body. It is essentially the same thing as "cut water", except that "cut water" is not solely for ingestion. The mediums used for "medicines" differ with the practitioner. They can range from potentized edible flowers or leaves to seeds, fruits, sugar, salt, even uncooked rice grains.

"Medicines" are given for a wide range of purposes and are not confined to treatment of illness alone. Amaresh Chakrabarty potentizes sugar for children to help them in their studies. Using another mantra, he potentizes sugar to bring in better relations between people in whose names mantras have been chanted. Mantras chanted on sugar also makes children obedient to their parents and grown ups obedient to the person whose name is on the mantra. He potentizes bananas to help cure "women's illnesses", and tender coconuts to cure prolonged and chronic stomach

problems. He chants mantras on honey to cure appetite loss brought about by *pohuta* or "liver problems". Similar "medicines" are given by all other practitioners. There are specific instructions on how to take these "medicines". Some can only be taken after a bath, with some "medicines", the person has to abstain from certain foods, while some, like the bananas for "women's illnesses" have to be taken once a day, early morning, on an empty stomach. "Medicines" are also used to bring out "bad medicines" fed to a person through *ku* mantras. "Medicines" when fed to a person "caught" by a ghost or a spirit makes that being "confess" its presence very easily.

Non-Ingsted Chanted-on Items. This is a form of *jora phuka* where mantras are chanted on some medium, which, when kept in close association with the problem, helps in alleviating or getting rid of the problem. Mustard, cumin and fenugreek seeds are often chanted on and sprinkled around a person's bed and under their pillow to prevent recurring bad dreams and to get rid of insomnia. Iron nails are chanted on and buried in the four corners of a house to protect the members from evil eye, bad mantras and misfortune. A similar precaution is taken by chanting mantras on raw grains of rice and sprinkling the rice around the compound of a house. These chanted-on items can even bring tenants into a house that the owners are having

trouble getting rented. Mantras are chanted on a box of vermillion powder, and the powder, when worn by a wife on her forehead and on the parting of her hair can make an errant husband come back to her. In cases of stomach problems, the Chakrabarty brothers take a raw banana, and stick seven date thorns to it, chanting a mantra while sticking each thorn. This banana is then hung over the cooking stove of the client's household. The general idea is that the enlarged liver, like the banana, will gradually shrivel up and get smaller. The heat of the stove, which the banana takes in, is also seen to resemble the excess internal heat of the sick person. When the banana is totally dry, it has to be dropped in a bucket of water so as to cool off the excess heat it has absorbed. If this procedure is followed correctly, the sick person's "elongated liver" will come back to its normal size. This is one of their most commonly given remedies, and many clients have told me that their own or their children's chronic stomach problems were totally cured by it. The brothers also chant mantras on an olive seed, which the client wears as a locket, tied to a thread around their neck. Olive seed, according to them is a very good medium for five illnesses --- high and low blood pressure, diabetes, head reeling, tonsillitis, and piles (hemorrhoids). Each of these illnesses needs a different mantra to be chanted on the olive seed. Another remedy the



Chakrabarty brothers use very often is chanting mantras on a shell, which the client wears around his or her neck. A cowrie shell is used for "enlarged bone", while another kind of shell is used for breathing problems. Dayanand Trivedi chants mantras on a brass plate which the client has to keep in contact with his or her back for about half an hour every day, to cure sciatica pain. These are only some of the examples of the various kinds of mediums used, which differ with the practitioner.

Chanted-on Folds of Thread (Jaap). Mantras are often chanted on threads which are worn around the neck, waist, wrists or ankles. Strands of thread are seen as a very good medium to hold particular mantras which need to be in constant contact with the person's body. Thread from a roll is folded (*jaap*) into several strands, usually with a mantra chanted at each fold. The folds are then braided or knotted together so as to give it thickness. The mantras differ with the purpose and with the practitioner. Threads are mainly used to protect a person from spirits, from evil eye, and for general well being. They are also used for pain. I have seen Nabin Mahanta give a thread to be tied to the wrist of a baby who cries excessively. The Chakrabarty brothers make a *jaap* out of seven strands of thread, with a mantra for each strand. They also sometimes tie a particular root to the threads. They then tie the threads to the

painful part of the body --- to the ankles and wrist for joint pain, to the waist for backache, and to the hair for headaches. I have talked to clients who claim to be totally cured of their severe and chronic pains after tying these threads.

Amulets (Tabeej and Kabash). Mantras are very frequently chanted or written into amulets (*tabeej*) which are then worn around the neck, waist or arm, or kept around the house, a shop's cash box, and so on. Amulets are so common in India, that empty amulet shells are available in the market. These shells are made of different kinds of metals --- copper, brass, silver or gold. Different mantras need different metals to contain them, and clients can buy a shell in whatever metal the practitioner recommends. The practitioner then uses the shell to prepare the amulet in the client's name. According to most practitioners, Tantric amulets often have diagrams (*yantra*) inside the shell, with mantras written inside the diagram. The client's or the victim's names are filled in at specific spots within the mantra. Non-Tantric amulets usually have a chanted-on flower, ashes from a ritual fire, or other small object sealed into the amulet. Gojen Barua and Nabin Mahanta told me that they never use diagrams. Most others use a combination of the two kinds.

The Chakrabarty brothers get so many clients needing

amulets that Samaresh draws the most frequently used diagrams ahead of time in little pieces of paper and keeps them in separate, labelled boxes, so as not to waste time during the healing sessions. When a client needs one of those diagrams for an amulet, all that the brothers need to do is to fill in names of the person or persons in the required spaces. I have seen many regular clients fill in the names themselves instead of bothering the brothers who are always very busy catering to their large clientele. After they have filled in the names, they give the empty amulet shell and the paper to one of the brothers, who puts the paper inside, chants a mantra, and seals the amulet. Often, the thread on which the amulet has to be worn needs to be chanted on too.

The brothers have eleven small, labelled boxes of diagrams, and I think that these boxes well reflect the most common concerns that clients come to them with. These boxes are labelled as such:

*Kanna*, or crying. This diagram is put into an amulet given to babies who are very cranky, and constantly crying.

*Vidya*, or knowledge. This diagram is for amulets given to students to enable them to do well in studies.

*Groh*, or planets. This diagram is put in amulets worn in order to counter-act the effects of bad planetary configurations.

*Jwar*, or fever. This is used in amulets given to people who

have already been chanted-on for three days for fever. After their fever decreases they are given this amulet to prevent the fever from coming back again.

*Pohuta*. This is used in amulets given to women who have *pohuta*, an illness category that I have already talked about in the previous section.

*Gabondhoni*, or "tying up the body" and *nojor*, or evil eye. This diagram is used in an amulet given for general protection of a person. The most constant protection a person needs is from evil eye. But the amulet also protects its wearer from startling, ghosts and spirits, and frequent illnesses. It "ties up" the wearer's body so that no harm can enter into it from any quarter.

*Biya*, or marriage. This is an amulet given to young women or men to boost their marriage prospects.

*Kala*, or bananas. This is a diagram used in an amulet given to women and girls for "women's illnesses", after they have eaten chanted-on bananas for twenty one days.

*Santaan*, or children. This amulet is given to women as a part of their treatment for childlessness.

*Bicched*, or to separate. This diagram is used in an amulet which separates two people. This amulet is given when a person has an extra marital affair, when someone falls in love with an unsuitable person, and even to get interfering in-laws out of the way. The prepared amulet, when buried under a Pipul tree, will bring about the separation.

*Madhu*, or honey. The purpose of this amulet is opposite to that of the one just mentioned. This amulet brings two people closer. Conflict between spouses, conflict between siblings, conflict with bosses or co workers, even when brought about by other's bad mantras or someone's evil eye can be resolved by dropping this amulet in a bottle of honey that the brothers keep for the purpose.

Sometimes more than one diagram is used in an amulet so as to enable the same amulet to cater to many problems. For example, the diagrams for knowledge, general protection and evil eye are often used together for children. I have seen the diagrams for education, marriage, general protection as well as an additional one for jobs put into an amulet for a twenty four year old female student. The general idea, according to Samaresh, was to get her life in some sort of order, either by marriage, or by doing very well in studies, or by getting a job. These eleven kinds of amulets just mentioned do not cover the entire range of amulets that the brothers give. These are the ones in greatest demand, but other amulets are also given for various purposes. Though other practitioners do not have their diagrams written ahead of time and organized into neat boxes, they also give very similar kinds of amulets for similar purposes. Amulets are usually used in conjunction with other remedies like *jhar phook* and "medicines".

Some amulets, called *kabash*, do not need an amulet

shell to contain the mantra. Some practitioners see no distinction between *tabeej* (amulet inside a shell) and a *kabash*, while others do. According to Satyen Goswami and Brojen Sharma, the two are very different. *Kabash* is Tantric, according to them, while a *tabeej* can be given by both Tantrics and non-Tantrics. A *kabash* always needs a diagram inside it. To make the *kabash*, the person has to first cleanse and purify himself, eat vegetarian food, stay in prayer for a period of time, and then write the *yantra* (diagram), usually in bark. The diagram then has to be embedded in metal, usually in gold or silver, by a goldsmith. *Kabash*, according to them, though usually worn on the neck or on the arm, are also sometimes inserted inside the person by cutting the skin and embedding the *kabash* inside. They claim that people who have powerful *kabash* inside their skin do not need to worry about any kind of danger.

Though Brojen Sharma and Satyen Goswami call *kabash* a Tantric item, Gojen Barua, who denies being a Tantric, also uses them. The Raj Mohini mantra, which he claims to be known for, is made out of dried, potentized flowers, embedded into a gold and silver *kabash*. Dharmeswar Goswami and Amaresh Chakrabarty, both of whom have Tantric training do not see much difference between the two. The major distinction seems to me to be in the way the two kinds of amulets are prepared. A *tabeej* is prepared by filling an

empty amulet shell, bought from the market, with potent words and substances, and sealing it. *Kabash* is prepared by first making the potent substances and then embedding them into a customized frame. The preparation of a *kabash* is more time consuming and more expensive.

Sessions to get rid of ghosts and spirits or bad mantras from client's premises. Practitioners like Brojen Sharma, Nabin Mahanta, Jitendra Das, Nripen Goswami, and Dharmeswar Goswami often go to client's houses to uncover bundles containing bad mantras or to chase away ghosts or spirits (*biras*) from client's bodies or premises. Using mantras and divination, they say that they are able to pin point the exact location of harmful items, even if these are buried under wells or large ponds. Clients claim to have seen these items as they were uncovered. These practitioners say that they also talk to ghosts and spirits and persuade them to leave the person or the family. Once the harmful items have been recovered, or the spirit has left, the practitioner gives a protective amulet to prevent future attacks.

Advice. Practitioners often counsel and advise clients on their courses of action, based on what they diagnose through divination. Clients come for advice on a variety of dilemmas. Nabin Mahanta and Nripen Goswami are often taken

by clients to their homes or properties for their guidance on where to construct new buildings or set up new machinery. They help clients in making decisions whether or not to think of a child's marriage at that particular period of time, whether to go on a particular journey or not, whether to accept or reject a particular alliance, whether to stand for office during forthcoming elections or not, whether someone will get a job quickly or not, where a missing person will be found, and so forth. Most practitioners are very good at giving this sort of advice, and counselling forms a major part of their duties.

One of the major worries mothers have about their young children is their studies. Mothers constantly come to practitioners complaining about their children not studying. I have often observed children being brought to the Chakrabarty brothers for this problem. The brothers in turn scold the children and tell them about the importance of a good education in these days of competition. Children are advised to prevent confusion of the mind and to concentrate on their studies if they want to do well in life. They seem to connect high education with good behavior and a pleasant personality. In fact, I was often pointed out to children as an example of how well behaved and pleasant a highly educated person is!

The Chakrabarty brothers also advised their clients on which medical doctor to go to for their specific problem, on



birth control strategies, and various other day to day concerns.

### CONCLUSION.

Analyzing the general structure of the interaction between practitioner and clients it is possible to get some sense of the assumptions about reality underlying such interactions. The general picture that emerges is that of a world consisting of various kinds of forces and dangers which can afflict humans in different ways. There are supernatural beings lurking around, which can inflict themselves upon people. There are also people who keep various kinds of supernatural beings to do their bidding. Sometimes these people deliberately bid the beings they control to harm others. There is also the force of other's words and envious thoughts which can bring about affliction. There are forces which can frighten and startle people and make them ill. There are snakes and other creatures that can bite, sting or prick. A very powerful force is that of mantras. Harmful mantras can bring about affliction and misfortune to the victim and his or her entire family. There are also configurations of planets that can cause problems in people's lives. Besides these forces, the human body also gets ill periodically, for no underlying reason.

All these dangers that the world presents can be resolved in a culturally typical way --- by mantras. The

force of mantras, which can cause suffering can also be used to alleviate that suffering. Good mantras, when chanted into people's bodies or ingested can help relieve affliction. They can be contained in amulets or threads, or garments and worn on the body. They can also be contained in other mediums and kept around people's houses or premises to get rid of and prevent problematic situations. Mantras are thus seen as a source of power that can help people deal with affliction, misfortune, and the experience of suffering.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE CLIENTS

In the previous chapter, I had analyzed the structure of the cultural schema of the practice of mantras in terms of divination, diagnosis, and remedies. In this chapter I look at how these techniques and ideas are used in actual practice in the interactions between practitioners and clients. As already stated in Chapter 1, I look at cultural schemas as a cultural means of interpreting, understanding and resolving various situations in similar ways --- in terms of mantras. As these situations often reflect culturally typical afflictions, dilemmas and misfortunes suffered by the client, the focus here will be on the clients and the problems they bring to the practitioners. I discuss some of the concerns most commonly addressed by the practitioners by illustrating them with the help of particular interactions that I observed as well as with accounts narrated to me by clients. My aim is to select a range of different problematic situations so as to give a sense of the variety of reasons for which clients go to these practitioners, and the variety of issues that are dealt with through mantras. Looking at particular interactions and specific cases will also give some idea about (how various forms of divination, diagnosis and

remedies are combined together by the practitioner, depending on the situation that the client brings to him.)

(One of the questions people ask me when they hear about my research is "Are mantras really efficacious?" It is very difficult to get concrete data to prove efficacy, especially since it deals with people's own notions of what is efficacious. I feel that a very good source of getting a sense of how effective the actors view a practice to be is from their own testimonies. Some of the clients I have talked to speak about the effectiveness of the remedies, the power of the practitioners, and experiences that made them believe in the practitioners and their practice. Such testimonies are scattered throughout the chapter.)

The cases I have chosen have been selected from sessions conducted by the various practitioners I have talked about in Chapter 4. Since emphasis here is on the range of problems brought by the clients to the practitioners, clients of some practitioners may be discussed more than others. This is specially so in case of the Chakrabarty brothers because they have an extremely large and regular number of clients to see them every day. The range of problems that their clients present is therefore much bigger than those presented by the clients of the other practitioners. Some practitioners were also uneasy about letting me into their sessions, and so their clients are not discussed as much as others.

ILLNESS. (One of the reasons clients resort to mantras is to get relief from various kinds of illnesses. A majority of clients I observed came for chronic problems like pain, asthma, stomach discomfort, high blood pressure, and even insomnia. Many clients I talked to told me about mantras curing them of illnesses that they had suffered from for months or for years. Most of these people had first gone to medical doctors. It was only when doctors could do nothing about their ailment that they had come to these practitioners. Many had also tried Ayurvedic and Homeopathic medicines. Minor illnesses like fever or toothache are also treated through mantras.) I have seen mothers come very often to the Chakrabarty brothers when their children have a fever, or a loss of appetite.

The first case I describe in this section is about a chronic illness. Loni Barua was an eight-year-old girl from a well to do, Western educated family. She was suffering from asthma since she was a baby and could not sleep at night due to breathing difficulties. I was told that she had been hospitalized once because of an acute asthma attack. When I first saw her in Dayanand Trivedi's session, she had already been under his treatment for two weeks. Her mother said that she had been sleeping well every night since she came under his treatment. The treatment had to be repeated every week till she was cured. Trivedi first blew mantras into her chest and then blew

mantras into a bottle of water they had brought from home. Half way through blowing, he asked her father if she had tonsillitis. The father said yes, and Trivedi also blew in a mantra for tonsillitis into the bottle. He asked her parents to give her some of the water to drink early in the morning on an empty stomach. That was for her tonsillitis. The same water was to be given later in the day also, as many times as possible, for her asthma. He specified that the early morning water will cure only her tonsillitis, and will do nothing for her asthma. The mantra for asthma will work only when the water is given later in the day. Her mother too was suffering from asthma, so Trivedi chanted and blew mantras into her chest and potentized another bottle of water for her. Just before leaving, the child and her mother touched Trivedi's feet as a mark of respect. The parents later told me that they were amazed at the power of his treatment. They had taken their daughter to many doctors for her problem, but no one had been able to cure her. And now, with just two weeks of being chanted-on and drinking chanted-on water, she was almost cured.

The remedies and procedures used for a particular problem often differ with the practitioner. Besides chanting on the person, and giving chanted-on water, the Chakrabarty brothers also give the client a chanted-on shell to wear around the neck for asthma, and a potentized olive seed to wear around the neck for tonsillitis or diabetes. As

seen in the case just mentioned, Trivedi treated tonsillitis by chanting a different mantra on the same bottle of water as that for asthma. I have seen him treat diabetes by chanting mantras on a lump of sealing wax that the client has to wear on his or her waist. But chanted-on water seems to be a common factor with all practitioners.

Pain of different kinds are frequently treated by mantras, though in slightly different ways depending on the practitioner, and on the specific characteristic of the pain. The next few cases are examples of clients who came for relief from pain. The second example shows how mantras are also used as a means to prevent pain in future.

Basanti Neog was a client of the Chakrabarty brothers. She gave me the following account of her daughter's sinus headaches being cured by Amaresh.

My daughter, studying in class nine (ninth grade) had acute sinus headaches. I spent fifteen hundred rupees for her treatment, but nothing would cure her. I am speaking in front of Maa (Mother) Kali, I am not lying, believe me. She had constant headaches, had become very thin, she could not eat, could not study. One day she went for her exams and had to come back half way through it because of her headache. And she is very good in her studies too --- always gets the top positions in her class. Then I thought of bringing her here, thinking that someone might have done something bad to her. He chanted on her head for three days and her headache was cured. That is why I believe in him.

Ramani was another client of the brothers who wanted Samaresh Chakrabarty to chant on her back, legs, arms, and head. She told me that she had been suffering from constant

pain, which doctors were unable to cure. Then she came to Amaresh, who cured her completely. So now she gets herself chanted-on periodically, so as to prevent the pain from coming back again.

Gauri Devi had come to the Chakrabarty brothers, because of pain in the lower part of her body, all the way from her waist down her legs. She complained that the veins in her legs swell up and it feels like they knot up into a bundle. This usually happens in the middle of the night, and she wakes up crying in pain. Her two daughters get up and massage her leg till the acute pain subsides. Though she does not get it every night, each time it happens, a dull pain lingers for three or four days. She had brought a small packet of uncooked rice, just as Amaresh Chakrabarty had told her to, and he chanted mantras on the rice. He then instructed her to eat a few grains of rice twice a day with some water --- once in the morning and once in the evening, for eight days.

Jonaki Devi was waiting to consult Nripen Goswami when I talked to her. She had come that day because of a pain in her leg. Goswami had given her seven chanted-on *silikha* seeds (an edible seed of a particular tree, often used for religious purposes), to be eaten once a day, for seven days, along with an amulet, which she was wearing on her waist. The pain was much better during the last eight days, so she wanted to ask him if she should get some more *silikha* seeds.



Pranati Hazarika, a client of Dayanad Trivedi has been suffering from rheumatoid arthritis for a few years. She was wheeled into his office in a wheelchair. This was the second time she was there. The first time Trivedi chanted and blew on the painful parts of her body, and gave her a bottle of chanted-on mustard oil to rub on her body. She told me that her pain was a little better after using the oil. Her arms used to be so stiff that she could not even tie her hair into a knot --- but that morning, she had tied her hair herself. That day Trivedi repotentized the oil and also potentized a bottle of water that she had to drink and bathe with. He manipulated her hands while chanting mantras, and tried to take her hands as far back as he could. He blew mantras into her shoulder blades, hit them with the bony side of his palm while chanting a mantra. He chanted on her back, and asked her if the pain she was having at that moment on her back was better. When she said it was not, he tried again with another mantra. This mantra seemed to work, because after he finished chanting, she said that her back felt much better. He massaged her back while chanting that mantra again, and instructed his assistant to say a particular mantra seven times and then blow on each of her legs twenty-one times. While his assistant was doing that, he himself worked at pulling and manipulating each leg. He then asked her to stand up. Her husband rushed forward to support her, and Trivedi told him to move back.

Both she and her husband looked extremely worried and unsure, but when Trivedi strongly insisted, she stood up, though she could not straighten her back completely. He chanted on her back and told her to try again. She did so, and this time stood almost straight. He then told her to walk. Her husband looked horrified, but Trivedi insisted. She took a few wobbly steps first and then a few fairly good ones. The husband looked astounded. He kept telling all who cared to listen that he had not seen her stand, let alone walk by herself, for months. When she left Trivedi's office, she walked out, supported by a still dazed husband.

Jayanti Barua had come to Dayand Trivedi because of sciatica pain, which she had been suffering from for two years. She had been told to bring a brass plate, and Trivedi chanted on the plate. He told her that the mantra will make the plate stick to her body. He placed it on her bare arm and it did not fall off. He asked her to stick the chanted-on plate on her back for about an hour or two every day, and also to rub the oil he had potentized on the painful area three times a day. He also chanted mantras on the painful parts of her back and leg and hit her back with the bony side of his palm. She said that the pain already felt a little better. He assured her that the pain would be gone soon. I talked to Jayanti about six months later and she told me that the pain that had been bothering her for two years was gone within a month of applying the plate on

her back and leg for an hour every day. She said that every time she held the plate to her back or leg, she felt a prickling sensation on the lower part of her body. That is how she knew that the mantra was working.

Chronic stomach ailments are a very common problem brought to these practitioners. The Chakrabarty brothers interpret stomach ailments as being caused by the liver, and treat it with a chanted-on raw banana stuck with date thorns, to be hung over the cooking stove, as described in Chapter 5. Here, I describe a case I observed in one of Nabin Mahanta's sessions.

Jatin Bora had been suffering from stomach problems (*petor asukh*) for about a year. He had gone to various medical doctors, but their medicines only gave him temporary relief. He had come to Nabin Mahanta a week ago, and Mahanta, holding his ancient coins to his ear, asked his *shaktis* what the problem was. He told Bora that they have said that someone has fed bad "medicines" to him through food, which were causing his stomach problems, and that these "medicines" are still inside his stomach. That is why the doctors' medicines do not cure him completely. As long as the bad things are inside he will not get better. To get rid of the bad "medicine", Nabin Mahanta gave Bora potentized water to drink and bathe with. Bora had been doing that regularly for a week and he told me that he had been feeling much better all week. The day I was there,

Mahanta gave him the second and final phase of the treatment --- a few ginger-like roots to chew three times a day, more water to drink and bathe with, and an amulet to wear. He said that the root will make the bad "medicine" come out of his body.

Problems like allergies are also treated by mantras. Purnima was a client of the Chakravarty brothers, who was suffering from rashes all over her body. She was told to get a roll of black thread from the nearby store, and when she got it, Samaresh folded the strands into *jaaps*, chanting mantras into each fold. He tied these threads to her ankles and wrist, and giving her a long one, told her to go to the corner of the room and tie that on her waist herself. He said that he will cut the threads himself after the rashes are gone. He told her that "these threads are our medicine for allergy", and that allergies are very unpredictable. For some people they may even take two or three months to subside. He asked her to abstain from eating eggs, red pumpkin, cucumber, a kind of greens called *pui* greens, two kinds of fish called *borali* fish and *puthi* fish, and shrimps, as these food items will make the allergy worse. He also told her to bathe every day with water in which *neem* leaves have been boiled, as *neem* water is very good for allergies.

I observed many women come in to be treated for "women's illness". One such woman was Banalata Kalita, who

was waiting to consult either one of the Chakrabarty brothers when I talked to her. In her words,

I first came here because of a woman's illness. I used to have two or three menses (her word) in a month, and they were also very painful. I had gone to doctors, they did a sonography and found that the uterus had become enlarged. They told me I had to have an operation. I was very scared. Then my maid told me one day that there was this person here, who cured women's illnesses. I had heard about him from a relative also, who had pain all over the body. He had tied threads to her legs, wrists and back and she was cured. So I came to him. He told me that I had to eat twenty-one bananas (chanted-on), one each day, and had to wear a black thread on my waist, on which he tied a root. I also could not eat garlic or meat while I was eating the bananas. He chanted on the root as well as on the thread. I wore the thread, and started eating the bananas. I was cured in about eight days --- I did not even need to eat all the twenty-one bananas. My illness was so bad that I had to take medicines to stop bleeding. If I did not take the medicines, the bleeding would come again with the slightest amount of hard work, like sweeping the floor, washing clothes, etc. All that has stopped now. The uterus has also become smaller. I have not gone for another sonogram, but I can make out just by touching. I could feel a swelling in my stomach area in the past, but not any more. And anyway, the symptoms are gone. Seven months have passed now, and the symptoms have not come back.

Associated with women's illness are anxieties related to pregnancy --- inability to conceive, prevention of miscarriages and bringing about a smooth childbirth. The next two clients had come to the practitioners with some of these fears. Devi, a client of the Chakrabarty brothers said that she had a miscarriage sometime back, and the doctors had told her not to try for another baby for six months. The six months had just passed, and she wanted

something to bring a baby inside her. Samaresh told her to get seven bananas chanted on the day after her next menstrual period was over. She should eat one banana every morning on an empty stomach for twenty-one days. After that he will give her an amulet to boost her chances of getting pregnant. Once she got pregnant, he will give her another amulet to prevent miscarriage. He told her that he could not give her the amulet to prevent miscarriage before she got pregnant because that amulet will "tie up" her body, and thus prevent even the baby from coming in. Around the time the baby would be due, another amulet would be given, to ease birth.

The second case is about Manju, who had come to consult Nabin Mahanta from a village about twenty miles away. She had been married for six years, but did not have any children. She went to many doctors, took many kinds of medicines, but none of them seem to work. Nabin Mahanta put the coins to his ear and asked his *shaktis* what the matter was. He then told her that his *shaktis* have told him that someone has tied up her womb with bad mantras. He also said that he finds that she has been bathing with "cut" water got from another practitioner. She was very surprised that he knew about that and admitted that she had consulted another practitioner. Mahanta said that he has also found out that the other practitioner had given her water chanted on with a good mantra, so he had no problems with that. He then said

that he could see that there were conflicts at home, and she said that there was. He said that he will give her an amulet, "cut" water to open up her tied womb, and "medicines", and that she should get a baby soon.

The "medicines" he gave her was a root that she had to eat, three times a day, with some of the potent water he had given her. She also had to bathe with a mixture of this water and regular water every two days. He also gave her a small flower, which had to be kept under the mattress of the bed that she shared with her husband. The amulet had to be worn on her waist, tied to seven strands of black thread. He told her to come back after eight days and get fresh water and "medicines".

Sometimes, mantras are resorted to because of a feeling of general weakness that a person might have. Teenagers, women with children and older people seemed more prone to general weakness than others. One cause of weakness is seen to be the cultural category of *dhatu* (substance) loss, and teenagers and younger people seem to lose *dhatu* easily. Other causes are a lack of proper nutrition, excessive labor, old age, bad mantras, or evil eye. The next two cases are examples of the treatment of weakness.

Jogen was a fourteen-year-old boy who was brought to the Chakrabarty brothers by his mother because he was very weak and was always very tired. Samaresh called him forward, chanted on his head, and then asked him to lift his

shirt so that he could examine his chest. He pointed the chest bone to his mother and told her that the reason why he was so weak was because his chestbone was enlarged. He told her to get a cowrie shell and one meter black thread from the shop across the street, and she sent her son to buy these. Samaresh blew and chanted on the shell and also prepared the thread. When it was ready, he told the boy to make a hole on the shell, and wear the shell like a locket, so that it falls on the enlarged chest bone. He also asked the boy if he passed out anything white in his urine. When the boy said that he did not know, he asked the boy to urinate in a bottle the next morning, and set the bottle aside. He asked the mother to examine the bottle after a few hours and check if there was any white sediments in the bottom of the bottle. The white deposits, he said, were very dangerous, and could be the cause of the enlarged bone. If there were white deposits, she should bring the boy in again as he will need to be chanted-on by a different mantra. In the meantime, he should drink and bathe with chanted-on water, which Samaresh prepared in his name.

The second example is about Bhanu Das, an eighty-year-old lady taken to Dayanand Trivedi by her son, who is a high ranking government official. In her son's words,

She was very weak, and could hardly walk. She had been confined to the house with all kinds of aches and pains for three years or so. Winters were the worst time --- she would hardly get out of bed. She is very conservative and does not eat rice (rice constitutes the main meal) cooked by



anyone else --- not even by her daughter-in-law. So she had almost stopped eating rice in winter, surviving on foods that need not be cooked. This made her weaker. Besides, it gave her gastric ulcers. She got worse each winter, in fact we were almost sure that she would not survive the winter two years ago. I took her to Dayanand Trivedi --- it was not easy to take her, mind you, I had to almost carry her from the car to his office. He chanted on her stomach where she was having a burning sensation because of her ulcer and also held her wrist tightly and chanted mantras, which he said was to get rid of her weakness and lethargy. She was also given chanted-on water, and she had to drink two cups of it everyday. After just two sessions with Trivedi, she was much better. For the last two years now, she has been free from pain, does her own cooking, even in winter, and is not bedridden anymore. She goes out, goes to weddings, goes visiting --- things she had totally stopped doing. Her ulcer is still there --- when it was not cured in the two sessions we had with him, we did not go back just for that. It probably needed one or two more sessions. But what is most important is that she moves about now, in fact, she is at a wedding, even as we speak! I am amazed at Trivedi's mastery over mantras. I never believed in mantras, but now I am forced to look at it in a different light.

The next two cases are of mental illness. The first client described is Pankaj Pator, a twenty-three year old student who was diagnosed as having schizophrenia. I met him and his father at Dayanand Trivedi's clinic. His father told Trivedi that he often became very violent. Trivedi reassured the father that every fifteen days, Pankaj's schizophrenia will be ten percent better, and that his problem would disappear in six months. He chanted and blew on Pankaj's head and forehead, and told him that the purpose of the mantra is to get him to sleep. He potentized a

bottle of water and told him to mix one part of that water with six parts of regular water. The mixed water was to be splashed on his face three or four times a day. At night, before going to bed, he had to drink a glass of the potentized water to enable him to sleep. He also told Pankaj to cut down on tea, as tea can cause sleeplessness.

I talked to Pankaj and his father four weeks later. Pankaj said that he slept very well these days and felt very relaxed. When Pankaj was not within earshot, his father told me that his violent behavior had also decreased.

(The next client I describe is Sameer Choudhury, who, with his wife Sushmita had travelled about a hundred and fifty miles to consult Nabin Mahanta. Sameer's sister, who was thirty years old, was mentally unstable since she was about sixteen. They had taken her to all the prominent psychiatrists in Assam, whose medicines kept her in control temporarily, but did not cure her. He was now beginning to wonder whether it was someone's bad mantras or evil eye that was causing this problem, and was hoping that Nabin Mahanta could help. Nabin Mahanta put a handful of ancient coins to his ear and asked his *shaktis* what was going on. He then told Sameer what his *shaktis* informed him --- that his sister was suffering from *sok khowa* (startling) and that there was no evil eye or bad mantras involved) He told the brother and his wife to buy a blouse for the sick sister from the nearby market. They went to buy the blouse while

Mahanta talked to other clients. When they got back, Mahanta took the blouse with him to his inner room to get it potentized.

When he came back he gave the blouse back, along with a bottle of water, an amulet and nine edible seeds of the *silikha* tree, and gave them instructions on what to do. They were to get water from three different ponds, and mix them together in a bucket to make a bucketful. Half the water from the bottle was to be poured into the bucket. The sick woman was to sit on a low stool in front of the bucket, with her hair brought forward in front of one shoulder. Someone should take a mug of water in a small mug, and pouring a little water on the palm of the sick woman's hand, ask her to drink it. The rest of the water in the mug should be poured over her head. This has to be done two more times. Then, taking the same mug, eighteen mugs of water had to be poured on her. Then she should stand up, and lifting the bucket, pour the remaining water over herself. She should then change her clothes, and wear the chanted-on blouse as well as the amulet, which had to be tied to twenty-one strands of black thread. One of the seeds was to be wrapped in paper and put inside the cotton filling of her pillow. She had to eat the rest of the seeds, one a day, on an empty stomach, with a little of the remaining half a bottle of water, for eight days. The sugar had to be eaten three times a day, either with tea or with

any other food. He repeated this part again to clarify --- in eight days, she had to eat eight seeds, drink eight parts of water, and eat sugar twenty-four times. After eight days, they should bring back the empty bottle, and get more water, seeds and sugar potentized. The chanted-on blouse that she would wear after bathing with the chanted-on water should not be taken off for three days. On the fourth day, she should take a regular bath and wash the blouse. Nabin Mahanta warned Sameer Choudhury and his wife that during the next few days, her illness might increase a little, but they should not get scared. Sameer Choudhury wanted to know whether they could continue giving her the psychiatric medication. She was also wearing two other amulets given by some other practitioner, and he wanted to know if those could be worn with this new amulet. Mahanta told them to stop the medication for a few days, and also to remove any other amulets she may be wearing.

(Practitioners, especially the Chakrabarty brothers often advise clients to go to medical doctors for particular problems, as illustrated in the next two cases. Surabhi Deka had come to them with her fourteen-year-old son who was having acute headaches. The boy had headaches sometime ago, and she had got his head chanted on for three days by Amaresh. His pain was gone for almost three months after that, but now it was back again. According to the mother, he was very weak, he could not study, he had pains in his

forehead and eye region, and he felt sleepy when he sat down to study. She was very concerned because he was a good student and had a major exam coming up. Samaresh told her not to do any *jhar phook* any more, but take him to an eye specialist instead. The mother said that she had suspected that he might need glasses, but she wanted Samaresh's advice before going to an eye specialist. But she still asked him to chant on the boy's head, so that he could get some temporary relief.)

A Muslim woman, Nazma, had come to the Chakrabarty brothers because of pains in her stomach. Samaresh told her not to eat sour things and started to chant, waving his hand over her stomach. He found her stomach area very hot to the touch, and asked her if it was always so hot. She said it was, especially after she ate anything. Her stomach also gets bloated after a meal and she feels like going to the bathroom. Samaresh said that her liver was bad, and asked her to bring a raw banana, seven date thorns, a small packet of salt, and a bottle of water the next day. She had already brought a bottle of water and some salt that day, so he chanted on them in her name. He then instructed her to mix a little chanted-on water with regular water in a glass, and drink it with a little bit of the chanted-on salt, three times a day. He asked her again not to eat sour or fried foods and to stop drinking tea for a while. He also told her that as her stomach was "hot as fire", there must be

something else wrong with it, besides the liver problem. He advised her to go to a medical doctor and take the doctor's medication along with the salt and water that he had given her.

EDUCATION. As already mentioned in Chapter 3, children's education is a constant concern of mothers, especially in urban areas. Studying and doing well in school is considered the major preoccupation that children should have during that period of their lives. Mothers consistently complain about how little their children study, and mantras are seen to be a means of increasing interest in studies (*porhat mon*) and in ensuring high scores in exams. A large portion of the Chakrabarty brothers' clientele is composed of women who come to "get something for (their children's) studies". The following two examples illustrate most interactions in this arena.

A mother had brought some sugar, which she wanted Amaresh to chant on in the names of her two children, for their studies. As exams started the following day, she also wanted the pens and ink bottles of both children chanted on, so as to enable them to write good exams. He chanted on the sugar and told her to feed a little bit of that sugar with a sip of water to her children twice a day --- once in the morning just before they sat down to study, and once in the evening, again before studying. To me, the twice a day

dose of sugar seems to fit in with the general ideal in India, of good children studying regularly twice a day --- every morning and every evening, irrespective of whether they had homework or not.

Another mother had brought a packet of sugar and a silver amulet shell and asked Samaresh to chant these in the name of her second son, for studies. The boy, according to her, had no interest in studies, and did very badly in exams in the past. But after she fed him Samaresh Chakrabarty's chanted-on sugar, his scores improved a little. She therefore wanted more sugar that day, and also a Saraswati (goddess of learning) amulet to boost his performance some more. The boy was already wearing another amulet given by another practitioner. She asked Samaresh if that might clash with the new amulet. He said that it would not, and wrote the boy's name on a piece of paper having the diagram for knowledge. He put the paper inside the shell, sealed it with wax, and chanted a mantra on it. Then chanting on the sugar, he gave both the packet of sugar and the amulet to the mother.

The pressure to excel in school perhaps acts as an area of stress for many children, especially as they reach the ninth or tenth grade in high school. This is because of a major exam, called the High School Leaving Certificate Exam that students have to take at the end of the tenth grade. Admissions to good colleges depend on the scores of this

exam. I saw many mothers come in to consult practitioners because their children during this crucial period either lost interest in studies or got ill in various ways. One such example is about Ruma Devi, a regular client of the Chakrabarty brothers. When I met her, she had come to the brothers because her fourteen-year-old daughter, who was studying for a major exam, suddenly gets ill every evening at about five. She first gets a fever, then she starts trembling and saying "that black thing has come again, chase it away." Amaresh Chakrabarty asked the mother if she had picked matches to see what was wrong --- whether the black thing she sees is a ghost or spirit, and if it is, has it inflicted itself accidentally on her, or has someone deliberately inflicted it with bad mantras? The mother said that she forgot to pick matches. Amaresh Chakrabarty told her to bring the girl the next day, with a box of matches, as it was too late to read matches that day. The mother said that coming the next day would be difficult as the girl had exams. In fact, she was already missing school that day to come to him. Amaresh then told her that he will do something to temporarily alleviate the problem for that day, as she could not afford to be ill the day before major exams. But she should pick matches at home the next morning before she went to school, and someone should bring those match sticks to him so that he would know how to proceed further to totally get rid of that black thing. Though the



mother forgot to pick matches, she obviously had some idea about what the remedy would be, as she had brought many of the ingredients with her. The ingredients that she did not have were bought from the store across the street from the temple. Amaresh chanted mantras on a small packet consisting of a combination of mustard, cumin and fenugreek seeds, so that she would sleep through the night without waking up or seeing the black thing. He also prepared a fever and *ga-bondhoni* ("tying" up the body) amulet (*tabeej*) with a copper amulet shell, to prevent the fever coming at night and for general protection. He also chanted mantras on a packet of sugar so that she could concentrate on her studies. The chanted-on seeds had to be scattered around her bed as well as under her pillow, the amulet had to be worn around her waist or her neck, and the sugar had to be eaten three times a day with a sip of water, preferably just before she sat down to study. He said that though the normal dose of chanted-on sugar for studies was twice a day, this girl needed an extra dose as her mind was in confusion because of her illness. Amaresh also prepared the thread on which the amulet was to be tied. When it was ready, he fixed the prepared amulet to it and gave it to the girl, assuring her that the black thing will not come that night.

ECONOMIC CONCERNS. Lack of a steady income, business losses, financial difficulties and unemployment are common

concerns which bring clients to practitioners. I saw many store owners who were given amulets to put in their store cash-boxes so as to boost sales and increase profits. Clients often told me about unemployed family members who got jobs after wearing an amulet for *aie-unnoti* (income-prosperity). I have also seen clients get an amulet or a garment potentized, which when worn during a job interview is seen to increase chances of getting the job. I observed that economic problems are often at the root of other problems that clients bring to practitioners, like marital conflicts, conflict between family members, and so on.

MARRIAGE. Marriage being an issue of utmost importance has a lot of anxieties associated with it. Getting one's daughter married is a prime concern of parents, and I have seen many parents seek the help of practitioners to increase the chances of success of a marriage negotiation. Phani Barua, a client of Brojen Sharma, told me that he had two younger sisters who had difficulty getting married. The older of the two was not very good in looks and several negotiations had therefore failed. Because of the older sister being unmarried, they could not conduct negotiations for the younger one as that might hurt the older sister's feelings. This is a very common scenario of one sibling's marriage prospects being held-up because of an unmarried older sibling, as ideally, siblings of the same sex get

married in descending order. In Assam, this does not apply to siblings of opposite sexes, and younger sisters are frequently married off before brothers unless the brothers are very much older. In this particular case, Phani Barua brought his sisters to Brojen Sharma, who found out through his *shakti* that no one done bad mantras to "tie" up their marriages. He then gave each of them an amulet which they had to wear on their waist. He said that these amulets would bring about desirable parties to conduct negotiations with. He also told Phani Barua that the day before a potential bridegroom's family came to "view" his sisters, he should bring a new sari and a blouse, which Sharma will chant on. His sister should wear those potentized garments when she meets those people so that they will find her attractive. Phani Barua said he followed Sharma's instructions and three months later, the older of the sisters was married. The second sister also got married a few months later. As far as Phani Barua is concerned, it is the amulets and the potentized garments that brought about those two marriages.

Parents often come to practitioners when their children fall in love and want to marry someone unsuitable, especially if the person belongs to a different caste or religion or to a different socio-economic status. Rupali Deka, a Hindu woman, told me of her son whose four-year-long romantic entanglement with a Muslim girl was severed by

Nabin Mahanta's potentized sugar, which she secretly fed her son for two weeks.

Frequent quarrels between spouses or wife beating, lack of attraction for a spouse, or an extra-marital affair are seen to be rectified by mantras. All these often go together and I observed many clients, especially women, who came seeking help from marital problems. The case of Santoshi is one such example. When I first met her, Santoshi had already been coming to the Chakrabarty brothers for three weeks in a row because her husband was involved with another woman. She had been told by the brothers to get her box of vermilion, a red powder which every Hindu married woman has to wear in the parting of her hair, chanted-on in her and her husbands name once a week. Wearing this chanted-on vermilion in her hair will make him attracted to her. They also told her to get some sugar chanted-on in both her and her husband's names so as to bring good relations between them, this too once a week. She had to secretly feed him this sugar in his tea. This was the second batch of sugar and vermilion she was there to get that day. She said that though he seemed a little more interested in her in the last few days, he still had not left the other woman. Samaresh asked her not to be impatient. The sugar needed to be chanted-on for seven weeks and this was only the second week. There was still ample time for him to come around. He said that there is a

different mantra for each week, each mantra stronger than the previous one. So after the seven mantras have been chanted and the sugar consumed, he is bound to come around.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, marriage is associated with various conflict situations and tensions. A common source of stress is the conceptual opposition between a mother and a mother-in-law and between a daughter and a daughter-in-law. Some of these stresses are reflected in the dilemma faced by the family I describe next.

Jaya and Shoma were wives of two brothers, living in the same household, which consists of their husbands and children, their mother-in-law and their husband's married sister, Lata. The family has been coming to the Chakrabarty brothers for many years. On the day I observed them their mother-in-law had asked them to discuss a family problem with the brothers. Their husband's sister, Lata, who was married more than two years ago, refuses to go to live with her husband and his family. Every time she goes to their house, she gets ill, and her mother brings her home. Samaresh already knew about the problem, and said that it was their mother-in-law (Lata's mother) who was to blame for the situation. He said that Lata was a little mentally unstable to begin with, and he had told her mother not to try to get her married, but to take her to a good psychiatrist instead. But the mother, who was obsessed with getting her daughter married, refused to acknowledge her

daughter's problem at that time. She had insisted that Samaresh should give Lata an amulet to get her married. Lata got married soon after wearing that amulet, but her mental condition became aggravated after she went to live in her husband's home. And now, her mother blames her daughter's husband and her in-laws for making life difficult for her in her married home. Jaya and Shoma confided to Samaresh that Lata had a rather unpleasant disposition --- they knew that first hand, as they were often at the receiving end of her temper. She would also say nasty things about her husband and his family, and her mother would encourage her. They also felt that Lata was taking advantage of her mother's indulgence by lording over her brothers' wives. This was something she could not do in her husband's home, where she had to be subservient to others. Both the sisters-in-law thought that Lata's husband and his family were very nice, and were in fact, being very patient with Lata's childish behavior.

Samaresh's advice was to first drop two sets of amulets, once a week for seven weeks. One set was to be dropped in honey in the names of Lata and her husband to bring good relations between them. The other set was to be buried under a Pipul tree, in the names of Lata and her mother, so as to sever Lata's attachment to her mother. And after she goes back to her husband's house, a third set of amulets will have to be dropped, these in honey, to bring

good relations between her and her husband's family members. These three sets of amulets should together succeed in keeping her there. But the amulets have to be dropped by Lata's mother. Samaresh warned the sisters-in-law not to let their mother-in-law talk them into dropping the amulets. He reminded them that they were merely her daughters-in-law, while Lata was her daughter. So if anything goes wrong in the future, the mother will side with the daughter, and blame the daughters-in-law. That, according to him, is the law of nature. Therefore, to be on the safe side, Jaya and Shoma should maintain their distance in this affair, and be very discrete in whatever they say about it. He also told them not to tell anyone except their husbands and mother-in-law about dropping amulets to make her leave. This might lead to problems and misunderstandings later on, especially if Lata's husband's family somehow gets to hear about it.

Samaresh prepared the first amulet in Lata and her mother's name and gave it to Jaya. He reminded her that her mother-in-law should bury it under a Pipul tree. He also told them where to find a Pipul tree in their locality. As seven such amulets have to be buried, the mother-in-law should come in a week from that day and get the second amulet. She should also drop the first of the seven amulets to be dropped in honey when she comes in next week.

LACK OF INTEREST. I observed many instances of people

seeking the help of mantras because a family member had no interest in the welfare of the family or in their work. Parents and wives would come to get a remedy for a son or a husband who would stay with friends all day, coming home only for meals and to sleep, or who were alcoholics, or who suddenly lost interest in their jobs. Though seen in women too (as in the previous example, where Lata had no interest in her husband), a large number of cases of this problem involved men and teenage boys and girls. In case of teenagers, this problem is usually attributed to "confusion of the mind" (*monor kheli-meli*) --- a state of mind seen to be common during that age. For older people, evil eye, bad mantras, or bad planetary configuration are often suspected, especially if the lack of interest was something out of character for that person. Lack of interest often went hand in hand with financial problems. I observed that sometimes, the lack of interest seems to be triggered off by financial difficulties. At other times, especially if the person who has lost interest is the bread winner of a family, the entire family faces acute financial distress. Sometimes, family prestige was involved, especially in cases of alcoholism or a teenager getting into bad company. The next two cases show clients who approached practitioners for a family member's lack of interest.

Juri Patgiri is a regular client of Nabin Mahanta, whom I met at one of his sessions. She lives in a village about



four miles away from his house. In her words,

I first came here about two years ago because my husband, who works at the Electricity Board suddenly stopped going to work. My mind was becoming almost like mad, after all, his job is our only source of income, and we do not have much agricultural land. The only reason he had not been sacked was because I had got a medical certificate from a doctor saying that he was ill. I had heard about him (Mahanta) before. My husband's older brother had become mad once. He would beat people all the time. Once he beat his wife so much that her head cracked in three places. They then brought him here, and he (Mahanta) cured him. He gave him water and medicines, after which he stopped beating people. So when my husband stopped going to work, I decided to come here. He (Mahanta) said that someone had done medicines on him. He gave me some water and sugar and told me to make my husband eat a little sugar and drink a little of the water everyday and to mix a little of that water with his bath water. He gave an amulet, which, to my surprise, my husband wore without making any objections. He also gave a medicine, which looked like root ginger, but wasn't. I fed my husband the medicine and the water, and gave him baths with the water for ten days. But within seven days he started going to work! And he had not gone to work for almost a year! Three or four days after he took the ginger like medicine, he vomited out the bad medicine in his stomach. I did not see what they were, but he (her husband) said they were round, and looked like three eggs.

The reason I have come here today is because the thread on which my husband was wearing his amulet snapped, and the amulet dropped to the floor. I got scared that my husband might stop going to work again without that amulet. So I came to ask him (Mahanta) what to do. He said that he will repotentize (*sodhon*) the amulet.

Gauri Devi had come to the Chakrabarty brothers worrying about her son, who was a heavy drinker, had lost all interest in the world, had no job, had incurred huge debts, and stayed inside the house sleeping or listening to

the radio most of the day. She had brought matches she had picked in the morning, and examining them, Amaresh said that his stars were bad. The lady agreed. She said that her son was critically hurt in an accident recently. He did not stop bleeding for two days. She had his horoscope examined then and the astrologer had also said that his stars were very bad. Amaresh told her to tell her son to be very careful, as *grohor dosh* (planetary problems) could turn a person's life upside down. He asked her to bring a silver amulet shell, as long in length as the first joint of a finger of her son's right hand. He will make a *groh* amulet for him, and will also insert a mantra in it for economic success (*aie unnuti*). He will also chant mantras on sugar which she will have to secretly feed him. The sugar will make him obedient to her, so that he will listen to her when she tells him not to drink, or to go and find a job. The sugar will also make him interested in the world.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN FAMILY MEMBERS. Though a cohesive family is the ideal, conflicts between family members occur in most families. A major source of family conflict is property disputes between brothers. This was the problem that had brought Dubori Hazarika to the Chakrabarty brothers. She had already picked a batch of matches to find out if her husband would get his fair share of his father's property from his brothers. His father had given a piece of land to

her husband when he was alive, but now that he was dead, his brothers were not letting him have the legal papers to it. Amaresh examined the matches and told her that the matches showed that her husband will get the land back. So he advised her to go to court if necessary, to obtain it. But he also told her to drop amulets in honey along with conducting legal procedures so as to bring good relations between the brothers. The amulet, written in her husband's and his brothers' names, will have to be dropped once a week in the pot of honey the brothers have for the purpose. It will ensure that there would be no hard feelings later on, and will bring about change in the brothers' hostile attitude towards her husband.

Another source of conflict is quarrels between the members of an extended family, usually between wives of brothers and between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. I observed that a lot of times, it was married daughters who approached the practitioners seeking remedies for conflicts in their natal families. Chanda Das is one such daughter, who had come to the Chakrabarty brothers for help. I first met her as she was dropping amulets into honey to bring in good relations. In her words,

Sometimes, in some families these days, where sons have married, the daughters-in-law do not like their mother-in-law. They do not respect her and do not obey her. My brothers' wives do not give my mother any peace. They do not even serve her food --- I have seen that myself when I went home. And my brothers do not say anything to them about it either. Besides, my brother's wives are always

quarreling among themselves. He (Samaresh Chakrabarty) gave me some sugar last week chanted on in the names of all the members in my mother's house. I have given the sugar to my mother and have told her to mix it with the sugar in the family's sugar box. Today I have got some more sugar chanted on. He also told me to drop an amulet in honey for seven weeks, one every week. The sugar and the amulets will make them obey my mother. Then automatically, they will have *maya* (love) for her. It will also stop them from quarreling, and bring peace to the household.

Conflicts about money or other everyday disagreements are also brought to practitioners, as can be seen from the next example. Farida, a Muslim woman, had come to the Chakrabarty brothers with matches. Samaresh asked him why she had picked up those matches. She said that there was no peace in her house. Samaresh replied that he could see there is no peace in her house from the matches, what he wanted to know was why there was no peace. Farida said that nobody listened to anybody else. Any money that came into their hands got spent in two days, and there were constant arguments between her, her husband, their children, and her husband's brother, who lived with them. Samaresh chanted on a packet of sugar for her, and told her to secretly feed the sugar to everybody in their tea. He warned her that the sugar may not work if people know they are being fed something.

SUSPICION OF BAD MANTRAS OR EVIL EYE. Sometimes people get multiple problems at the same time, which makes them suspect bad mantras being done to them or somebody's evil eye

catching them. The following is one such example. Rojoni was a businessman, educated, with a bachelor's degree in commerce. He introduced me to both Nabin Mahanta and Jitendra Das, as he had been consulting both of them for some time, for his problems. He also knew Gojen Barua, but did not trust him at all. In his own words,

I had bought a piece of land and constructed a brick kiln on it two years ago. Though I had paid him ninety thousand rupees for the land, the landlord wanted an additional seventy thousand. He kept on demanding more money and I paid him thirty thousand more. Then he gave me an ultimatum, that I had to pay within a particular time period, and if I did not, he would take steps. I did not pay him within that period, and so he burnt my kiln and the office I had constructed in the compound. I confronted him and told him that it was unbelievable that he could stoop so low. That made him angrier, and he told me that since I had accused him of arson, he will certainly not leave me alone. After that I was not allowed to enter the compound of my kiln and my employees were beaten up. And it was then that the disturbances (*ashanti*) in my life began. My mother, who hardly ever gets sick, was suddenly taken ill, and after fifteen days at the hospital, she died. Ours is a joint family, and my uncle (father's brother), also got ill and died. After my mother's death, my brother's wife quarrelled with me, and they moved to a separate house. There was confusion all over. My financial situation was getting very bad. I abandoned that kiln, and bought a new one, borrowing money from people. My mind was unhappy, I would get angry at everyone, and I was constantly worried.

As these bad things kept happening to me one after the other, I went to Jitendra Das and told him what was happening in my life, and that my mind was not at peace. I go to him whenever I have a problem, and he always tells me what to do. He took the boy he uses as a medium to do *basoni* (divination) on nails, and went to my house. He found that somebody had done something on my house, and there was a bundle of bad mantra items buried in my courtyard. I immediately knew who had employed a *bej* to do bad mantras on me --- it was

the landlord who had promised not to leave me alone. Jitendra Das told me not to worry about it, as he could take it out. He poured oil and chanted mantras on the boy's nails again, sprinkling water and mustard seeds on the nails. The boy soon saw the general area where the bundle was buried, and about ten o'clock at night, I started digging, helped by a trusted employee. As we dug, the thing kept on moving, trying to avoid being found out. The boy, who was standing at about six feet from the hole we were digging could see where it was on his nails. He kept telling us which way to dig and then suddenly, after we had dug for about two feet, he told me very urgently to grab. Jitendra Das, who all this time was chanting mantras and sprinkling mustard seeds and water both on the boy and on the area we were digging, told me to do as the boy said. I did not have any idea what to grab, as I could not see anything. Besides, it was late at night, and we just had the light of a flashlight to work with. I blindly grabbed into the ground I was digging, and clutched a mass of mud in my hand. The boy said that I had it in my hand, and that I should bring it out. I pulled my hand and whatever I had in it, out of the ground and came to the lighted courtyard of the house. Till then I had no idea what I had pulled. When I looked at it in the light, I saw that it was a mud-covered bundle. We examined the bundle, and found that it was a little cloth packet, filled with something and carefully stitched up. Jitendra Das and the boy were very satisfied that they had got what they were looking for. They were the ones who opened the bag, I did not --- I was too scared. Our entire family stood around and watched as Jitendra Das took out a set of human teeth, nails, hair, yellow cloth, vermilion, and some small bones. These items had first been put on a black cloth, and stitched on all sides to form a packet. The packet had then been put on a red cloth and stitched all around again. The red packet was then put inside another one, and stitched again. We knew that it was deliberately prepared --- no one would stitch garbage up so carefully (he said this in response to my question whether it could have been garbage that somehow got accumulated together). Jitendra Das chanted mantras on the contents of the packet and sprinkled water and mustard seeds on it. He then put it on a piece of tin, poured kerosene oil on it and set fire to it, after sprinkling mustard seeds and chanting

mantras on it again. An unbelievable stench of burning human flesh came out of the burning packet. Jitendra Das told me to take the ashes outside the compound and throw it out. After I did that, he told me not to worry any more as the thing won't bother me again. He gave me some chanted-on mustard seeds and told me to sprinkle those all around the house and the compound.

Things were better for a few days after that. But a few days later, the same man did it to me again. He must have found out that I had taken those things out, and so he put in another bundle. As things started getting bad again for me, I asked Jitendra Das to check again. He got the boy look at his nails again, and found that there was another bundle, this time in the pond in our compound. I was worried, how do I get it out of the pond? But they said that it was no problem at all --- they could easily lift it out through mantras. So we got together again one night --- I prefer to do it at night, as I did not want curious neighbors watching. Things happened just like the previous time, except this time my employee and myself were wading in the shallow end of the pond. The boy suddenly threw a stick at a spot in the bottom of the pond, and told me to grab. This time, I grabbed immediately, and brought out what I had caught in my hand. It was a bundle just like the previous one. The strange thing is that the cloth in which such packets are packed never rot. This packet was in water for who knows how long. But it looked as fresh as if it was dropped today. Anyway, we burnt the packet in the same way as the previous one, and I threw out the ashes. The boy then told me that he saw another bundle in my new kiln. We went to the kiln, and followed the same procedures. It took us much longer to get hold of this packet, as it kept running back and forth. Just after we got hold of it, there was a loud noise, as if some one had thrown a brick on the ground, and then the sound of something flying away with a "hu-hu" sound. We looked all around for someone, flashing our torches all around the compound, but found nothing. Jitendra Das told us not to worry --- it was the *shakti* running away when the packet was captured.

Things got somewhat better after that, but the other day Jitendra Das told me that my enemy has tried again, and there is something else put in my compound. I now feel I need some protection. I asked Jitendra Das if he could tie up the place

with mantras so that no other bad things can be put in there in future. But Das says that he does not have that knowledge. He can open up things tied (*baandhs*) by other people, but he could not do *baandhs* himself.

I then went to Nabin Mahanta. He talked on his "telephone" and he too, like Jitendra Das, told me that there is something still being done to me. He even told me who was doing these things to me, and it turned out to be the same person I had suspected --- the landlord of my previous kiln. But I hold no grudge against him, as that will only lead to more feud. I just need protection. Nabin Mahanta has said he can give me protection, and has told me to see him in a week. He said he will give me an amulet to wear, some chanted-on sugar that has to be eaten by all members of my household, and water and mustard seeds to sprinkle around my house and my kiln, as well around the compounds of both. I asked him whether he will be able to get rid of the new bundle in my compound. He said he will not go himself, but his *shaktis* will go and take it out. He also told me to bring an old silver coin, ranging between 1901 to 1907. I found one yesterday, dated 1902, as I looked around my father's things. I will take that to him when I go to see him next week.

(Both Jitendra Das and Nabin Mahanta are very good men. They both lead very religious lives, and you can make out that such men will not deceive you, or promise to do things that they are incapable of. Neither of them are greedy for money. I usually give them fifteen or twenty rupees every time I consult them, but I never feel obligated to give anything. Sometimes, if special amulets have to be made, they charge for the materials that go into it and for the shell, and I do not mind paying that. After all, I have seen them take out the evil things from my house with my own eyes, so I do not grudge them a little money.)

(Other clients have also claimed to have seen evil items unearthed "with their own eyes" (*nij sokure dekha*).) Jonaki Devi, who was waiting to consult Nripen Goswami narrated an account of how Goswami had cured a mad girl in their village. In her words,



There was this girl in our village, she was educated, with an M.A degree. She suddenly got mad. She would sing and dance in the street, laugh loudly to herself, and even take off her clothes. He (Goswami) was brought to her house, and when he reached there, she was in a room, without any clothes, singing and dancing. Her mother and sisters were crying outside, and there were a lot of us gathered around, trying to comfort them. He stood just outside the door of the house, and closed his eyes. Then he instructed the mad girl's brother to dig at a particular spot in a corner of their courtyard. Several people started digging, and found a bundle of things --- human intestinal canals (*nari*), all twisted up after being cremated, red cloth, red feathers, roots of trees, nails and hair. As soon as these things were brought out, the girl became unconscious. He (Goswami) went inside the room where she was, told her sisters to put some clothes on her, and when she was presentable, sprinkled water on her, chanting mantras all the time. Soon after, the girl woke up, and looked surprised to see so many people staring at her. He asked her how she felt and she said she felt feverish. He gave her a chanted-on flower and blessed her, chanting mantras again. He sent someone to the nearby shop to buy an amulet shell, and prepared an amulet for her. The girl was completely cured after that. Now she is married, and is the mother of three children.

I had heard about *bej* burying bundles in people's courtyards to cause bad things to happen in the family, but this was the first time I had seen such things. It made the hair on arms stand up! And till then, I had only heard about him (Goswami) from others. But that day I saw his *shakti* with my own eyes.

INTERESTING, MISCELLANEOUS CONCERNS. The concerns that bring clients to practitioners are so extensive that it is impossible to give examples of all of them. I am therefore ending this discussion with only three more, which I found interesting.

Keteki told the Chakrabarty brothers that she had some

coconut trees in her garden, which start fruiting, but the fruits fall off before they are ready. Samaresh chanted on a bottle of water in Keteki's name, and instructed her to pour the water into a sprinkler bottle and sprinkle the tree with it. The water had to reach as high up the tree as she could manage. He reassured her that their chanted-on water had brought fruits to many people's trees, so her trees should fruit soon too. This claim is confirmed by a lot of clients who told me that their trees started producing fruits after being treated with the brothers' potentized water.

Jayanta Nath had come to the Chakrabarty brothers because his eight-year-old daughter, who was in hospital with burn injuries was refusing to eat. The doctors had told them to give her milk and other nutritious things, but she would not touch anything they tried to feed her. He had brought a bottle of milk with him, which he wanted Amaresh to chant on. Amaresh chanted on the bottle and also on a bottle of water, telling the father to give her the water several times a day. He said that the mantra in the water will give her the desire to eat and drink by the next day, and would also make her get better faster.

Jayashree, another client of the Chakrabarty brothers had brought half a kilogram of honey, to be chanted on to reduce her weight. She said that her uncle had eaten a bottle of honey the brothers had chanted on for his chronic

upset stomach. According to the brothers, the stomach problem was being caused by his enlarged liver, and the chanted-on honey would help reduce the enlargement. As her uncle's stomach problem was much better, she wanted to try a similar remedy that the brothers had to reduce fat. Samaresh potentized the honey in her name, and instructed her how to eat it. After finishing her work for the day, and before going to bed each night, she should mix two teaspoons of the honey with a glass of water and drink it. She should then go to sleep immediately. The honey and the water will work inside her as she sleeps, and gradually get rid of the fat in her body. He told her to try the dose of two spoons of honey for a week, if she has no problems, she should increase the dose to four spoons a day. The actual dose, according to him was four spoons, but a lot of people get irregular bowel movements, burning sensations inside the stomach, or loss of appetite with high doses of honey. So she should test her tolerance first before going in for four spoons right away. He reassured her that honey and water made excess body fat disappear very quickly.

#### CONCLUSION.

As can be seen from the interactions I have described and the stories I have narrated in this chapter, "medical" issues are only one aspect of the experience of suffering. "Medical" issues are not separated from social, economic or

other issues, and they are interpreted along the same categories of causation. Though different practitioners may have different styles of operating and their techniques may differ in some ways, the general procedures are very similar. (The concerns that clients come with are also very similar and many of them provide a window into particular culturally specific stress areas that arise out of that socio-cultural setting.)

Mantras are one way to deal with problems, and, as the narrations show, people often do not start out believing in its effect. But having personal experience or knowledge of some problem solved in a satisfactory way, often helps in bringing people to the practitioners.)

(One of the reasons I put in the narrations is because this is how discourse on doing mantras is carried on. I found myself hearing these sorts of stories over and over again --- in social gatherings, in everyday conversation and in the practitioners' sessions. Even people who had never been to a practitioner told me such stories about other people. I therefore see the role of stories as an important factor in keeping the practice of mantras going as an effective and meaningful way to deal with situations.)

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

I started this dissertation by questioning a common assumption in medical anthropology that health and illness can be objectified into isolable entities. Such assumptions help in creating apriori western categories, which other cultural actors do not often relate to. I also referred to a growing sentiment among scholars that we need to look at health and illness as only one aspect of misfortune, affliction, and the experience of suffering. These scholars see a need for medical anthropologists to address broader issues of social theory. This dissertation is a step in that direction.

To recapitulate what I have done so far, I have examined a cultural practice, locally called "doing mantras" in the Indian state of Assam. The practice is played out as practitioner-client interactions. The interactions come about in times of afflictions, misfortunes and dilemmas suffered by the client, and are roughly structured into divination, diagnosis, and remedy. Underlying the practice is a set of assumptions about the world, and a cultural logic that makes it a sensible way of dealing with problematic life situations for the actors. Illness and health form only one aspect of the interaction. For

purposes of this dissertation I address three basic questions about the practice of mantras--- what is the nature of the practice, what is the logic underlying the practice, and how influential is this practice in dictating actor's thoughts and actions in that cultural setting. This treatise, so far, has addressed the first two questions.

I have analyzed the practice of mantras as a cultural schema, using Ortner's [Ortner 1973,1990] conceptualization of the notion. The practice of mantras, as I see it, represents a culturally typical way of interpreting and resolving diverse situations in a similar way --- in terms of mantras. Cultural schemas, according to Ortner, embody and rest upon particular assumptions about the nature of reality and they are found to be useful, logical, and natural ways of understanding and acting. As already discussed in Chapter 5, the world that my informants presented to me consists of various forces which can effect people's lives in different ways. Besides normal illnesses and dangers, there are also ghosts and spirits, other's envious thoughts and words, as well as the power of fellow humans to deliberately inflict problems on others.

One means by which other humans obtain power is through mantras. As laid out in Figure 1, mantras, when said by the right person, in the right procedure is seen to generate a power which can be used for both good and evil purposes. It is this cultural logic that takes the client to the

practitioners. I looked at some of the practitioners to see what a "right person" is like, and what the source of his power is. Most of the practitioners talked of rigorous training, some form of exercise, whether spiritual or otherwise, to maintain the knowledge, and a sense of humility and goodness of heart.

In Chapter 2, I had made the distinction between doing mantras and *puja* (worship). Mantras are the essential component of both, and are sacred words. But in the context of doing mantras, they are recontextualized in an almost secular way, the word secular being used here to mean concern with worldly affairs rather than spiritual ones. This is evident both from the nature of the interactions as well as from the composition of the clients, who are not confined only to Hindus. It is also, in a sense, decollectivized and individualized. Each client comes to the practitioner with his or her own set of problems. Perhaps because of this sense of being irreligious, practices such as these, which Alper [1991 a,b] calls quotidian mantras, have often been glossed as "magic". Significantly, in my discussions with informants, I did not see a dichotomy between magic and religion. Doing mantras were sometimes described as *jadu vidya* (knowledge of magic) by both practitioners and clients, who at the same time emphasized its religious base. This fits in with Wadley's [1975] ideas, who shows that there is no bounded domain of

religion or a spiritual universe in Hindu thinking. "Thus any behavior towards any being which is based on the fact that being has power is religious behavior" [Wadley 1975:184].

The taken for granted reality of religion is for some people extended to the domain of doing mantras. This transition from the worship-oriented religious to the somewhat secular, distress-oriented domain of mantras is not very phenomenal. A common feature of any religious ritual (*puja*) or temple blessing is water, seen to be made sacred and potent with mantras and by contact with the deity. Such potent water is ingested by as well as sprinkled over the person. In Assam, the water that is ingested is called *pod jol* (water from the deity's feet), which would convey the deity's blessings into the person. The water sprinkled is called *shanti pani* (peace water), which brings peace and happiness to the devotees. After a ritual is over, a flower (*nirmali*) from the ritual is given to retain the power of the deity with the person. Usually an edible item (*prasad*) is also given, eating which transfers the deity's power into the devotee's body. The same concept is seen in the context of doing mantras. The power inherent in the mantra is activated by the power of the person chanting it, and the combined power potentizes water, or any other item for a specific purpose. Just as the power of the deity is taken into the body by ingesting the potent item, similarly,



the power created for the specific purpose is taken into the body through the mouth to fulfill that purpose. A very similar concept as sprinkling water on the devotee can be seen in the practitioner requiring the client to drink and bathe with chanted-on water. These seem to be merely extensions from a generalized ritual context to an individualized problem solving context.

Similarly, other "unmarked" objects [Wadley 1975] are used in both contexts. Temples often give threads, bangles or other items, made potent by being in contact with the deity which devotees wear to keep the power of the deity with them. Boxes of vermilion powder are offered to the deity and then brought back home for everyday wear --- for a long and happy married life. The same general ideas can be seen in the practice of mantras where mantras are chanted on strands of threads or on amulets which a person wears for a specific purpose. Vermillion powder is symbol of marriage for a Hindu woman --- similar to a wedding ring in the West. Chanted-on vermilion is given to a wife so as to make a wayward husband come back to her. Potentizing the symbol is seen to make the weakening marriage stronger. I have seen the Chakrabarty brothers give chanted-on kohl to Muslim women instead of vermilion, for the same purpose.

The concept of chanting itself is very common both in the ritual as well as in everyday context. Many Hindu prayers are in the form of verses, often in Sanskrit, which

are chanted either by the priest, or by the person. Though the words are not meaningless, the emphasis for the chanter is on the chanting, and not in the meaning of the words --- most people in fact do not even know what the words mean. The general idea is that as long as the words are chanted correctly, the deity's blessings will come to them. In the context of doing mantras, this concept is intensified to the extent that the meaning of the words, in many cases become totally unimportant. As most practitioners told me, the power of the words was in the particular configuration of syllables and not in their meaning. The point I am trying to make here is that there is a lack of a rigid compartmentalization between a spiritual and a quasi-spiritual domain of mantras. But at the same time, I want to make it clear that my informants do make some sort of a conceptual distinction between the two domains, even though the distinction is not hard and fast.

I could also see that not everyone in that cultural setting resorted to mantras. Some strongly disbelieved in it. Others were ambivalent about it. But almost everyone knew about the existence of the practice. Many clients have told me that they had heard of people who were able to do things using mantras, but they had no idea of what exactly went on until they saw someone's crisis resolved or until problematic situations forced them to seek the help of mantras as an alternative resort. As Ortner suggests

actors have enough cultural shapings so that much of their cultural repertoire will seem reasonable, but not always necessarily deeply meaningful and compelling. Under circumstances, however, actors may connect with a particular cultural schema, which may then assume intense meaningfulness. They will take it, or equally, it will take them. The schema may then acquire potential structuring force: The actor will actually use it to order his or her interpretations and actions. Even under these conditions, it will not **necessarily** take on structuring force; whether it does or not depends on a multitude of real world factors - - - [Ortner1990:92].

From Ortner's words it is apparent that an actor has the choice to accept or to reject a cultural schema. Besides, different actors incorporate the same schema in different ways. As members of a culture, actors embody different kinds of cultural schemas inside themselves. The particular way the agent embodies these structures or schemas determine his or her actions to a large extent. How a structure or schema is embodied differs from person to person, depending on socialization, family ideology, life circumstances, personality, and so on. Thus each agent works on the existing structures and changes them somewhat, based on his or her life experiences. This also makes the logic underlying these schemas very contextual --- in certain contexts and situations they may make sense, at other times they may not. As Ortner says, actors find the schema personally meaningful in a given context and utilize them as a vehicle for personal agency. At other contexts, they can reestablish distance and render the schema once

again a relatively abstract part of their symbolic ecology [Ortner 1990:90].

As I watched the clients come in to the practitioners, I noticed many children, either just accompanying their mothers or brought by mothers for some specific purpose, including getting them chanted-on so as to be obedient. Children were sometimes made to miss school to come to a session. One area where children themselves came to the Chakrabarty brothers was around the time of exams, to get their pens and ink potentized. Getting high scores in exams was an arena most children relate to on an everyday basis -- their reputation among their peers in school often depend on this. Many mothers have proudly told me how their children's scores have improved after resorting to mantras. For those children, studies was one context where resorting mantras made sense. As Bourdieu states, dispositions inculcated in the earliest years of life are constantly reinforced by calls to order from the group, which consists of individuals having the same dispositions and interests [Bourdieu 1977:15] Therefore, chances exist that later on in life too, these children will continue going to practitioners in times of distress. I have talked to many mothers who have been coming to these practitioners since they were themselves children.

Cultural stories also play a very important role in making a schema seem sensible. As I have already stated,

most of the discourse on doing mantras is conducted in the form of stories. This is particularly relevant in the case of Mayong, where all that survives of mantras seem to be stories. Very few people have real experience of any *bejali* from Mayong. But the reputation of *bej* from Mayong is carried on through these stories. I see these stories playing an important part in keeping the practice going. Most of the time they remain just as stories --- but at the same time, they reinforce assumptions about the world --- evil eye, ghosts and spirits, power of mantras, and so on. Then at particular moments of crisis, they may fit into the person's life experiences and become a model of reality [Geertz 1973:93]. In the context of Mayong, these stories have also, to a certain extent, shaped the meaning of the practice of *bejali* --- the word *bej* now often has a bad connotation.

But these stories, like any other cultural material, are embodied by different people in different ways. Actors do not passively take in these myths, legends or stories during placid times and then regurgitate them as sensible ways of looking at reality in times of crisis. Resorting to mantras during times of trouble is not therefore as unconscious a decision as Bourdieu [1977, 1990] suggests. These schemas are not being mindlessly reproduced [Comaroff 1985] by sheer 'habit' [Bourdieu 1977, Berger and Luckman 1967]. Actors take in these various cultural material, from

multiple realities, and, in times of crisis make a conscious choice, based on their own experiences. It is because of this potential for choice that Ortner sees a loose connection between cultural schemas and the actor. And it is this potential that prevents the schema of the practice of mantras from having a programming effect on actors. And for me personally, this suggestion helps in understanding why in spite of growing up in the same cultural setting, different people relate to the practice of mantras in different ways.

This brings me to one last point --- the role of the actor in shaping schemas. Ortner suggests that actors have the capacity to shape and potentially change the schema. In the practice of mantras, clients, by seeking the help of these practitioners, are reproducing the practice. One of the reasons people continue going to these practitioners is because of the kind of problems they deal with --- conflicts, illnesses, dilemmas. The same kind of problems crop up through generations. It is conceivable that as long as these problems exist, and as long as people see them being solved through mantras, clients will continue to seek the help of these practitioners.

On the other hand, I continuously heard people lament about the lack of real *bej* these days --- practitioners are accused of having become mercenary. It is greed that is seen to have brought the downfall of Mayong. Practitioners,

in turn, talked of the lack of enthusiasm among the younger generation to learn the knowledge. I was told that a lot of this knowledge has been lost because practitioners have died without teaching their skills to others. Younger generations are fast becoming "scientific", and do not often relate to such "superstition". It is therefore possible that the practice may eventually cease to be meaningful and thus disappear.

## LIST OF REFERENCES



## LIST OF REFERENCES

- Alper, Harvey P  
1991 a. Introduction. in, Harvey P. Alper, ed.  
Understanding Mantras. Delhi: Motilal  
Banarasidass.  
1992 b. A Working Bibliography for the Study of Mantras.  
in, Harvey P. Alper ed. Understanding Mantras.  
Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.
- Babb, Lawrence A  
1975 The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central  
India. New York : Columbia University Press.
- Banerji, S.C  
1978 Tantra in Bengal: A Study in its Origin,  
Development and Influence. Calcutta: Naya Prokash.
- Basu, Nirmal K  
1970 Assam in the Ahom Age: 1228-1826. Calcutta:  
Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar.
- Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckman  
1967 The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in  
the Sociology of Knowledge. New York: Doubleday  
and Co.
- Bharati, Agehananda  
1965 The Tantric Tradition. London: Rider and Company.
- Bhattacharyya. N.N  
1982 History of the Tantric Religion: A Historical,  
Ritualistic and Philosophical Study. Delhi:  
Manohar.
- Bourdieu, Pierre  
1977 Outline of a Theory of Practice. Cambridge:  
Cambridge University Press.  
1990 The Logic Of Practice. Stanford: Stanford  
University Press.
- Cantlie, Audrey  
1984 The Assamese: Religion, Caste and Sect in an  
Indian Village. London: Curzon Press.

- Carstairs, G.M and R.L Kapur  
1976 The Great Universe of Kota: Stress, Change and Mental Disorder in an Indian Village. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Chattopadhyaya, Sudhakar  
1978 Reflections on the Tantras. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.
- Choudhury, Pratap C  
1959 Kamrupi Systems of Ayurveda, Astrology and Almanac. in, K.N. Dutt ed. Aspects of the Heritage of Assam, pp 22-30 Gauhati: Indian History Congress.
- Coburn, Thomas B  
1984 Scripture in India : Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life. Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 52 (3): 435-459.
- Comaroff, Jean  
1980 Healing and the Cultural Order: the Case of the Barolong boo Ratshidi of Southern Africa. American Ethnologist, 7(4):637-657.  
1985 Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Das, Amiyo Kumar  
1982 Assam's Agony: A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis. New Delhi: Lancers Publishers.
- Embree, ed.  
1972 The Hindu Tradition.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E  
1937 Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ewing, Katherine  
1984 The Sufi as Saint, Curer, and Exorcist in Modern Pakisthan. in, E. Valentine Daniel and Judy F. Pugh ed. South Asian Systems of Healing. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Gait, E.A,  
1906 A History of Assam. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.

- Geertz, Clifford  
 1973 The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books.  
 1980 Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gellner, David  
 1994 Priests, Healers, Mediums and Witches: The Context of Possession in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. Man, 29:27-48.
- Glaserapp, H. V.  
 1940 Buddhistische Mysterien. Stuttgart.
- Gonda, Jan  
 1975 Selected Studies, Presented to the Author by the Staff of the Oriental Institute, Utrecht University, on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Goswami, M.C  
 1975 Shamans and Shamanism at Kamakhya Dham, Assam. Bulletin Board of the Department of Anthropology, Vol. 4. Department of Anthropology: Gauhati University.
- Goudriaan, Teun  
 1978 Maya Divine and Human. A Study of Magic and its Religious Foundations in Sanskrit Texts, with Particular Attention to a Fragment in Visnu's Maya Preserved in Bali. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Goudriaan, Teun, and Sanjukta Gupta  
 1981 Hindu Tantric and Sakta Literature. Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz.
- Grimes, Ronald L.  
 1985 Research in Ritual Studies, A Programmatic Essay and Bibliography. (American Theological Library Association Series 14) Metuchen, N.J. : The Scarecrow Press.
- Hahn, Robert A  
 1984 Rethinking "Illness" and "Disease", in, E. Valentine Daniel and Judy F. Pugh ed. South Asian Systems of Healing. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Janzen, John M  
 1978 The Quest for Therapy in Lower Zaire. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Kakar, Sudhir  
1982 Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Enquiry into India and its Healing Traditions. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kakati, Bani Kanta  
1948 The Mother Goddess Kamakhya. Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall.
- Kleinman, Arthur  
1980 Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kleinman, Arthur, Leon Eisenberg and Byron Good  
1978 Culture, Illness and Care. Annals of Internal Medicine, 88(2):251-258.
- Lambert, Helen  
1992 The Cultural Logic of Indian Medicine: Prognosis and Etiology in Rajasthani Popular Therapeutics. Social Science and Medicine, 34(10):1069-1076.
- Mandelbaum, David  
1966 Transcendental and Pragmatic Aspects of Religion. American Anthropologist, 68:1174-91.
- Nichter, Mark  
1981 Idioms of Distress: Alternatives in the Expression of Psychosocial Distress. Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, 5:379-408.  
1991 Ethnomedicine: Diverse Trends, Common Linkages. Commentary. Medical Anthropology, v.13, pp137-71.
- Ortner, Sherry  
1973 On Key Symbols. American Anthropologist, 75:1338-1346.  
1990 Patterns of History: Cultural Schemas in the Foundings of Sherpa Religious Institutions. in Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney ed. Culture Through Time: Anthropological Approaches. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Oxford University Press  
1990 Atlas of India. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Padoux, Andre'  
1991 Conclusion: Mantras --- What Are They? in, Harvey P Alper ed. Understanding Mantras. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.

- Pugh, Judy F  
 1983 Astrological Counselling in Contemporary India. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 7:1-21.
- 1984 Concepts of Person and Situation in North Indian Counselling : The Case of Astrology. in, E. Valentine Daniel and Judy F. Pugh ed. *South Asian Systems of Healing*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Sahlins, Marshall  
 1981 Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy  
 1990 Three Propositions for a Critically Applied Medical Anthropology. *Social Science and Medicine*, 30(2):189-97.
- Scheper-Hughes, N and M.M Lock  
 1987 The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical anthropology. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 1(1):6-41.
- Schieffelin, Edward L  
 1976 The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Staal, J. Frits  
 1979 The Concept of Scripture in the Indian Tradition. in, Juergensmeyer, Mark, and Gerald Barrier ed. *Sikh Studies, Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition*. (Berkeley Religious Studies Series) Berkeley: GTU.
- Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja  
 1985 Culture, Thought and Social Action. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Wadley, Susan Snow  
 1975 Shakti: Power in the Conceptual Structure of Karimpur Religion. University of Chicago Studies in Anthropology Series in Social, Cultural and Linguistic Anthropology, No. 2. Chicago: Department of Anthropology. University of Chicago.
- 1977 Power in Hindu Ideology and Practice. in Kenneth David ed. *The New Wind : Changing Identities in South Asia*. Mouton Publishers: The Hague.

Walker, Benjamin

1968 Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism,  
Vol. 1 London: George Allen and Unwin.

1968b Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism,  
Vol. 2 London: George Allen and Unwin.

Worsley, Peter

1982 Non-Western Medical Systems. Annual Review of  
Anthropology, 11:315-348

Young, Alan

1980 The Discourse on Stress and the Reproduction of  
Conventional Knowledge. Social Science and  
Medicine, 14B.

Zysk, Kenneth G

1991 Mantra in Ayurveda: A Study of the Use of Magico-  
Religious Speech in Ancient Indian Medicine. in,  
Harvey P. Alper, ed. Understanding Mantras. Delhi:  
Motilal Banarasidass.