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AGHOR MEDICINE

POLLUTION, DEATH, AND HEALING IN NORTHERN INDIA

RON BARRETT FOREWORD BY JONATHAN P. PARRY

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The Cosmic Sink

The concentric mapping of microcosm to macrocosm is a dominant foundational schema in Indian religious traditions. The Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā (hereafter RV) tells how humanity and the cosmos are embodied in the anatomy of Purusha, the “Cosmic Man” (RV 10: 90). In the Caraka Saṃhitā (hereafter CS) the principal text of Ayurvedic medicine, the human body is a homunculus embodying greater cosmological principles (CS IV: 1). Similarly, Banaras is considered to be a microcosm of the divine world. As such, the city is thought to encapsulate all other centers of Hindu religious pilgrimage (Singh 1993). This concept is central in Diana Eck’s comprehensive survey of Banaras’s sacred geography: “The symbol that condenses the whole into the part is common in the Hindu world. The whole of the sacred Vedas, they say, may be packed into a single powerful mantra . . . or the whole of the universe may be depicted in the ‘sacred circle’ of a cosmic map called a mandala. [Banaras] is this kind of symbol, which condenses the whole of India into a great ‘sacred circle,’ a geographical mandala” (1983: 41).

Just as Banaras is a prototype for sacred India, her sacred features are prototypes for the divine roles of the city as a whole. Foremost among these features are the Ganga and the two famous cremation grounds (*śhmashāns*) along her banks. Pilgrims commonly say that Banaras is like the Mother Ganga, who accepts and purifies anyone and anything that comes to her and transforms them into herself. Indeed, more than a million pilgrims visit Banaras each year for the same reasons that they

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Figure 3. Banaras main bathing ghats along the Ganga River. Courtesy of the Sonoma Yoga Ashram.

bathe in the Ganga: to purify themselves of pollution and sin in hopes of better fortune in this life or the next, or spiritual liberation (*moksha*) from the perpetual cycle of rebirth.

For those desiring the latter, the Kāshī Kaṇḍa offers the promise of instant liberation for all who die within the sacred boundaries of the city (Skanda Purāṇa [SP] IV.1.30). Even people who die elsewhere can obtain an auspicious sendoff at the famous *shmathāns* at Manikarnika and Harischandra Ghats. Unlike most cremation grounds, which are typically located on the outskirts of Indian towns and cities, these *shmathāns* are centrally located in Banaras, along the bank of the river. Indeed, the *shmathān* of Manikarnika lies next to the purported site of cosmogenesis, the place where Lord Vishnu carved out the world with his discus. Manikarnika is named for the earring that fell to earth when Shiva shook with ecstasy over this earthly creation. To this day, Shiva continues to dance the *Nāṭarāj* among the burning pyres of Marikarnika (SP IV.1.26). Lord Shiva is the ultimate ascetic of the *shmathān*. Banaras is the city of Shiva. So it is said that Banaras is the *mahāshmathān*, the Great Cremation Ground (Eck 1983).

Each of these features—the Ganga, the *shmathān*, and the city as a whole—functions as a kind of cosmic sink, a sacred dumping ground for

humanity's physical and metaphysical refuse. Yet although people who work as sweepers and cremation attendants are socially denigrated for managing the excreta of humanity, the same stigma does not apply to these sacred geographic features. On the contrary, people believe that these places derive their divinity and ritual power from their ability to take on the pollution of any and all who come to them. Shakti takes the form of Ganga Ma. Lord Shiva takes the form of cremation ascetic. Both are as infinite as their capacity to absorb the sins of the universe.

These dynamics hold true for Aghor as well. The Kina Ram tradition asserts that Aghor is like the Ganga, accepting the purest streams from the Himalayas as well as the sewage of the cities. The Aghori consider Baba Kina Ram to be the manifestation of Lord Shiva; his *dhuni*, a cremation pyre; and the Kina Ram Ashram, the *mahāshmathān*. Like the city, the ashram and its namesake play the role of cosmic sink for the removal of pollution and sin from the many pilgrims and patients they receive. Significantly, this role is informed by the same models of purification that people use when bathing in the Ganga or offering the bodies of their ancestors to the fires of final sacrifice. These models of purification are the foundation for the practice of Aghor medicine. Thus, we need to understand their relationships to the history and sacred geography of Banaras.

BABA KINA RAM

The Kina Ram Aghor tradition emerged as an ideology of resistance to the pervasive social inequalities and power dynamics of Banaras during the British Raj. These dynamics have persisted through independence, and they continue to shape the context in which Aghor medicine is practiced today. The hagiography of Baba Kina Ram illustrates this fact well, though it has been filtered through the lens of the postreform Aghor tradition. His story has taken shape through oral legends recounted by Aghor disciples, published in tracts written by the Aghori, and illustrated on the many signboards hanging in Aghori ashrams (Ram 1997; Asthana 1994a, 1994b).

Although the Kina Ram Aghori have left more written records than the *kāpālikas* before them, a reliable history of the lineage before the 1950s awaits the discovery of sufficient primary source materials. Three potential sources exist for these materials, but such a historical project is beyond the scope and scale of this investigation.¹ I therefore represent the hagiography of the Aghori in the same way that I have operationalized

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

Figure 4. Statue of Baba Kina Ram in the middle of Krim Kund, 2000.

my definition of Aghor itself: that is, according to the stated beliefs of my informants. Although this definition is biased toward a postreform agenda, it is salient within the current Kina Ram Aghor tradition, its social and medico-religious practices, and the image the Aghori projected to the outside world. It follows the argument that one should evaluate such hagiographies more for their ideological lessons than for their historical accuracy (Lorenzen 1995).

The Kina Rami tell of the miraculous circumstances surrounding the birth and early childhood of their founder and namesake. According to them, Kina Ram's parents were a childless elderly couple who lived in a small village in the district of Chandouli near Banaras. Kina Ram was conceived shortly after Lord Shiva visited his mother in a dream. Just after his birth, the infant was visited by Lords Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva disguised as wandering sages, who whispered an initiating mantra into his ear. As a young child, Kina Ram gave inspirational teachings to his age-mates and lived a pious life. His marriage was arranged by the time he was nine, but he correctly foresaw the death of his bride-to-be on the eve of their wedding. The circumstances surrounding her death were considered ominous, and the young Kina Ram was released from the obligations of family life to become a wandering ascetic.

Such miraculous accounts of early childhood are common in Indian hagiographies, where they serve to establish the saint's supernatural power and religious vocation at an early age, but they are more common for saints of lower caste or untouchable origins for the likely reason that they serve to mitigate or deny their natal social status (Lorenzen 1995). In the case of Baba Kina Ram, however, divine conception would mitigate his *upper*-caste origins, supporting the argument that Aghor functions as an ideology of resistance to the entire schema of social hierarchy, not just to any caste or class within it.

As a young ascetic, Baba Kina Ram wandered India for many years before encountering Hinglaj Devi, a goddess associated with a legendary center of tantric worship in northwestern India. Hinglaj Devi directed him to go to Banaras, where she said he would find her once again, dwelling beside a sacred bathing tank that would eventually be known as Krim Kund. This message was reinforced by Lord Dattatreya, an antinomian form of Shiva closely associated with the cremation ground, who appeared to Baba Kina Ram atop Girnar Mountain in Gujarat. Considered to be the *adi guru* (ancient spiritual teacher) and founding deity of Aghor, Lord Dattatreya offered his own flesh to the young ascetic as *prasād* (a kind of blessing), conferring upon him the power of clairvoyance and establishing a guru-disciple relationship between them.

The young Kina Ram found his guru once again in Banaras. This time, Lord Dattatreya appeared in human form as Baba Kalu Ram, sitting in the *shmbhān* at Harischandra Ghat. The guru gave three supernatural tests to his disciple. In the first, he fed grains to a group of chattering skulls. Kina Ram commanded the skulls to stop eating. Baba Kalu Ram then stated that he was hungry, so Kina Ram caused three fish to jump out of the Ganga. The disciple cooked the fish for his guru with wood left over from a cremation fire. With Kina Ram having passed these two tests, Sri Kalu Ram offered a third: he pointed to a body floating in the river. Kina Ram pulled the body ashore and brought it back to life. The revived soul was an Aghor disciple who later became known as Baba Jivayan Ram. Satisfied with the performance of his disciple, Sri Kalu Ram accompanied Baba Kina Ram to the dwelling place of Hinglaj Devi at Krim Kund.

Having reunited with the goddess, Baba Kina Ram established his *dhuni* (and thus, the seat of the Aghor lineage) beside Krim Kund. There, he became famous for his social activism and healing, the two dominant themes of his hagiography. The most famous story of Baba Kina Ram relates his confrontation with Chet Singh, the maharaja of Banaras.² The

maharaja built a grand fortress just south of the *śmashān* to improve his physical presence within the sacred boundaries of Kashi. In celebration of its completion, he ordered a grand *yajña* (Vedic fire sacrifice) in the courtyard. The sacrifice was to be a very auspicious affair. A number of reputed Brahmin priests and *paṇḍits* were on hand to perform the rite, and the richest and most powerful men of Banaras were in attendance.

Baba Kina Ram was not on the guest list, but he nonetheless arrived at the ritual riding atop a donkey, an inauspicious way to show up at an orthodox ceremony.³ When the maharaja and his priests berated him, the Baba responded, “Do you think that knowledge of scripture gives you the authority to decide what is holy and virtuous? Such knowledge is nothing special. Look, even my donkey can chant the Vedas.” The donkey proceeded to chant the Vedas to an astonished court. Baba Kina Ram then cursed the maharaja, foretelling that his new fort would be occupied only by pigeons and that his family would never give birth to sons. Shortly thereafter, the British routed Chet Singh from the fortress. It has remained unoccupied ever since. Moreover, as Baba Kina Ram predicted, Chet Singh’s successors had to adopt male children to maintain the lineage until the most recent generation.⁴

Although some scholars emphasize potential conflicts between the ritual authority of Brahmin priests and the worldly authority of their Kshatrya kings (Dumont 1966; Gupta 1995), the story of Baba Kina Ram’s curse instead serves as an allegory of resistance against the collusion between these two groups. Such collusion has been a recurring theme in the history of Banaras, which has been as much a political and economic crossroads (*tīrtha*) as a symbolic one. The city arose out of a cluster of shrines and temples at the intersection of two key northern Indian trade routes, the Ganga and the Grand Trunk Road, sometime around the ninth century B.C.E. (Eck 1983). Because of its strategic location, Banaras became a major inland commercial capital, developing as a nexus of economic activity in parallel with its development as a religious center (Freitag 1989). This codevelopment of symbolic and material prosperity was evident in the activities of the Gossains, mendicant warriors organized around local temple networks, who protected traveling merchants and pilgrims by providing armed escorts, safeguarding merchandise, and enforcing trade agreements. The Gossains operated in small decentralized, feudal houses that concentrated religious, economic, and military power into more than three hundred local neighborhoods, or *muhallas*, through complex networks of patron-client relationships similar to the *jajmani* system of rural India (Beidelman 1959).

This complex and persistent web of local power relations made Banaras easily conquerable from without but totally untamable from within. The city's strategic location, auspiciousness, and wealth of resources have made it a key asset for political rulers, beginning with its emergence as one of sixteen Janapadas ("Great Kingdoms," literally "foothold of a tribe"), from the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C.E. Banaras was the capitol of the Gahadavala kingdom in the twelfth century C.E., before submitting to a long chain of Mughal and British colonial masters. Yet none of these authorities were able to control Banaras without close collaboration with its local centers of power. Such collaboration entailed careful and often problematic exchanges of symbolic, social, and material power.

The emergence of the maharaja of Banaras during the Mughal and British periods provides key examples of these problematic exchanges. The city's status shifted radically under Mughal occupation. Its religious and cultural institutions enjoyed generous patronage under Akbar, only to see these mainstays destroyed two generations later under the intolerant rule of Aurangzeb (Freitag 1989). These structures were partially rebuilt in the declining years of the Delhi Sultanate, for which Banaras remained an important source of revenue as well as a symbolic instrument for appeasing its Hindu subjects. To achieve the requisite local support for these objectives, the nawab of Awadh appointed the head of a prominent family of Hindu Bumihar landholders to serve as tax collector instead of a Muslim *zamindari*, as was usually the case. Through key alliances with the Gossains and nine families of merchant bankers known as the Naupatti, members of this Bumihar family became highly successful government revenueurs, indispensable to Mughal and later British rulers, who granted them the title of raja, and then maharaja, in subsequent generations (Freitag 1989).

Despite his success, the maharaja held a tenuous position in Banaras. Lacking a royal pedigree and perched between potential war with colonial authorities and a revolt by the local population, the new maharaja was badly in need of symbolic legitimacy. He therefore adopted the same strategy of "sanskritization" that many of his merchant bankers had pursued.⁵ He heavily patronized the city's temples, some with *mahants* of previously marginal standing. They, in turn, honored him in their words and ritual deeds. He patronized schools of traditional literature and music, which lauded him in their arts. He supported large religious festivals, such as the Ram Lila, a public enactment of the epic *Ramcharitmanas* (a popular form of the Ramayana), the largest of which had him

appearing before thousands to exchange salutes with the gods (Lutgen-dorf 1989). Without the need for a costly standing army, royal patronage of the arts increased under the British, resulting in more elaborate festivals, expanded institutions of traditional learning, and a near monopoly in publishing (King 1988). Not surprisingly, the products of these local institutions later served as templates for linguistic and religious revivalism and nationalist identity in the half centuries before and after Indian independence (see Dalmia 1996).

These historical relationships illustrate the classic struggle between temporal and ritual authority that Dumont (1966) describes. Yet these struggles never yield a clear winner, and the lines of defense are often blurred. Instead, a dialectic of coercion and conflict emerges that persists specifically because it is never resolved (see Nuckolls 1996; Guha 1989). Baba Kina Ram attempted to break this dialectic by confronting the maharaja, the priests, and their mutual patronage. The Aghori were usually explicit about this confrontation when retelling the story—some would even go so far as to trace the flow of money, power, and prestige between the various interests—noting that that these overall dynamics continue into the present day.

At a religious level, the curse of the maharaja closely parallels the Puranic tragedy of Daksha's sacrifice. As the reluctant father-in-law of Lord Shiva, Daksha disapproved of the ascetic activities of his new son and his association with the *shmashān*. Daksha therefore excluded Lord Shiva from a great fire ceremony, a *yajña*, to which he invited all the other gods (SP IV.2: 87). In the end, the gods berated Daksha for his omission, and his daughter jumped into the fire as an act of protest (SP IV.2: 87–88). Daksha's sacrifice also has a more direct symbolic link to Baba Kina Ram. After the tragic death of his consort, Shiva wandered the earth, carrying his wife's corpse until Vishnu eventually cut her body into many pieces with his fingernail. The places where these pieces fell became Shakti *pīthas*, major centers of power and tantric worship throughout India. Hinglaj, the place where the crown of the daughter's skull fell to earth, is one of the most mythically prominent of these centers. Her namesake is the goddess at Krim Kund (Ram 2000).

Both of these stories depict their protagonists as sincere but misunderstood figures with close ties to the cremation grounds. The anti-nomianism of Lord Shiva and Baba Kina Ram incurs the disapproval of the landlords and priests of the Brahminical orthodoxy, who exclude them from Vedic rituals. Consequently, these rituals are rendered inauspicious, the leaders of the orthodoxy are stricken with tragedies, and

their underlying hypocrisy is exposed. The protagonists, Lord Shiva and Baba Kina Ram, prevail as social revolutionaries against the powers-that-be in Banaras.

Many other tales reinforce Baba Kina Ram's role as an advocate against social oppression. In one, he rescues his first disciple and successor from the violence of a brutal *zamindar* (feudal landlord) by correctly telling the latter that he can find more than his share of rent buried right beneath his feet. In another story, Kina Ram poses as a beggar and has himself arrested in a town where the nawab (Muslim ruler) has punished begging with hard labor at his mills. Kina Ram forces the millstones to turn by themselves, thereby attaining from the frightened nawab the release of his fellow prisoners and a pledge of alms for all beggars. Kina Ram also stops a group of men from killing a young widow for giving birth to an illegitimate son. The men skulk away after Baba Kina Ram suggests that they kill the father of the child as well, a member of their group whom he is fully prepared to reveal. He finds employment for the widow as the resident caretaker of an auspicious *samadhī* shrine, the burial site of a famous saint.

Baba Kina Ram's social activism extended to his healing practices as well. He particularly reached out to women with socially discredited health conditions such as infertility or leprosy. Some people say that Baba Kina Ram conferred fertility upon barren women in the same manner that Lord Shiva brought fertility to the baba's own mother. Once, after Kina Ram blessed a barren woman with four children, another saint asked his guardian deity for the secret of this power. The deity demanded that the saint offer a piece of flesh from his own body for the knowledge. The saint was unwilling to make such an offering. Yet when the deity directed the saint to obtain flesh from the body of Baba Kina Ram, the latter readily cut a piece from his thigh. The deity stated that this willingness for self-sacrifice enabled Baba Kina Ram to perform such miraculous deeds.

The allegory of healing as self-sacrifice addresses two important challenges to the traditional practice of medicine in Banaras. The first is the importance of establishing the sincerity of the Aghori healer among a larger population of charlatans. Banarsi have a common saying: "Raṅ naṅ siṭī sannysā, ānse baché sévé Kashī" (Widows, bulls, steps, and *sadhus*, save [yourselves] from these [in order to] enjoy Kashi). Bulls can be unpredictable. Stairs can be steep. But gurus can be the most dangerous of all, for the corrupt among them can poison their disciples, just as the most sincere can be their salvation. The same is true of healers, who are

commonly revered as gurus in their own right, regardless of any other claims to religious authority. The outward expression of self-sacrifice can help establish the underlying motivation and qualities of the healer. We will soon see how many patients of the Aghori come to value these qualities more than they value the medicines themselves.

The most famous of Baba Kina Ram's miraculous cures established Krim Kund as a place of healing. A desperate mother approached the Aghori in search of a cure for her dying son. In response, Kina Ram charged a few grains of rice with the *Krīm* mantra, a seed mantra associated with Kali and other fiery manifestations of the divine feminine. Kali is the fiery goddess who is often seen "dancing" upon a supine Shiva. She wears an apron of human arms and a necklace of human heads. Blood drips from her extended tongue as she holds a scythe and severed head. Yet despite her ferocious appearance, Kali is often considered to be a loving mother who helps the spiritual seeker break away from worldly attachments and limitations.

Kina Ram cast the mantra-laden grains into the water and instructed the mother to bathe her son there on five consecutive Sundays and Tuesdays. The mother did as instructed, and the boy was cured. Shortly thereafter, a courtesan was cured of leprosy by bathing in the *kund*—despite the double stigma of having been a prostitute afflicted with the most untouchable of human diseases. News of these cures quickly spread, and more people began bathing in its waters. Baba Kina Ram proclaimed, "This *kund* shall live as long as the Ganga remains in Kashi." Like the Ganga who fed her waters, and the Aghori who charged them, the Krim Kund acquired a reputation for great power in the context of limitless nondiscrimination.

GANGA MA

When I asked Agania Devi, a longtime Aghor disciple and retired schoolteacher, about the healing powers of Krim Kund, she began discussing the Ganga. "'Ganga' means holy," she said. "There is no kind of evil in her. All rivers flow into her and meet in her, and Ganga takes all into her. Even so, her purity remains. In the same way, are these Aghor saints." Her companion, Sangita, expanded on this idea: "There is no darkness in it. It has taken everything in it, meaning all things should be all right [i.e., no discrimination against anything]. [One should] stay away from discrimination, have a simple nature, and live one's life with simplicity." These women spoke of the *kund*, the Ganga, and Aghor interchangeably.

Sangita had previously bathed in the *kund* for a variety of ailments, and she claimed to have good results. We first met when she brought her son to bathe for an undisclosed “personal problem” within the family. Her son summarized the situation as follows: “Now we have put the burden of [these] problems on Baba. He will do it.” He used the verb *ḍālnā*, meaning “to pour” or “to cast,” verbalizing a hydraulic model of purification that frequently arose in the explanatory models of patients at the ashram and elsewhere. The healing modalities of Aghor medicine in general, and Krim Kund in particular, were informed by such cultural models of purification, for which the Ganga is a major prototype. One could therefore learn a great deal about the dynamics of healing in Aghor medicine by examining models of pollution and purity with respect to this holy river.

The Ganga is the foremost of India’s seven sacred rivers, winding fifteen hundred miles from the glaciers of the Himalayas through twenty-nine cities and seventy towns of the northern Indian plains and exiting into the Indian Ocean through the great delta that feeds into the Bay of Bengal on the eastern coast. The river is the primary source of irrigation and alluvial deposits for the agrarian economies stretching out from her banks. For many centuries, the Ganga was a major route for trade and transportation. In recent decades, she has become a dumping ground for untreated sewage, industrial waste, fertilizers, pesticides, and detergents—in addition to an increasing number of animal and human bodies (Kumra 1995). The Ganga is also a pilgrimage destination for the hundreds of millions who bathe in her waters to remove the accumulated karma of many lifetimes, make offerings to deities and ancestors, and offer themselves as the ultimate sacrifice at the time of death. For these latter reasons especially, the Ganga is more than a river. She is the Holy Mother. She is Ganga Ma.

The story of the Holy Mother’s descent to earth has been recounted in numerous oral traditions, as well as in the Epic and Puranic literature. Through the single-minded austerities of the pious King Bhagiratha, Lord Brahma granted a boon that Ganga Ma would descend upon the earth so she might carry sixty thousand of his cursed ancestors to the netherworld. Her fall was broken by Shiva’s matted locks, which prevented the earth from being destroyed by her impact, and the locks channeled her downward flow from the Himalayas. Once upon the plains, Ganga Ma sought out King Bhagiratha in Banaras, who led her to the remains of his ancestors in Bengal, where she swept them along to the other world (Darian 2001; Eck 1983).

Although any point along the Ganga can serve as a pilgrimage site, a number of especially powerful *tīrthas* (sacred crossings) along her banks allow pilgrims to cover multiple spiritual bases with a single visit.⁶ Banaras is the largest and most visited of these *tīrthas*, presenting itself as Kashi (“the Luminous”), an otherworldly abode that rests upon Shiva’s trident and grants instant liberation to all who die within its boundaries (SP IV.1.26: 80). The Ganga forms the eastern boundary of Kashi, delineating the auspicious from the inauspicious, for people say that those who die on her far shore are destined to be reborn as donkeys (Eck 1983). One might therefore expect that such a border would occupy a peripheral position in this sacred space. Nevertheless, the Ganga is a central symbol and geographic feature of Kashi.

Most pilgrims begin their visit to Banaras with a ritual bath in the Ganga. Ideally, they bathe just before dawn, when the river waters are offered to the rising sun while reciting the Gayatri Mantra.⁷ Although the bath is a *pūjā* in itself, pilgrims may make other offerings of lamps, flowers, incense, rice, and prayers, just as they would in a temple or shrine. The ritual structure of these offerings can range from personal formulas to complex rites performed under the direction of Brahmin *paṇḍās*, ritual specialists who hawk their services from umbrella-covered platforms along the bathing ghats.

Ritual bathing is the prototypical interaction with Mother Ganga. Yet amid the sacred ablutions, washerpeople (*dhobīs*) scrub and pound the city’s laundry. Herders bring their buffaloes to cool themselves in the midday sun. Pilgrims throw plastic bags full of flowers into the river, and people everywhere urinate and defecate along her banks with the full knowledge that the next rain will wash their excreta into the waters below. The Ganga is also a dumping ground for the dead. The unburnt remnants of more than eighty cremated human corpses are put in the river every day (Parry 1994), and the remains of cows, buffaloes, and other animals float down the river like an endless convoy of bloated barges. But even these insults are dwarfed by the 125 million liters of wastewater that the city generates, 84 percent of which it dumps untreated into the river every day (Ahmed 1995). As a consequence, this river of spiritual purification has a fecal coliform count that is two hundred times greater than the World Health Organization’s recommended limit for safe swimming (Mishra 2000).

The Ganga is often cited as an example of the apparent incongruence between Indian religious models of ritual pollution and scientific models of biological pollution. However, conversations with people along the

ghats reveal a more complex and ambivalent relationship between these two models of contamination. Despite local awareness of river pollution, I found mixed interpretations of its implications. After hearing countless opinions and anecdotes, I decided to formally interview two dozen people on the riverbank on the subject. A couple of cosmopolitan-looking young men told me (in Hindi) after their bath that “the Ganga is certainly pure. Mother Ganga is giving salvation to the whole world, be it cattle, be it sparrows, be it dogs, be it man.” Then (in Bhojpuri) they said, “Certainly [the Ganga] is polluted. You are seeing it, aren’t you? You have the proof.” On another day, a fisherman spat a large mouthful of *pān* into the river so that he could more clearly give me the opposite answer in similar terms: “Certainly the Ganga is pure. Can you not see it?”⁸ I replied on both occasions with a sideways nod: “Yes, certainly. I see.”

These statements reveal the range of models by which people understand the purity of the Ganga. Their use of different languages to describe these models is a common example of situational code switching among local speakers of *Banarsī bolī* (Simon 1993). It is reminiscent of other societies, such as in Samoa, which use multiple speech registers to affirm or deny categories of cultural behavior (Shore 1996). Yet even in the same language, the nearly simultaneous use of apparently conflicting models is not unusual in Indian metaphysics, which O’Flaherty describes as a suspension of opposites (1976).

At the same time, one should consider the different relationships that people have with the river and how these relationships might prompt the use of one model over another. For example, the fisherman above, using the same dialect and nearly identical sentence structure as the two young men, cited the same empirical evidence to support an opposite claim. Yet his adamant denial of pollution in the Ganga, on any level, was shared by many who earned their living from the river, whether by fishing, washing laundry, or watering their animals. If the Ganga could be dirty, even if only in a physical sense, then no one should put anything dirty in it nor eat anything dirty from it. The fisherman, like the washers and herders, would therefore have to choose between financial ruin or karmic disaster. In contrast, those who used the Ganga solely for ritual purposes could afford to be more philosophical about the coexistence of physical pollution with spiritual purity.

There may be nearly as many cultural models for the purity of Ganga Ma as there are people along her banks. Yet most of these models fall into at least two generalized patterns, or schemata, of purification. These

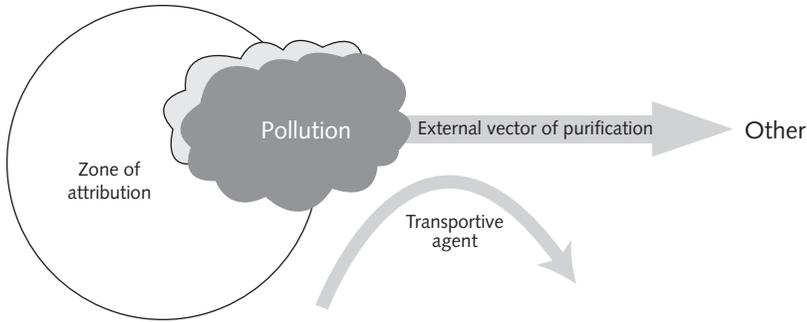


Figure 5. The transporative schema of purification.

schemata inform not only ritual purification within sacred spaces but also the manner in which people clean themselves and their environments on a daily basis. They include any means of dealing with physical or metaphysical pollution within a particular *zone of attribution*, an area in which a coded substance may bring negative social consequences for a person or group of people.

The first category is a transporative schema of purification, entailing the transfer of pollution from one zone of attribution to another. This schema describes a process of externalization, of excretion from the inside out (figure 5).

The transporative schema emphasizes the dynamic properties of water, an example of which is the common belief that a person can be properly cleansed only by running water (Babb 1975). Likewise, Banarsis often note that the relatively still waters of the city's sacred bathing tanks are replenished, albeit inadequately in many cases, by underground springs originating from the Ganga. Krim Kund is one such tank, and ashram residents affirm that it is constantly replenished by a spring that links it to the river. Even when people draw bath water from a relatively stagnant source, such as a well or container, they make it dynamic through a pouring action (*dālnā*) from the top of the head to the bottom of the feet. Likewise, bathing in the Ganga involves a series of vertical bobs in which the bather submerges his or her entire head. These practices evoke a top-down hierarchy from the auspicious to the inauspiciousness that is embodied in gods and humans alike (Babb 1975).

Significantly, the Ganga herself has a vertical orientation, flowing from the realm of the gods far up in the Himalayas to the netherworld below (Eck 1983). One elderly woman stated that “from where the Ganga originated is pure in itself,” noting that the river *descended* from a pure source.

Another woman's version of Ganga Ma's descent emphasized the height and purity of the river's source in the Himalayas (while typically conflating the Ganga's heavenly origins with her earthly source). Therefore, "all the sins are washed away. Even the sins of gods are washed away."

Where is this "away," and what does the Ganga do with the sins once she receives them? Several people stated that the pollutants are washed into the ocean, but the more popular destination was *bāhar*, meaning "outside." *Bāhar* illustrates transportive purification as a process of externalization: excretion from the inside out. Through externalization, pollution flows from one zone of attribution to another. Thus, transportive models by necessity emphasize trajectory over destination. The destination of ritual pollution is not important so long as its general direction is *other*, moving toward someone or somewhere else.

Similar dynamics appear in the exchange of gifts for ritual services between people of different ritual status. For example, donations to high-status ritual specialists may carry with them the sins of their lesser-status patrons (Raheja 1988). Similarly, pilgrims drop rice and coins into the hands of beggars as a means of shedding some of their sins before entering temples or of getting a head start on their ablutions in the Ganga. The relative ranks of priests and beggars could not be more different, yet their roles are essentially the same: the removal of karma in exchange for material resources that function as a medium of transmission.

As with human sins, so too with human waste. In Banaras, a child may urinate or defecate in the street or open sewer just outside (and facing away from) the home. An adult male might urinate in the street or in an open sewer (facing away from everywhere else) that is not in front of a home entrance or storefront. And anyone can relieve himself or herself in an unoccupied lot, empty alleyway, or railroad embankment.⁹ The liminal areas where excretion is socially sanctioned in Banaras even extend to the banks and ghats leading to the Ganga. Although defecating directly into the Ganga is a sin, many defecate just beside the river.¹⁰ They do so despite the obvious fact that, in a very short time, rains, erosion, and the workers who clean the ghats will inevitably sweep the waste a few feet down into water anyway. Here, the responsibility for pollution does not rest upon the polluter, but rather its final recipient. In special cases in which the act of polluting is considered a sin in itself, only the person who performs the deed directly acquires its karma. As such, the people who clean the mud from the ghats with high-pressure hoses at the end of monsoon season are the ones who acquire the karma of defecating in the river.

On a larger scale, transportive models play out in the waste-management practices of the city as a whole. Although Banaras's dense urbanization and poor infrastructure have left few options for waste disposal, these constraints are not sufficient to explain the behaviors that take place before waste is flushed into an open sewer or swept into the street for professional sweepers, who pick it up by hand and cart it away to neighborhood holding areas.¹¹ Until then, people treat waste like a hot potato. They handle it as little as possible and quickly pass it to the most available person with the lowest status: a female or servant within a household, a peon within an office, or, in many cases, a child laborer working in a small shop or factory.¹² Trash receptacles are rare, so waste material is either burned or left for someone (or no one) to sweep up. Trash is thrown over a wall or out of a window; dumped in a pile just outside the home or workplace; or thrown on the street, into an empty lot, or into a space between two buildings. Trash is typically dumped in the closest available *outside* space (that is, a liminal space apart from the polluter's network of social relations) beyond the handler's zone of attribution.

From the householder to the servant, the sweeper, and then the sewer, polluted substances travel down a gradient of inauspiciousness, with little or no change to the relative (in)auspiciousness of the substances themselves. This conservation or immutability of attribution is another fundamental characteristic of the transportive schema of purification: the negative attribution is intrinsic to the pollution itself. If one cannot destroy or change pollution, then one must somehow transport it to another location.

The transportive schema also informs the daily dumping of untreated sewage into the river. Because of the near absence of water treatment, disposing of waste in sewers is little different from disposing of it directly in the Ganga herself. But conceptually, a distinction does exist, for the sewers are the elements that perform the final deed. Even those officials who may have pocketed money earmarked for water treatment can wash their hands of whatever happens to the water after their negligence. The sewers of Banaras are small rivers in themselves, carrying away the city's pollution from "self" to other.¹³

The dynamics of transportive purification beg further questions about the Ganga's role in pollution and the attribution of blame. The sewers of Banaras are not auspicious, even if they do act as little rivers. The same is true of the professional sweepers who tend the sewers and clean the streets. In both cases, the close association with pollution is very stigma-

tizing. Dirt and sin are inseparable entities that flow downhill. The farther down the transport chain that the pollution passes, the more tinged its handlers become, not because they passed it along, but because they received it in the first place. Likewise, the Ganga herself could not maintain her purity simply by “passing the buck,” especially if she were the last recipient of pollution and sin in all of Banaras.

One explanation reinforces the idea that the Ganga is as immutably pure as sin and dirt are immutably polluted. Nuckolls (1996) describes a situation in which one of his American students presented a paper to a professor at Banaras Hindu University (BHU) on pollution in the Ganga. The professor rejected the paper on the grounds that Mother Ganga is ever pure and therefore can never become polluted. The student subsequently revised her argument to state that “the Ganga is indeed most pure . . . but what is put *into* her is polluted.” The professor understandably accepted this revision. Transportive purification entails the conservation (i.e., the indestructibility) of pollution, such that the insult itself never becomes purified; it only transfers from one location to another. This model also entails the possibility that an intrinsically pure solvent can never become contaminated but can merely be shifted about or displaced by the polluted solute. Within this model, the mixing of the immutably inauspicious with the immutably auspicious literally results in a suspension of opposites, in line with O’Flaherty’s characterization (1976). Pollution in the Ganga is like oil in water.

Another explanation for the Ganga’s persistent auspiciousness is a schema of purification in which pollution and purity are not immutable but interchangeable states dependent on their contexts. This transformative schema emphasizes the re-creative power, or *shaktī*, of certain substances as agents of change, which either transform negatively coded substances into those with neutral or positive attributes or eliminate the substances altogether. In contrast to the transportive schema, in which the vector of purification is externally oriented, from inside to outside, transformative purification involves the internalization of a change agent, from outside to within (figure 6).

An interesting application of this schema is the recurring explanation that the Ganga is purified by the pious just as she is contaminated by the immersion of sinners in her waters. A Brahmin *paṇḍā* sitting beneath an umbrella beside the river told me that “this filth that is dumped [*ḍālnā*] in Gangaji—not just from today, from a long time—just see: [when] some sadhus/mahatmas die then they are immersed in Gangaji. By that, Ganga water does not become polluted.” An outspoken elderly woman sitting

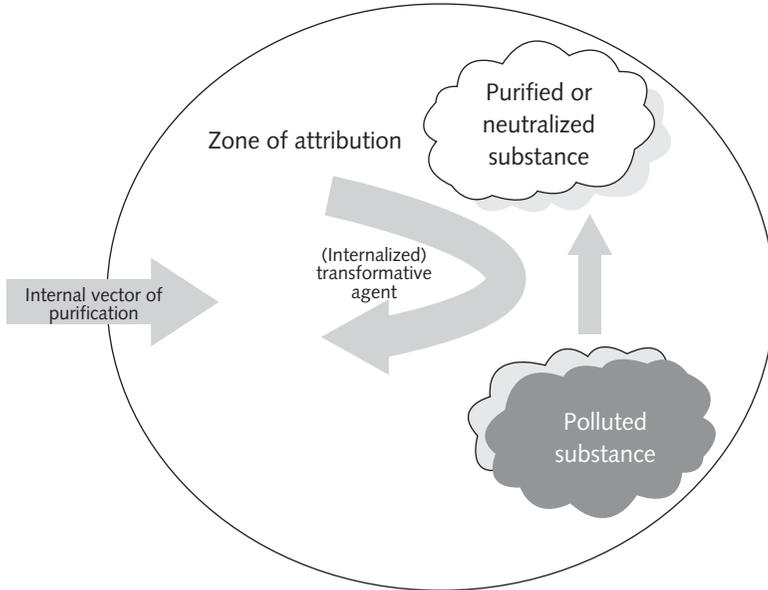


Figure 6. The transformative schema of purification.

beside him—the one who said that the Ganga washes away even the sins of the gods—made the same case in the following tale: “When Ganga was brought to Haridwar, then all the Gods asked: ‘We wash all sins, but who will wash us?’ Ganga said this to Lord Vishnu: ‘Lord Vishnu Bhagwan, tell us, what should we do?’ Then the Lord said: ‘As many *sadhus* and saints are living in this world, every time they will bathe in Ganga, all your sins will be washed [automatically].’”

The proportion of *sadhus* (renunciates) who bathe in the Ganga is much smaller than the rest of the population, and the sincerity of even this small fraction is often regarded with skepticism. As such, a few great souls must go a long way toward keeping the Ganga on the auspicious side of the balance sheet. Such asymmetry is consistent with transformative models of purification, even among the much greater set of explanations that view the Ganga as intrinsically pure. By and large, both transportive and transformative models laud the Ganga’s unlimited powers of purification. However, they do so with inverted proportions of the purifier and purified. When the Ganga purifies by transport, she functions as a vast solvent receiving a relatively small amount of polluted solute. When she purifies by transformation, she is a minute solute transmitted into a much larger quantity of polluted solvent.

A popular story in Banaras tells of a scientific study in which “a single drop of water from the Ganga” purifies gallons of brackish water, leaving (usually Western) scientists scratching their heads in puzzlement. Some people state that anyone can perform these experiments. A third of my informants in the ghats told me that one could place Ganga water and ordinary water in containers and compare their qualities over time. “It has been observed that if you store Ganga water [over some time] . . . it will not give off a bad smell,” said a middle-aged renunciate. “[But] if you store ordinary water in a bottle, then after a few days it will start giving off a bad smell.” There is a common saying that “even a single a droplet of Ganges water carried one’s way by the breeze will erase the sins of many lifetimes in an instant” (Eck 1983: 217). Given this perspective, some resident bathers carry Ganga water back to their homes in brass pots to purify their family altars, not just by bathing the lingams and idols but also by combining the water with food and other waters in the household. Likewise, nonresident pilgrims collect Ganga water in sealed containers to take back to their friends and family in their home communities. According to the *paṇḍā* under the umbrella, “Place Ganga water in a bottle [and] suppose you go to the village or countryside. If you do *pūjā-path* [ritual worship] [and] do not find Ganga water there, then you have already kept [Ganga water] in a bottle. So mix it [with plain water] and then it becomes Ganga water.” People can also purchase Ganga water in sealed pots and packages from local shops.

Unlike the transportively informed, externally oriented models of excretion, in which polluted substances (often plural) are taken out and away, transformative models usually involve the deep internalization of a purifying substance (often singular). Whereas transportive models often entail purification by excretion, transformative models typically entail acts of ingestion or digestion. For example, in the *achmāni* rite, the celebrant sips a small portion of water to purify himself or herself before performing a sacred rite, such as a *pūjā* or ritual bath. During the *achmāni*, the participant cradles water in the palm of the right hand in a particular posture (*mudrā*) and sips the water just after *praṇava*, voiced recitation of a simple mantra such as *Aum Tat Sat*. The mantra charges the water with sacred power before ingestion. Yet although the *achmāni* is common in Banaras, I have been told that the mantra is more for the benefit of the recipient than for the substance when the water is from Ganga Ma, because that water comes preloaded. People often link this preloaded quality of the Ganga, the independent variable of her auspiciousness, to her intrinsic creative power, or *shaktī*.¹⁴

Eck describes the creative power of the Ganga as “liquid *shaktī*,” evidenced by the fertility of fields along her banks and her position as a second consort and active principle of Shiva. Citing the *Gāngā Māhātmya* of the Kāshī Khaṇḍa, she states that “one should not be amazed at the notion that the Ganges is really power, for is she not the Supreme Shakti of the Eternal Shiva, taken the form of water?” (1983: 219). The idea that *shaktī* is within the Ganga is consistent with all the models that I have heard of and observed, regardless of the degree of transportive or transformative influences. *Shaktī* is present in the dynamism of the Ganga’s currents as well as in the heat of her creativity. This power is closely associated with her procreative status as the Holy Mother. It is also linked to her maternal attitude of nondiscrimination toward whom and what she meets. An elderly woman sitting beside a Brahmin *paṇḍā* said it best: “The mother keeps the baby in the stomach for nine months and then gives birth. She cleans his excreta and urine, and the child is [always] in this when he is small. Then that is [how] the mother takes care of the baby, doesn’t she? So she is Ganga Ma. All this trash, good things, bad things, everything, is in her. So she will never be impure. The mother is never impure.”

In discussing the unlimited grace of the Ganga, Eck cites a common Indian saying that “no child is too dirty to be embraced by its mother” (1983: 216). Indeed, Mother Ganga embraces everyone and everything that is put into her (or that she enters). The same is said of the Aghor guru. A prominent sign in the Kina Ram Ashram states that “the guru is always in the form of a complete mother. The physical mother raises the child by nurturing the physical body. The guru, through his motherly love and secret methods, nurtures the mind and soul.”¹⁵ Ironically, this maternal message hangs above one of the giant skulls under a peepal tree in the Kina Ram Ashram. Aghor may be nurturing, but one must overcome major aversions to partake of it, especially those aversions pertaining to human mortality.

MAHĀSHMASHĀN

Banaras and the Kina Ram Ashram share the epithet of *mahāshmeshān*, the “Great Cremation Ground.” The cremation pyres of Harischandra and Manikarnika Ghats are prototypes for the liberating function of all sacred spaces in Banaras. Just as the Ganga is a prototype for purification by ablution in Krim Kund, so are these *shmeshāns* prototypes for the flame that burns in Baba Kina Ram’s *akhand dhuni* (perpetual fire).

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

Figure 7. Kamleshwar Baba worshipping at the *akhand dhuni*, 2000. Photograph by Victor Balaban.

But whereas the *shmasbhāns* carry the hope of liberation after death, this diminutive pyre holds the promise of *jīvanmukti*, spiritual liberation within one's own lifetime, and the promise of healing that this kind of liberation entails.

The *akhand dhuni* burns within an enclosure on the eastern side of the courtyard flanking Krim Kund, just before the seat of the lineage. Every day, scores of Aghor devotees pay their respects and offer mantras to this sacred fire. Hundreds of nondevotees also visit in hopes of healing or finding solutions to socioeconomic problems. All seek the grace of the sacred fire through its *darshan* (auspicious sight) and the *vibhuti* (blessing) of its ash, which they use for a variety of ritual and healing purposes.¹⁶

In a general sense, the *dhuni* is not unique to the Aghori. *Dhunis* are common features among guru-based traditions, and traveling renunciates will often use them to establish their presence in a particular place, whether temporarily or permanently (Gross 1992: 357–69). Indeed, one can see millions of these fires burning though the night during the Kumbha Mela, a great religious festival held in one of four sacred cities along the Ganga every four years (Rai 1993).

The *dhuni* is a gathering point for disciples and pilgrims who seek the reunciate's blessings and advice. Visitors may use it for cooking, warmth, and illumination; but always with the understanding that the benefits of the fire are the *prasād* (sacred remnants) of the guru and his or her presiding deity by way of the *havan*, or fire ceremony.

Derived from the Vedic *yajña* (fire sacrifice), the *havan*, or *homa*, is a ritualized sequence of offerings to the gods through the medium of Agni, the deity of fire, via Svaha, his consort. Its Vedic predecessor, the *yajña*, was the prototypical rite of ancient Hinduism. The elaborate ritual prescriptions and proscriptions of the *yajña* were outlined in an oral tradition of hymns that eventually formed the corpus of the Vedas. As the greater mirror of humanity, the gods themselves perform the *yajña* in the Epic and Puranic literature (Vesci 1985). Indeed, the Vedic myth of human origins and even the origin of the sacrificial act itself is described in the self-sacrifice of Purusha, the Cosmic Man (RV X: 90).

In ancient times, the *yajña* was an extensive series of rites conducted by a team of ritual specialists over several days. The rites took place in a temporary temple that was destroyed upon their conclusion (Staal 1983). The *yajña* mandated that its celebrants be of the highest ritual purity, a requirement that has often been invoked to justify social segregation and pollution/purity taboos, particularly among the upper castes of orthodox Hindu communities (see Dumont 1966). Moreover, the considerable human and material costs of this rite restricted its sponsorship to the wealthy and powerful.

In strictly Vedic terms, the *yajña* was supposed to be the primary means of communication between the human and the divine. Yet common people did not have the knowledge and resources to conduct or sponsor a *yajña* themselves. They had to rely on the ritual patronage of the powerful within their own communities, who performed the rite on their behalf in exchange for essential but labor-intensive and sometimes ritually polluting services.

Following the rise of Hindu devotional movements, the *havan* arose as an inexpensive and simpler alternative to the *yajña*. Henceforth, people of all classes and backgrounds could perform the rite, with only minor preparations. Even when led by a guru or priest, the *havan* allowed as many people to make their own offerings as could fit around the fire. This approach was in the spirit of many tantric and Bhaktī devotional movements, which encouraged a direct relationship with the divine without the need for hereditary ritual specialists (see Urban 2003; Lorenzen 1995).

Instead of having to master complex formulas, *havan* celebrants typically offer a series of praises and mantras through the medium of grain or seed mixtures and a liberal amount of ghee. These offerings are transmitted to Agni, the fire god, through Svaha, his consort. Agni may then pass on these offerings to designated saints, ancestors, or other deities. The spirits who receive them imbibe the ethereal qualities of the offerings, leaving behind the material remnants for the benefit of their human hosts. Because the divine exist on a much higher plane, this “backwash of the gods” is *prasād* for humans, a blessed return for their sacrifices. In this manner, the human and the divine exchange power through the media of language, food, and fire. As we will see, this schema of exchange, modeled in the prototype of the fire sacrifice, also informs exchanges between patients and healers in Aghor medicine.

Like other *dhunis*, the *akhand dhuni* of Baba Kina Ram provides a medium for divine exchange and the occasional *havan*. Its special relationship to the *shmashān*, however, adds significance to these roles. Since its establishment three centuries ago, the *akhand dhuni* has been fueled by leftover wood from the cremation pyres of the nearby Harischandra Ghat, purchased for a token sum according to an old agreement with hereditary funerary attendants of the Dom community. These days, trucks deliver most of the wood, but Aghor devotees occasionally carry a few logs to the ashram as a ritual duty. The ash from this fire is the main *prasād* distributed from this ashram, a substance that would ordinarily be considered untouchable because it carries the pollution of death. Yet in this case, both devotees and non-Aghor pilgrims consider it to be a blessing imbued with tremendous power for healing and salvation.

During my time in Banaras, Aghor disciples often spoke of the *dhuni* and the *shmashān* interchangeably when discussing Baba Kina Ram’s sacred fire. This conflation was usually deliberate, just as it was for the *kund* and the Ganga. Prem, an unmarried resident of the Kina Ram Ashram in his early twenties, stated that, while meditating in front of the *dhuni*, he felt that his body was like a corpse with the real power burning in front of it. “It seems that everything that is here is a corpse. Meaning, just before you it is burning,” he said. Prem believed that this power derived not only from the confrontation with death but also from confrontation with the entire cycle of human existence. “There is also a form of *shaktī* over there. Everything is coming to an end there. It notes the whole time as well. Another time is coming to an end and increasing. So, in other words, it is a complete form of culture there. People come and go—one complete life cycle; it is a life cycle. People come . . . [are] born

. . . then [are] young and then dead, then again [they are] born. In this way [we] visit a complete life cycle there.”

The *shmashān* speaks to the power of death as a universal human experience that equalizes social differences. Lakshmi, a young college student and resident of the ashram, asserted that everyone burns the same way in the *shmashān*. She stated that “there is . . . no poor. There is equality. No difference there. In society we have difference between he [and me] . . . I am poor. He is medium class. We have a lot of categories here. But in that fact place, the reality place, we don’t have any difference. That is the point,” she laughed. Prem spoke similarly of the power of the *dhuni/shmashān*:

What is the reason that [the wood for the *dhuni*] comes from the *shmashān*? . . . Our relation is that we people connect our life with that place. So that *shmashān* is also a very big part of our life. The meaning of *shmashān* is “*sam asan*,” “equal position” [*sic*], where everything is given equal position. This is my thinking. The meaning of *shmashān* is that it is a place where everybody is given equal position. So that is a holy ground where one . . . in a *havan kund*, we burn our whole body. So we call it the biggest *pūjā*. In the other *havans*, we offer everything. But in that *havan kund*, we dump our whole body.

The funeral pyre is the prototype for Baba Kina Ram’s *dhuni*. It marks the establishment of the Aghor lineage and marks Aghor itself as a spiritual state of nondiscrimination that one achieves through confrontation with mortality. In Hindu life-crisis rituals (*saṃskāras*) the rite of cremation is often seen as the ultimate fire sacrifice. We can therefore understand why the ultimate sacrifice in the cremation pyre extends into the more diminutive offerings of the *akhand dhuni*.

The funerary rites, or *antyeshti saṃskāras*, are the last in a sequence of life-crisis rituals that take place from conception to death in Hindu religious traditions. Although the Hindu *saṃskāras* share with each other elements derived from the Vedic fire sacrifice, particularly those of the fire itself (Pandey 1969), the rites of cremation are unique in that the fire is more than a witness to the worldly development of the person. In cremation, the fire is the active participant, the deceased is the sacrificer, and his or her body is the chief offering to Agni. Many authors have described this powerful cultural model of cremation as the ultimate sacrifice in which the body becomes the material element of sacrificial food to be consumed by fire, whereas the ethereal soul is released as the vital breath, or *prana*, from the top of the skull (Filippi 1996; Parry 1994; Pandey 1969). Indeed, the meaning of the Sanskrit word *antyeshti* is

“final sacrifice.” The ritual elements of the *antyeshti saṃskāras* are modeled upon the death of the extended family’s patriarch and the succession of his eldest son. When the patriarch dies, his adult male kin wrap the body in a shroud and carry it to the *shmashān* on a wooden litter, chanting “Ram nam satya hain” (God’s name is truth). Upon arriving at the *shmashān*—which is ideally next to a riverbank—the relatives place the corpse feet first in the river and give it a bath while placing camphor in the mouth. Family members negotiate for the wood and the services of the professional funeral attendants. They place the body upon the pyre and give offerings of wood, incense, ghee, and parched grains, much as they would during a *havan*, except that the family members make the offerings before the ignition of the fire. Once the offerings are made, any accompanying women and children return home while the adult males retreat to the sidelines—all, that is, except for the eldest son, who remains behind in his role as chief mourner and cremator.

The eldest son usually has the task of cremating his father’s body, and he assumes the role of family head at the conclusion of the rite. Similarly, when the guru of a religious lineage or school of traditional knowledge dies, his successor (again, usually a man) is often designated to cremate his teacher.¹⁷ If the head of a family or teaching lineage wants to change the line of succession, he designates someone else to cremate his body. In these prototypical instances, the cremation is as much a rite of succession as one of death, and it is fraught with social and spiritual hazards. Thus, the circumstances surrounding death and cremation must be as auspicious as possible.

In preparation for the cremation, the eldest son has his head shaved (except for a small lock in back) and dresses in a white cotton shawl. In this manner, the son undergoes a kind of temporary ritual death not unlike that of the religious renunciate who marks his death to the world by tonsure and the wearing of a funeral shroud. Parry discusses how the son undergoes a temporary symbolic death concurrent with his father’s, entailing a process of regeneration within these funerary rites. In this patriarchal prototype, “the father repays his debt to the ancestors by siring a son; the son repays his debt to his father by giving him birth on a new and higher plane, and this newly created ancestor in turn confers fertility and material prosperity on his descendants” (1982: 151). Death marks the turning of the wheel of *saṃsāra*, of regeneration and rebirth.

Once the family retreats to the sidelines, the son circumambulates the pyre while carrying embers in a sheaf of grass. When the grass is aflame, he ignites the pyre and stands by to attend the fire for the duration of

the cremation. For this task, he usually receives more than a little assistance from the professional funeral attendant.¹⁸ The cremation usually lasts between three and four hours. At a key moment in this process, the son breaks open his father's skull with a bamboo staff to release his *prāṇa* (vital energy) from the *chakra* (energy center) at the top of his head. Once the soul has separated from the body, the latter burns into a small remnant about the size of two fists. The attendant picks up the remnant with a pair of tongs and throws it into the river. The remaining ashes are gathered into a clay pot. The chief mourner holds this pot on one shoulder, turns his back to the river, throws the ashes over his shoulder and into the water, and then walks away without looking back. This act concludes the cremation rite.

As with ablution in the Ganga, the final sacrifice of cremation is an opportunity for ritual purification for the living as well as the dead. However, purification by fire has distinctive attributes, not the least of which is that cremation confers a temporary but significant degree of ritual pollution on its living participants. Mechanisms exist for removing this pollution, which, like the Ganga, are informed by transportive and transformative schema of purification.

Two major aspects of the *antyeshti saṃskāras* lend themselves to transportive purification. The first is a cultural model of fire as the reducer of both pure and impure substances to their primary constituents. The prototype for this kind of reduction is the immolation of the corpse. Despite having been ritually bathed and decorated, the corpse remains a highly polluted vessel of the human soul and becomes a fitting offering to the divine only after its somatic attachments to worldly existence (and the sins therein) have burned away. Prem spoke earlier of offering one's whole body as sacrifice to the funeral pyre. He also extended the *dhuni*'s purification function to the removal of sin. "My concept about the *dhuni* is [that] . . . here, our bad deeds are destroyed. . . . It can even be seen in a small form." Here, the *dhuni* is the "small form" of the *śhmashān* that removes (i.e., transports) the pollution of human sin in the way that cremation separates out the polluted remains of the human body.

The *antyeshti saṃskāra* also provides opportunities for the transportive purification of the surviving family. Family members usually undergo a period of death pollution (often twelve days) in which they must abstain from many ordinary social functions. Parry (1994) describes this period as a ritually hazardous time for the family, one that determines whether the soul of the dead person departs the world as a friendly ancestor or remains a malevolent ghost to impede the fortunes of his/her descendants.

This period can also be hazardous in a structural sense, in that the death of the family patriarch entails the succession and reorganization of roles within the lineage (cf. Douglas 1966). The structural hazards of this transition are evident in cultural models of auspicious and inauspicious deaths, with the ideal of the former being the natural demise of a long-lived, financially successful, pious, and prolific patriarch (see Justice 1997). Such ideals are rarely achieved in reality, so families must find other ways to make the transition of death as auspicious as possible. The rites of the *antyeshtī saṃskāra* can compensate for any shortcomings by ensuring that a bad death does not linger around the family. They do so by providing for a temporary period of asceticism involving ritual ablutions, tonsure, and postmortem offerings to ensure proper transport of the dead away from the living (Parry 1994).

The transformative schema of purification exists within the *shaktī* of the fire itself. For some, this heat has the power to destroy negatively coded substances, but only when the *shaktī* of the transformative agent exceeds that of the ritually polluting entity. The *shmashān* must therefore be associated with the most powerful manifestations of this contranegative destruction: Shiva the Destroyer and fierce goddesses such as Kali and Tara. Significantly, the power of these deities is internalized in the fires of digestive transformation.¹⁹ For example, Shiva, the lord of cosmic destruction, becomes the lord of worldly medicine by ingesting deadly poison and transforming it into a life-sustaining substance within his esophagus (Eck 1983).

This latter myth is important to Aghor medicine, and we will see in later chapters that those who take the most transformative approach to cremation as purification, the Aghori themselves, make a conceptual link between fires of the *dhuni* and *shmashān*, and the fires of their own digestion. The use of cremation wood in Aghor *dhunis* is symbolic of this connection between death and digestion, with not only the Aghori but also their patients ingesting the products of ritual sacrifice—offerings of food and even the ash from the wood (see Parry 1982). Along these lines, Prem spoke of imbibing ash as a blessing: “It is like this. . . . We apply [the ash]; that is for the peace of our heart; for our own mental peace, and that which has burned itself. From that, I feel something different in myself. For instance, we are very cruel. With that *dhuni* . . . because that is burning outside, that is a different process. One is burning inside. They [these two fires] have the same relation.”

Such acts of ritual ingestion represent a kind of “tantric homeopathy,” purification and healing by confronting the source of the pollution. When

the pollution involves death, this digestive transformation represents an intimate confrontation with mortality. We will further examine these dynamics in the next chapter through a popular ritual-healing sequence that contains key elements of the *antyeshti saṃskāra*, and we will see how these models of purification inform the ways that patients and healers approach Aghor medicine.