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**Durgāpūjā in Calcutta:
The Poetics and Politics of a Ritual**

**Durgápúdžá v Kalkatě:
politické a poetické aspekty rituálu**

Disertační práce

vedoucí práce – PhDr. Hana Preinhaelterová, CSc.

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Abstrakt

Tato disertace se zabývá politickými a poetickými aspekty výroč ních oslav svátku bohyně Durgy v indické Kalkatě . Ač koliv není etnografickým popisem událostí, je založ ená z vě tš í č ásti na terénním výzkumu.

V první kapitole reflektuji proces své č ásteč né enkulturace v terénu, zamýš lím se nad způ soby jimiž jsem do kulturní prostř edí Bengálska postupně pronikal, jakož i nad obecným problémem porozumě ní Jinému. Druhá kapitola je vě nována antropologickému pojetí rituálu. Shrnuje ně která témata, která jsou na poli antropologie rituálu relevantní se zvláš tním zř etelem k prostř edí Již ní Asie a nakonec krátce nastiň uje klíč ové koncepty Alfreda Gella, jako je sekundární jednání (secondary agency), technologie okouzlení (technology of enchantment) nebo rozš íř ená mysl (extended mind) se zamě ř ením na způ soby , ož ivování' zpodobení bož stev. Tř etí kapitola je krátkým úvodem do tradice uctívání bohyní v Bengálsku se zamě ř ením na mytologický text Déví-máhátmja a bengálské př evedení eposu Rámájana, jehož autor do vyprávě ní Durgápúdž u zař adil. Č tvrtou kapitolou se vracím ke svému prvnímu terénnímu výzkumu Durgápúdž i v ř íjnu 2001 a s pomocí konceptu „ omezené" a „ rozš íř ené" rituální techniky Marca Augého odhaluji, jak se Durgápúdž á jako rozš íř ená rituální technika protínala s rituálním vymítáním teroru. Pátá kapitola je detailní studií už ití rostlin a jejich č ástí v Durgápúdž e se zamě ř ením na jejich znakovost. Zároveň je doplně na analogickými srovnávacími př íklady literárními a s př edchozí kapitolou kontrastuje zejména v míř e detailnosti mě ř ítka pohledu na př edmě t Durgápúdž i. Š está kapitola popisuje př íbě hy a mechanismy nacionalistické reinterpretace kultu bohyně . Závě r se pak pokouš í tato rozmanitá témata týkající se nejvě tš ích nábož enských oslav bengálské kulturní oblasti syntetizovat v rámci jednoho vysvě tlovacího schématu.

Namísto obrazové př ílohy je k této práci př ilož en CD-ROM s krátkým, pě timinutovým dokumentárním filmem o Durgápúdž e.

Abstract

This thesis deals with poetics and politics of the annual worship of goddess Durgā in Calcutta, India, and though it is not an ethnography as a genre, it is largely based on fieldwork.

In the first chapter of this thesis I reflect on the process of my partial enculturation in Bengal, on the process of understanding that cultural milieu as well as on the nature of understanding the Other in general. The second chapter deals with the concept of ritual. It summarises current state of discussion in the field and finally outlines Alfred Gell' s concepts of secondary agency, technology of enchantment, distributed personhood and extended mind in order to examine the external and internal strategies of animation of images of deities. The third chapter is a short introduction into the goddess worship tradition in India with focus on mythological narratives of *Devī -Mā hā tmya* and portrayal of Durgā pū jā in Bengali rendition of *Rā mā yaṇ a*. The fourth chapter reverts to my first fieldwork on Durgā pū jā and interprets the intersection of Durgā pū jā and the " war on terror" with Marc Agué' s concept of extended ritual technique. The fifth chapter is an elaborate survey of plant symbolism in Durgā pū jā with plenty of comparative material. Its aim is to explore the ritual symbols within the Durgā pū jā complex at the most detailed level, as opposed to the subject of previous and next chapters, and to look for an interpretive framework that could encompass ritual symbolism at both the levels. The sixth chapter recounts the nationalist remake of the Durgā cult. The conclusion brings those diverse topics related to the Durgā pū jā festival in Calcutta together under a single interpretive framework.

Instead of photographs, a five minutes long documentary on Durgā pū jā is attached to the thesis on CD.

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Introduction

The present thesis is an outcome of my long-term fieldwork in Calcutta and engagement with various facets of Bengali culture. Bengal is a cultural area situated in the North-East of South Asia, distinguished by the dominant presence of people speaking an Indo-European language – Bengali. It is politically divided between the Indian state of West Bengal and The People's Republic of Bangladesh. Calcutta (Kolkata), the capital of West Bengal, used to be the centre of the British colonial administration and has been since then the site of some eminent research institutions, e.g., The Asiatic Society founded by William Jones. The cosmopolitan environment of the city allowed for creative interaction between indigenous and European cultural traditions. Modern Bengali literature is one of the oldest and most developed in the Subcontinent. Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Nobel prize winner (1913), brought Bengali literature to Western readers. The Academy Award winning film-director Satyajit Ray was also an heir of this cultural tradition.

Religion in Bengal evolved within a wider pan-Indian context. Prevailing denominations are Muslims in East Bengal (Bangladesh) and Hindus forming majority in West Bengal. Several pan-Indian cults originated in this cultural area. The cult of *śakti*, the omnipresent energy which pervades all creation and manifests itself in the form of numerous goddesses, has had strong presence in Eastern India. The *bhakti* (devotionalist) *Vaiṣṇavism* was given major impetus by a medieval Bengali saint Caitanya. These cults draw on a corpus of religious literature written, to a great extent, in Bengali. Numerous folk and syncretic cults flourished in the area and inspired artistic expressions in genres of literature, music, dance, theatre and painting. The cultural and religious unity of the area is also fostered by the popularity of certain festivals (e.g., Durgā pūja). Their continuous performance right from the medieval ages constitutes a regional tradition along with a particular style of terracotta sculpture and architecture.

I came to Calcutta after 4 years of theoretical training, with the aim to study public festivals of goddess worship as a "window" to Bengali culture. This pragmatic goal soon clashed with the pragmatics of life in an alien culture and those personal struggles finally proved to be better entries than observation of the worship of the goddess I was not really devout to. The text that follows reflects it. In the

course of the fieldwork I learnt that it is through painstaking submitting of one's body and mind to the cultural practices of the Other – be it a willing, conditionally willing, or unwilling process – that more substantial understanding comes about than mere reflection upon the central symbols of the culture in question. As I have understood, even a participation in a ritual, a participation which aims to be a culturally approved performance, requires primarily the knowledge and physical practice of what to do and how rather than an arrival at a common interpretation of what does it all mean.

Moreover, the complex of cults which is usually called Hinduism is itself obsessed with orthopraxy, not orthodoxy. The question about the right meaning is referred to a rather tolerant dispute or a series of speculations once the proper ritual action is taken, and ensuing contradictions are rarely fatal. This combined experience made me to question the paradigm of interpretive anthropology as ethnocentric. When I saw my first annual festival of the goddess Durgā in 2001, I was looking for the commonality of meaning in Bengali culture. To my surprise, I found eccentric multitude of projections of what this central cultural symbol stood for. Even when I turned from Geertz to Turner, the impact of media-powered aftermath of 9/11 on Durgā pū jā of 2001 was so massive that the concept of multivocality was not sufficient to explain it.

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Instead of photographs, a five minutes long documentary on Durgā pūjā is attached to the thesis on CD. For abstract of the short documentary see Appendix I.

Note on transcription:

The names of Indian authors are transcribed in their anglicised form, e.g., Bankimchandra. Bengali authors, however, are anglicised on the basis of the Bengali form of the name (e.g., Krittibas instead of Krittivasa). Other Indic words except those that became a part of English vocabulary (e.g., ayurveda) are always transliterated in keeping with standard rules for a given language. The names of literary works are always in italics and are transliterated according to the language of the original. Thus *Rā mā yaṇ a* refers to the Sanskrit original while its local version by Krittibas will be transcribed as *Rā mā yaṇ*. All other transcriptions throughout this paper are from Sanskrit except those marked by B., which are from Bengali as in (B. *nabapatrikā*).

1. The researcher and the field:

On ethnographic understanding, the journey, and methodology.

> " *Knowledge does not imply love, nor the converse; and neither of the two implies, nor is implied by, identification with the other.*"
>
> (Tzvetan Todorov: *The Conquest of America*, p. 185)

> „ *When everything changes, from the small and immediate to the vast and abstract – the object of study, the world immediately around it, the student, the world immediately around him, and the wider world around them both – there seems to be no place to stand so as to locate just what has altered and how. … What we can construct, if we keep notes and survive, are hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things that seem to have happened: pieced-together patternings, after the fact.*"

1.1 Reflexivity and fieldwork

One of my favourite philosophers, Immanuel Kant, dedicated greater part of his life to the development of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in order to lay down foundational principles for any possible future science. The forefathers of the regime I grew in as a child used to submit themselves as well as other comrades to what was called public self-criticism, a specifically Bolshevik method of indoctrinating cadres. Many ethnographic accounts start with something in between.

With the end of European colonial empires and subsequent reflexive turn in anthropology, earlier accounts of other cultures were criticised for their objectivist (third-person perspective, etic, *Erklärung*) approach. The authority of ethnographers and their voice were questioned, the link between the knowledge and power emphasised. As a result of this critical movement, approaches methodologically inspired by hermeneutics (first-person perspective, emic, *Verstehen*) gained popularity. This process of understanding progresses through what is known as the hermeneutic circle. The researcher as a product of innumerable influences, both cultural and professional, starts with a set of presumptions, which motivate him to ask certain questions at a certain field. The answers he receives reconfigurate his presumptions and consequently influence the formulation of questions he asks next. It is within the logic of the hermeneutical or interpretative paradigm that one should clarify the fore-structure of his or her understanding. Hence it has become a practice to start an anthropological monograph with a more or less direct disclosure of author's preconceptions towards the subject of his writing.

It is indeed doubtful whether this exercise really helps to elucidate the context of what is written in the pages that follow it better then more authoritarian points of departure. It is equally doubtful whether one can ever truly achieve a description from the actor's point of view. I am also not persuaded that this should be the ultimate goal or the decisive criterion of quality of anthropological writing. Furthermore, the emphasis on first-person perspective tempts the author into a sort of intellectual narcissism, which in the worst case may result in a lonely self's diary of series of misunderstandings and justificatory cover-ups. Finally, this genre of

writing is susceptible to serve the purpose of legitimising author's voice in the same manner as the fact of " being there" did in the past.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge there are good reasons to include a chapter on the researcher and his fieldwork. Nita Kumar (1992: 3-7) mentioned some of them in the Introduction to her *Fieldwork Memoirs of Banaras*. First, it gives the reader some idea of who, where, how, and what. Second, such narrative can be useful to other researchers who might like to venture into the same or similar field. Third, the inclusion of the ethnographer into the text calls attention to the processual character of fieldwork, which might be easily forgotten while reading, say, a pedantic account of kinship in Bengali culture. Fourth, the balancing act between a public self-criticism and the critique of anthropological reason with all its literary licence locates the researcher and his perspective more graphically than a conservative CV like introduction, albeit it should be remembered that both are self-styled. Last, it allows the author to express some preoccupations which motivated or were motivated by his fieldwork in a free, nearly idiosyncratic manner without being forced to either erase them completely from his account or to write a different book.

In order to make justice to my favourite philosopher, to the forefathers of the regime I grew in and to the reflexive turn in anthropology at the same time, I shall try to strip myself modestly of my own preconceptions and motivations and their personal or cultural rootedness, both about " them" and about " ourselves" . To distinguish the cultural and the personal I shall use first person singular and first person plural respectively. I apologise to the reader if he or she finds the first person plural in this narrative too offensive.

1.2. The test of culture-worthiness

On my second arrival to Calcutta in September 2001 I had to undergo an HIV test to have my residence permit approved by the Foreigners' Registration Office. The officer gave me a stamped request slip and sent me to the Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine, an old institution founded in 1921 which pioneered many outstanding discoveries in its field. I stepped out of the clean underground and slowly negotiated my way through the narrow pavement occupied by homeless families living in the dust of the busy Central Avenue bellow the dilapidated façade

of the School. Cracked wastewater pipes attached to the façade exuded stinking dense liquid that formed mosquito infested loblollies on its way down to street manholes. Bamboo scaffolding spread like a cobweb over the Northern side of the building as if awaiting some giant fly to become its prey.

Up on the third floor, I insisted that the doctor use my needle and syringe. That kind old gentleman, amused by my request, was more interested in why I ever got to study his language than in having his business done. Finally, he dropped his third cigarette to the ashtray, took my syringe with needle, looked at its thickness, wished me good luck and took in the sample amount of blood which was to decide my fate in his country.

A week later I came to the same chamber for results. This time a young doctor with impressive dense hair and appearance of a charismatic guru was waiting behind a huge brown wooden desk. I sat modestly in front of him and spelled carefully my name.

" Do you believe in God?" he asked.

This question made me a little nervous: " Well, from the cultural point of view, yes I celebrate Christmas…more like a family thing, but…in fact…no, I do not. Is it too bad?"

" When exactly were you born?" he continued ignoring my growing anxiety.

I told him my date and year of birth and apologised that I did not know the exact hour. For a minute or two he was silently engrossed with the numbers. Then, as far as I remember, he mentioned the influence of Saturn and proceeded to develop my horoscope. I could not control my heartbeat anymore: " So, what is the result?" I insisted with pretentious calmness.

" Of what?" he asked innocently.

" I mean, the test, that is really why I have come here, you know, the Foreigners' Registration Office has asked for it." I tried to be formal.

" Oh, the test? That' s all right. But you have to find the reason why you are here."

" You mean it is negative?"

" Yes, but you have to know your question, what do you want to find out here. Not the studies, but the real reason. And the influence of Saturn…"

I took my file and left. I have never seen that doctor cum self-proclaimed guru of astrology any more and my residence permit got approved. Yet his question haunts me till the present day.

1.3 Reflections upon the European Other

Throughout the growth of our civilisation we have always loved the idea that our victims desrve their slavery. In 1492, Christian Europe (re)conquered the Iberian Peninsula and the same year unleashed an unprecedented expansion over vast territories and their inhabitants. Now their descendants turn to us with grim, explosive faces.

It took us some time to even acknowledge their humanity. Soon after the establishment of the Spanish colonies in Central and South America the famous legal battle between a compassionate bishop of Chiapas Bartolomé de las Casas and a strict theologian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda took place in Valladolid in 1550[1]. It had to decide whether indigenous populations were to be treated as human subjects of the Spanish crown or whether their status was equal to the exotic trees, birds and animals found in those distant lands. The question was whether they were " natural slaves" as Sepúlveda argued with reference to Aristotle.

The political context of that debate was a latent conflict between the new Spanish elite who ran the colonies and the centre of the monarchy over actual control of conquered territories and their resources. Initially, the natives were submitted to the system of *encomienda* under which conquistadores were entrusted (*encomendados*) land along with the native population, whom they were supposed to convert and civilise, if possible, and in return they could extract gold, labour, crops or whatever tribute they found fit. That resulted in their effective enslavement. Interestingly, that system was originally applied to Jews and Muslims during the reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula hence it can be generalised as an established approach of the colonising Self to the Other.

The practice of enslavement had already been formally banned by the papal bull *Sublimus Dei* (1537) and later, within the Spanish Empire, by the " New Laws

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[1] For analysis of this debate in connection with the relation to colonial Europe' s Other see Todorov (1996, especially the chapters Love and Knowledge).

of the Indies for the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians" (1542), to much discontent of the conquistadores. The New Laws effectively started gradual decline of *encomienda*.

The Valladolid controversy ended up with formal victory of Las Casas. Sepúlveda did not succeed in having the New Laws repealed. Las Casas, however, did not see the violence against the Amerindians decline in practice, nor was his victory unanimous. While Sepúlveda considered natives to be " natural slaves" , his opponent saw them as potential converts to Christian faith and hence endowed with equal humanity, even though later he embraced still more relativist positions. On January 20, 1531 Las Casas wrote to the Council of the Indies in defence of the natives: " Nowhere in the world are there countries more docile and less resistant, or more apt and better disposed than these to receive the yoke of Our Lord" (quoted in Todorov 1996:163).

The two approaches to the Other – denying equality and acknowledging it as a precondition to conversion – still characterise many Western attitudes and policies, which unavoidably defines many a field that anthropologists study as well as the practice of the fieldwork itself, despite all that exercise in self-criticism and self-flagellation and passionately triumphant claims about empowering the weak. The questions about legal status of some unwanted individuals or groups and their treatment still fill the news pages. The judgements whether one is an " enemy combatant" or a " prisoner of war" , a " refugee" or an " illegal migrant" are as politically controversial and as consequential as similar rulings in our medieval past. Occupational armies wage wars for " minds and hearts" . Official drives for integration of minorities are met with popular resistance against the carrot of affirmative action and, what a surprise, sometimes with resistance from the minorities themselves. Access to equal treatment is still preconditioned on incessant moral profiling of individuals, communities and even states.

Early colonial distant encounters, enriching as they were, at the same time allowed the European mind the luxury of meditative self-reflection back in the cold of the metropolis. Thoughtful *Essays* by Michel de Montaigne (1580) provide one of the earliest and most exquisite examples. Grammars, dictionaries, translations, artworks and accounts of the most bizarre and improbable human habits streamed to Europe along with gold and spices. Missionaries, prospectors, and other adventurers with

strong stick backing consistently penetrated the intimacy of innumerable populations by mastering their languages and inner working of their interactions, turning it into a comparative advantage in the field and a spicy food for thought back home.

When Enlightenment ruptured the human and the divine, the liberated European self found its centre of gravity in the reason alone, both individual and transcendental, which ostensibly has the capacity to extend its realm ad infinitum as far as the reality out there can be perceived as clearly and distinctly as one's thought process. The implied politics is clear. You exist as far as I am able to recognise you as an object of my cogito. Concurrently, the empiricism of *nihil-est-in-intellectu-quod-non-prius-fuerit-in-sensu* intensified the imperative of direct experimental experience with the object of one's study. Classification and categorisation soon became an ideal of sort for proper knowledge. Carl Linnaeus charted out the first taxonomy of species based on binominal nomenclature in 1735 where humans, for the first time, were included into the system of nature. This influence even had some bearing on Kant's "Copernican Revolution," a monumental attempt at accommodating the two competing positions of rationalism and empiricism within a single paradigm, whereby the idea of the most abstract pure concepts (categories) of all reasoning was introduced (c.f. Sloan 2002). According to Zammito's summarisation of another Phillipe Sloan's argument, "the natural history of man" developed in the eighteenth century through three phases: "…first, Linnaeus's step of classifying humans among the animals; second, Buffon's step of shifting the meaning of species from merely logical to real, from criterial to ontological; and finally, over the last part of the century, the incorporation of data on empirical diversity drawn from the travel literature into a theoretical ethnography. We can take these as three decisive steps in the constitution of anthropology in the European Enlightment." (Zammito 2002: 234-235).

With the advent of the golden age of steam, railway networks and natural sciences, the imperative to perceive reality clearly and distinctly achieved unprecedented levels. Darwin's theory of natural selection flourished. In 1869, Mendeleev created the periodic table of chemical elements, perhaps the most precise classificatory grid of matter that has ever been invented. Emergent social sciences struggled to join the bandwagon. Theories of race, the survival of the fittest

and evolution of societies through clearly defined hierarchical stages dominated anthropology in the late nineteenth century.

Despite the Great world war and many successful national liberation movements, colonial empires seemed to be unshakeable. The war-time internment of Bronislaw Malinowski in Trobriand Islands allowed him to take interest, beside the economy of reciprocity, in the most intimate domains of aboriginal life and juxtapose them to Freud's universalist claims about human psyche, a subversive theory to the European mind at that time. Trobriand Islanders had little opportunity to dispute that but the practice of detailed participant observation in ethnographic fieldwork gained prominence.

Yet the eventual collapse of the colonial world found a strong reflection both in the minds of the colonised and the colonisers. Posthumous publishing of Malinowski's personal *Diaries* in 1967 revealed much of the irrational contempt for "his" aborigines as well as the actual content of his field study, both missing in his official writing. Subsequent reflexive turn in anthropology culminated in the two influential collections, *Writing culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Fischer and Marcus 1986), which questioned the very authority of ethnographic writing and called attention to rhetorical strategies that authors use to produce knowledge about the Other. Once again our perceptions about the Other were to serve primarily as a mirror of our Self. As with the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne, the spiral of our thought came full circle, several layers above in terms of detail indeed, though hardly in terms of literary skill.

We have been called to our conscience, yet still not brought to our knees. As many times in our history we seem to be irreconcilably poised between a humble admittance of imperfection and the arrogance of omniscient reason and its categories. Giving up the latter would apparently strike hard into the essence of our civilisation, nearly seemed to negate the glorious path to all its scientific achievements. Restraint from the former, on the other hand, distances us from whatever transcends it. Yet is it not an artificial crossroad? To shed a tear here and there, lament the insensitivity of founding father figures and promise to be really compassionate in future makes up, no doubt, a more sexy dress for the hegemonic discipline but it certainly does not do away with the material conditions for the hegemony. Blurring the border between ethics and epistemology brings about

neither higher morality nor qualitatively deeper knowledge. The only substantial contribution of this call to conscience is the specific understanding of how precisely are the categories of knowledge related to power and agency. As it happens with any strategic understanding of how the world works, I am afraid this one too ultimately serves more to the powerful than to the oppressed.

Virtual media has become the biggest battlefield of present time. It is quite possible that groups, perhaps whole civilisations, who wire themselves swiftly into the new sphere of interaction, will rise in importance while others loose. However, it is unlikely that success and loss in the virtual struggle for the new world order would be contingent upon the level of moral reflection of the past regime by the groups concerned rather than upon deployment of categories that more or less effectively personify their agency. Indeed, one is better of conscious than ignorant about poetics and politics of the terms he uses to describe the world, thought such awareness is not a necessary condition to success. And an ethical judgement about the choice of terms and imageries, i.e., about a moral act, is a separate issue altogether.

More fundamental critique of categories in ethnographic description might question the very possibility of accounting for cultural diversity within a single explanatory framework. Extension and specification of the system of explanatory categories modelled on natural science as attempted by structuralism and cognitivism do not account for the phenomenological dimension of culture and consequently miss the actual meaning of unfolding events on the ground. Natural science could only prove entirely victorious in the study of men if there was finally no otherness left unexplained and no experience uncontrollable, or in other words, if human minds could by totally subjected to effective management. It is not impossible that progress in genetics and neurobiology, seconded by some schools of linguistics and anthropology and ubiquitous networks of computers and sensors, will make it one day. Perverse as it may sound, perhaps this is the way to higher consciousness and as with the use of other powerful technologies, the control over mind management can be more or less equitably distributed. Till now, however, the essential categories that anthropology uses to describe mankind like 'culture', 'society', 'family' or 'religion' have been our own cultural phenomena,[2]

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[2] For critique of these categories see, e.g., Wolf 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1992.

redefined and renegotiated with varying degrees of success to higher level of abstraction so that phenomena observed at other islands can be intellectually accommodated within them and variations reduced to provisional taxonomies and typologies. Such enterprise does provide valuable insight and allows to present cultural diversity in a persuasive digested form. Yet, it can be ultimately successful and methodologically valid only under the condition that variations of cultural and social phenomena are a finite number, like the number of species on the planet, the number of possible chemical elements, perhaps the number of possible combinations of DNA constituents. So far, nothing seems to suggest that this would be the case.

On the other hand, hermeneutic effort to enrich our horizon of understanding with descriptions of Others' point of view, interesting and useful as it might be, has no foreseeable point of mission accomplished and a permanent critique of meta-discourse on culture can stretch indefinitely since the sum of human experience is infinite. Again, one can only daydream about some kind of collective nirvana whereby all separate cultural horizons happily merge, some kind of universal simultaneous occurrence of what Gadamer termed fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), and mankind realises the true essence of its humanity and agrees on terms how to call itself, if it still makes any sense to speak.

If materialism of natural sciences is rightfully criticised, both on epistemological and ethical grounds, for treating individuals and communities as units of matter, then idealism of the interpretative paradigm can be equally charged for its rootedness in culturally specific Christian universalism (C.f. also Asad 1983). Hermeneutics as a basis of methodology for humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) historically developed from Biblical exegesis through interpretation of historical manuscripts to the philosophy of language. Clifford Geertz pioneered interpretative paradigm in cultural anthropology from 1960' s. A brief look at analogies between his line of argumentation and that of philosophers of the hermeneutic tradition reveals the connectedness of this paradigm with its Christian origins. In the process of carving out the interpretative or symbolic anthropology as opposed to scientism Geertz replays on altered chessboard and with pieces of different shapes essentially a very similar gambit to the one which hermeneutics of 19th and early 20th century played against Kant' s legacy.

1.4. Question of ethnographic understanding

The first analogy worth mentioning is the analogy of antigrammatism. Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German theologist of early 19th century who was concerned with textual interpretation, in particular of the New Testament, defined hermeneutics as a search for individual meaning as opposed to the grammatical study of supra-individual language (Grondin 1997:95). What a speech actually says cannot be reduced to rules of declension or syntax and the same statement might have different meaning in various situations. During my sojourns in Calcutta I struggled on daily basis with the deficiency of my Bengali learnt outside of the cultural context and I will come to this point later.

When Geertz worked in Chicago in 1960' s, dominant schools in anthropology aimed at devising a sort of " grammar" of human thought and behaviour. He turned away from this endeavour and became a part of an intellectual movement which was set to radically redefine the nature of ethnographic research. As he says: „ …This redefinition consisted in placing the systematic study of meaning, the vehicles of meaning, and the understanding of meaning at the very center of research and analysis: to make of anthropology, or anyway cultural anthropology, a hermeneutical discipline" (Geertz 1995:114). He also expressed this Schleiermacherian move from grammar to hermeneutics in his seminal essay *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* with sceptical attitude to the possibility that „ …structural linguistics, computer engineering, or some other advanced form of thought is going to enable us to understand men without knowing them" (Geertz 1973: 30).

By the end of 19th century the opposition between the search for grammar and the search for meaning gained new importance. It has become a basis for conceptual distinguishing of flourishing natural sciences from humanities. And here comes the second analogy, the analogy of specificity of human object. Historians, who were well aware of temporal conditionality of their understanding, aspired for a firm philosophical and methodological ground in humanities, as firm as the ground that Kant' s *Critique of Pure Reason* afforded to natural sciences.

Wilhelm Dilthey, who was at the forefront of attempts at a critique of historical reason, refused to apply to humanities the same criteria of verity accepted in natural sciences (i.e. experimentally verifiable general laws), since the object of historical enquiry is that what had already been known before. Humanities do not study the world as it is but ideas about the world which were expressed in different historically conditioned contexts. While natural sciences *explain* causal relations, humanities *understand* ideal objects. This understanding (*verstehen*) is a psychological process in nature.

Cultural anthropology has as its object *ad definitio* culture. Yet the plurality of anthropological definitions of culture is enormous. Clyde Kluckhohn, Geertz's teacher from Harvard, dedicated a whole book to the overview of these definitions (Kluckhohn and Kroeber: 1952). Geertz, however, in his redefinition of ethnographic research radically narrowed and specified the concept. In the introduction to *Thick Description* Geertz (1973:5) states: „Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." Influence of this statement over the practice of anthropology as well as other disciplines is hard to overestimate.

Geertz thus did not seek to establish new subdiscipline of anthropology which would study symbols and their interpretation and stand in complementary position to the study of cultural "grammar". The paradigmatic shift he proposed was more fundamental. He suggested that all anthropology *is* interpretation because its object is Others' ideas about the world and themselves. Historical texts and characters from our past are replaced by contemporary, empirically observable actors. Ethnographic research should be directed to capturing the „actor's point of view", which is here a synonym for more traditional *verstehen*. The metaphor of textual interpretation for study of human behaviour is made explicit when Geertz (1973:10) says: „Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalised graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped

behaviour." The work of anthropologist thus may be compared to the activity of a literary critic.

Geertz and Dilthey share the view that "ideal" objects should be studied differently from material ones – not by analysis of causal relations and subsequent abstraction of general laws but by deep understanding of their specificity. This is the end of the second analogy. Dilthey has never overcome the contradiction between historical conditionality of understanding and the desire for some, albeit specific, objectivity in humanities. Later hermeneutics avoided this contradiction and renounced the desire for any method (Grondin 1997:119).

Geertz tries to circumvent Diltey's failure in a somewhat similar manner. In the first place he turns away from Dilthey's psychologism. Geertz does not hope for empathy with the mental world of the Other, only for understanding of the system of meanings that allow the Other to experience the world as real. Furthermore, he strictly differentiates between the objectification of spirit in culture and (unavoidably imperfect) anthropological interpretation of that objectification. Field notes, diaries, interviews and photographs, that is the ethnographic data, are in his view " …our own constructions of other peoples' constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to…" (Geertz 1973:9) Geertz, therefore, does not explicitly attempt a critique of anthropological reason.

Let us now turn to the manoeuvre whereby Geertz in his own field reproduces later hermeneutics' deflection from psychological understanding in Schleiermacher's and Dilthey's sense. In a chapter from *Local Knowledge* dedicated to the nature of anthropological understanding, Geertz starts with the critique of the opinion espoused among others by Bronislaw Malinowski and George Herbert Mead that the basis of understanding is a sort of professional empathy with the informant. Malinowski considered the ability to tune oneself to the right mood or feeling (*gefühl*) of an informant to be a practical or technical problem in the process of data collection. Publishing of his *Diaries*, however, revealed author's subjectivity and problematised both the status of data out there to be collected as well the claim that meaning can be objectified through professional empathy. How else then is it possible to found understanding of other culture, or in Geertz's words „ what happens to *verstehen* when *einfühlen* disappears?" (Geertz 1983:56)

Geertz recalls Friedrich Ast' s principle of hermeneutic circle (he terms it Dilthey' s principle), according to which the understanding of a text (or a culture) as a whole is arrived at by reference to the individual parts and vice versa. Next he borrows the distinction between " experience-near" and " experience-distant" concepts from the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut. " Experience-distant" concepts represent the sum of meta-concepts of anthropological theory while " experience-near" concepts are the symbolic worlds of informants. Understanding of culture then can be imagined as endless series of turns – back to the theory and forth to the ethnographic detail. Understanding the Other is thus more similar to grasping the meaning of a proverb or a joke rather than establishment of spiritual or psychological unity. „ Culture is public because meaning is" (Geertz 1973:12) and hence open to enquiry. We can understand each other even without a special gift for empathy, keeping all our differences intact.

The goal of ethnographical analysis should be „ an interpretation of the way a people live which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch, nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their existence, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer" (Geertz 1983:58). Geertz replaced psychological understanding with a semantic one, which rendered *verstehen* less mystical and much clearer. Again he tries to step out of Dilthey' s shadow when he asserts that ethnography is not defined by a methodology but by " the kind of intellectual effort it is" (Geertz 1973:6) towards what he terms (with philosopher Gilbert Ryle) the " thick description" , i.e. the description which captures the meaning of what happened rather than the happening itself. But is not the analysis of public structures of meaning and the ability to stand up to what it takes ultimately a *method* of ethnography? Geertz never gave up the claim for objectivity completely.[3]

Philosophical hermeneutics overcame the contradiction between the claim for objectivity in humanities and their historical conditionality with Heidegger who introduced an element of existentiality – every *understanding of* the world is preceded by *being in* the world (*Dasein*). As a consequence of the precedence of being-in-the-world, its facticity, our thinking is bound within preconceptions which direct our search for meaning (Grondin 1997:125). These preconceptions are

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[3] C.f. also Č ervinková

limiting but they can be overcome by conscious and systematic self-reflection of our being-in-the-world as a source of all our statements about the world. With Heidegger hermeneutics was elevated from auxiliary branch of humanities which lays down principles of interpretation to the philosophical examination of the process of interpretation. There are only hints at this direction in Geertz, while reflexive and critical anthropology in certain way followed much further.

Geertz's emphasis on emic perspective and "actor's point of view" can be also compared with Heidegger's hammer (Grondin 1997:131). A predicative statement "the hammer is heavy" attributes heaviness to the hammer as a thing. In such a statement, the relationship between the hammer and its heaviness is much more constricted and less complicated than in a situation when a smith throws off the hammer because it is heavy to him. Geertz's interpretative anthropology analogically turns against attempts to describe human experience with a set of such predicative statements.

The last great philosopher of hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer clarifies the specificity of humanities with the help of Aristotle's distinction between *phronesis* (ethical knowledge, practical judgement) and *episteme* (scientific knowledge). Ethical knowledge does not consist in the application of a general principle to all individual cases. "What is 'right' is absolutely relative to the ethical situation concerned. It is not possible to say in an abstract and general manner which action is right and which is not: no action is right 'in itself', independently of the situation that demands it" (Gadamer 1994:35). Ethical knowledge always concerns agency: "Ethical understanding is ethical knowledge and ethical being at the same time…" and similarly "…historical understanding is historical knowledge and historical being at the same time" (*Ibid*:40).

The highest principle of phronesis is for Gadamer a dialog: "…a statement can never be withdrawn from the context which motivated it, that is from the dialog it is part of and which only makes it meaningful" (Grondin 1997:150). To understand in human sciences "involves applying a meaning to our situation, to our questions. [...] When we cannot understand a text, it is because the text has nothing to say *to us*. There is nothing anomalous in the fact that understanding differs from epoch to epoch, even from one individual to another. [...] To understand a text of the past is to transfer it to our situation, to find in it a persuasive answer to questions of present

time" (*Ibid*: 147, italics original) Theoretically we can assume that statements of the other can have indefinite meanings, in reality, however, " we always sort out – from our situational perspective – among various *possible* meanings – that is those that *we* consider to be possible – and refuse all the rest which seems to be ' outright absurd' " (Gadamer 1994:35). Therefore, we have to keep on reflecting upon the questions that answer the meanings we find and on how these questions arose.

If we replace history with anthropology, that is temporal distance with cultural one, then it is the ethnographer who " turns his questions to foreign cultural forms in order to find questions which the other cultural object might answer" (Vrhel 1993:50). This effort is embedded in historical consciousness, including the academic perspective the ethnographer takes before he enters the field. Otherness is non-understanding, lack of meaning. Dialog is a process of discovering meaning (or truth which is here the same). Other' s meaning " becomes ' mine' when it reveals itself as genuinely ' other' than ' my' own thought [...] to transform a not-authentic ' mine' into an authentic one, to transform an intolerable ' Other' into *true* and hence acceptable ' Other' always remains an open possibility or a possibility that opens up in dialog" (Gadamer 1994:51).

Geertz (1973:14) also finds the most important aim of anthropology in the dialog of symbolic worlds as „ the enlargement of the universe of human discourse" . Let us look deeper into this analogy. An anthropologist is a random witness to many events in the field and after return „ removed from their immediate pressure" he tries to devise „ … a way of talking about matters that transcend and engulf such occasions, and fold, in turn, back upon them – to elaborate a language of significative contrast that can, as I said earlier, make some sort of sense of the swirls and confluxions into whose midst I have, over the years, so clumsily stumbled" (Geertz 1995:19-20). The dialog founds not only the process of understanding but also the reality which can be understood: „ Whatever reality is, besides existent, our sense of it … comes inevitably out of the way we talk about it" (*Ibid*:18, Cf. Gadamer' s famous statement „ Being that can be understood is language").

Similarly, Geertz is close to Gadamer when he links cultural knowledge and cultural being on ethical grounds. He does so in an essay which talks about the

need of mutual understanding across cultural barriers in a world where cultures increasingly clash: „ To live in a collage one must in the first place render oneself capable of sorting out its elements, determining what they are … and how, practically, they relate to one another, without at the same time blurring one' s own location and one' s own identity within it. Less figuratively, „ understanding" in the sense of comprehension, perception, and insight needs to be distinguished from „ understanding" in the sense of agreement of opinion, union of sentiment, or commonality of commitment. We must learn to grasp what we cannot embrace" (Geertz 1994:465). That is to " to transform a not-authentic ' mine' into an authentic one, to transform an intolerable ' Other' into *true* and hence acceptable ' Other' " as Gadamer says in the above quoted passage. Also Gadamer' s equation of truth with meaning is implicitly present in Geertz' s project though he never refers to Gadamer. In one of his earlier articles entitled *Thinking as a Moral Act* he credits " …the succinct and chilling doctrine that thought is conduct and is to be morally judged as such" (Geertz 1968:34) to John Dewey.

Geertz, however, never completely stepped out of Dilthey' s shadow and never renounced the claim for objectivity in anthropology. He never attempted such radical a move as was Gadamer' s revocation of object in human sciences. For Geertz, other symbolic worlds are autonomous objects, not just answers to our questions. He refuses to analyse the ontological status of symbolic systems by leaving them to be „ things of this world." (Geertz 1973:10) What Dilthey held to be a " historical object" becomes in Gadamer (1994:52) a unity of mine with other. The distinction between " the web of meanings" of ethnographer' s informant and ethnographer' s own " web of meanings" effectively impedes the fusion of horizons in Gadamer' s sense.

One important difference between Geertz' s application of hermeneutics and its whole philosophical tradition consists in the metaphor of human behaviour as text to be read. Real texts, be they sacred or historical, are expressed in language and also Gadamer founds the universality of his hermeneutics in language. Geertz speaks sometimes about culture as text, sometimes about actual texts that ethnographer writes and compiles in the course of fieldwork. While conducting an ethnographic interview, the dialogic character of fieldwork is clear and it can be well understood in hermeneutic terms. But the metaphor of behaviour as text is

challenging. Is really all human behaviour symbolic so that it can be " read" as a manuscript or deciphered as a code of communication?

Similarly, cultural distance cannot facilitate interpretation in the same way as temporal distance does, for example in the history of art, because temporal distance silences the historical object if we do not have any questions it could answer. Interpretation of history of the dead can afford to be self-centred. On the other hand, a living actor, however culturally distant he might be, can increasingly easily dispute interpretations of " his" ethnographer and counter with interpretations which better suit his interests. Nuances of understanding dissolve in the heavy sea of politics. Like Dilthey, Geertz has never really overcome the contradiction between the claim for objectivity of understanding and historical conditionality of the understanding subject.

His hermeneutics is, in fact, a theology of humanism. The end of colonialism brought to the boil the tension between the old Bastian' s postulate of the psychic unity of mankind and the plurality of ways in which to be human. The relative authority of all cultural traditions became more acutely felt when the authority of anthropologist' s tradition diminished, which also translated into the conditions of doing fieldwork. Geertz' s cultural hermeneutics aims to answer exactly this question: How can anthropology think the plurality of human ways of being as a plurality of equal possibilities and how it can, at the same time point to something beyond that plurality? This invokes the last analogy with the philosophical tradition of hermeneutics, precisely with its very beginning, the teaching of St. Augustine about the *verbum interius*.

Anthropologist studying culture as a web of meanings is somewhat similar to an early Christian exegete who aspires to identify the " inner word" behind the text of Bible by studying numerous manuscripts, commentaries and language versions of the Scripture. For exegetes *verbum* was the pure divine idea and the Scripture its imperfect human expression. *Verbum* could be approached only in the process of interpretation, a dialog with the text. In Gadamer' s adaptation the inner word is what the actual speech clumsily attempts to express, the thought which never reveals fully in language.

Geertz' s cultural hermeneutics replaces the Divine with the Human. Ethnographer approaches its *verbum interius* through interpretation of diverse

cultural forms which are understood as different expressions of humanity. Culture is what distinguishes Man from other animals, what is his defining ontological characteristic. And culture is expressed chiefly through language and symbolic thinking: " man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" , or at different place: " …the culture concept, to which I adhere…denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz 1973:89).

The contrasting concepts of anthropology as a science and anthropology as one of humanities are based on different views about the ontological status of man. Scientists identify human being with Cartesian *cogito*. Structuralism and cognitivism in particular follow Kants' s footsteps in pursuing an empirical critique of pure reason. Reason or mind is an instrument as well as the object of study. In the interpretive paradigm, on the other hand, the essence of humanity is as elusive as the pure divine idea but it can be inferred from partial realisation in cultures, that is webs of meaning, in the process of their interpretation.

1.5. The journey

I came to India for the first time in November 2000 for a six months stay to gather material about the annual worship of the goddess Sarasvati in the public spaces of Calcutta. One late night I landed at Delhi airport with loads of useless luggage and a hand bag of equally useless ideas about how to cope with life in that country, not to speak about how to make a sense of it.

The dusty air, humidity, the deceitful taxi driver, everything was as I had imagined. The first day I did not find courage to have anything more than few cups of tea, biscuits I brought from Prague and bottled water. All eateries within my budget comfortably fulfilled most of the criteria from the not-to-do list I had learnt. Along the way I fell prey to each and every street tout. I used the office of one of them to call the Czech Embassy. Indeed, due the last moment unwanted rescheduling of my flight I missed the consul at the airport. Somehow, I managed the public bus ride with all the luggage to the diplomatic enclave and the hospitality

of the Embassy and of the Polish lecturer at Delhi University cushioned the initial culture shock and added greatly to my survival instincts. My first Indian marriage, elephant ride under the majestic walls of the Red Fort, travelling by cycle-rickshaw in the lanes of Old Delhi, first touch with authentic Indian cuisine and, more importantly, with the practical side of Indian religions.

Few days later when I arrived to Calcutta's Howrah Station after twenty-four hours of strenuous train journey, I felt the hell had no bottom. My Czech botanist friend took me from the station to her hired room on Calcutta's periphery near the Botanical Garden. The view of the streets was more than depressing. Concrete structures around seemed to be dilapidated and poised to collapse at any moment into the stream of filth bellow them. I could not believe I had spent four years of my life learning the language of people who lived there.

It was late in the evening but I could not stay with my friend since the landlords would have seen it as a serious threat to the moral standards of their household. Another bus ride to the stinking touristy street and a nearly a month long stay in the bunk-bed twenty plus dormitory full of cockroaches, free passive grass smoking and unhealthy looking yet cool acting crowd of international backpackers which I tried to avoid. That was not the India I came to explore. A short trip to Himalaya with my botanist friend was a relief from the unbearable city and reaffirmed my conviction that unspoilt exotic world, after all, still lays out there. Slowly, I came to discover it in the city itself. My activities were divided into pursuit of several goals. Weekend sightseeing in and around Calcutta, attempts to find alternative accommodation through newspaper adds and real estate touts, meeting all contacts I had from Prague, time-consuming visits to innumerable government offices and ultimately the Calcutta University to have my research visa application processed.

Finally, when my friend left for her academic base in South India, I moved from the dormitory to a mosquito-infested two-roomed space in her landlord's place on the other side of the river, technically outside the proper Calcutta. For the rest of my stay I tried to live on 150 $ monthly budget. Sometimes I did not speak my mother tongue for several weeks. I did not meet any expats or other foreigners nor did I go to those several city pubs and clubs I came to know only much later. At rare times of gloomy nostalgia I would listen to some Czech songs from a creaking

tape recorder and drink a bottle of glycerinated warm beer in my dark humid room, counting the mosquitoes on the reverse side of the net.

But it was not all so negative. After all, I could speak Bengali everyday in so many different situations. I became familiar with the city and its confusing transport system pretty well. I regularly studied in the National Library's reading room and the contacts of my teachers from Prague proved invaluable with advice as well as hospitality and I am immensely indebted to all of them. I ate all the street junk and survived, braved daily the dust, sweat, traffic congestions and bureaucracy. And in the process, I became a European.

This identity was truly imposed on me in India since being Czech was rather unintelligible for anyone who was not a diehard football fan or a true cineaste. When I insisted on being a Czechoslovak, the way I have actually always felt, few more memories of our past industrial heritage resurfaced, though Czechoslovakia often phonetically collapsed into worn-torn Yugoslavia, sometimes it was thought to be part of the USSR and the best way I was able to locate my country was to say that it borders with Germany. Not really satisfying presentation of my identity, I thought. Indeed it made no sense to keep on lecturing about funny details of Central European geography and ethnic sentiment. The pan-continental generalisation was convenient for both sides. So I became a European through that distancing effect of travel, as opposed to Americans, Australians, Israelis and other foreign visitors to India. And I did not mind.

If my ethnicity and mother tongue proved to be meaningless from certain distance, there was, however, another part of my identity which played more important role, both subjectively and for my interlocutors. Much has been written on the difference between a native and foreign ethnographer, between studying an alien and one's own culture (For Indian context, c.f., e.g., Kumar 1992: 1-35; Narayan 1998; Chaudhuri 1998; Mascarenhas-Keyes 2004). Yet the position of an ethnographer hailing from a post-communist country in former British colony is also dramatically different from the one of a born-Western observer. Availability of resources for research plays a role too but it is the least important difference.

Till the age of twelve I was growing up in a society homogenised to unprecedented levels. Miners had incomes little higher than lawyers and compared to Western block countries and the general differences in income were negligible.

Any private enterprise was illegal and the enforcement of unified living standards nearly foolproof from the bottom as well. At the age of eight, during my first trip abroad, I saw my first beggars in Budapest, the capital of a socialist country which started some market-oriented reforms in mid 1980' s. I still remember asking my mother why all those people were sitting on pavements in the cold. I simply could not grasp what it means to beg. At the same time I eyed T-shirts with catchy colours and designs unknown in the dull grey of Czechoslovakian shops.

The next trip was to Romania, still under Ceausescu dictatorship. Around the mountain and seaside resorts, there were slum-like areas of underdevelopment and dirt from the perspective of a child trained to clean his typified panel-house neighbourhood on special days, collecting the garbage left by less conscious fellow citizens with a sharp wooden stick in the company of no less ideologically motivated (and forced) schoolmates. The train journey from Transylvania to the Black Sea coast was a bit of an adventure because hordes of dissatisfied youngsters gathered around the rail track and hurled stones on our passing express train. Windows of some compartments really got broken on the way. The inexplicable lack of public order rooted in economic inequality struck me for the first time. Soon after the breakdown of the communist rule in 1989, I went for a one-day trip to Vienna – the first encounter with the capitalist West. I remember walking long hours from one monument to another. A tram ride was so many times more expensive than back home. And I remember myself glued to the shopping windows decorated and animated before Christmas. Everything looked out of this world, so close and so unattainable.

Since then my country has officially set on the path to become what Western Europe was, with all the beggars and shining shopping windows. Despite all the upstart black-shoes-white-socks-is-cool capitalist turmoil of the 1990' s and despite further short tours in Europe and the Near East and all my university studies and short-term fieldwork training, I came to India absolutely blind to the essence of class stratification. Not only that I could not figure out who is the boss and who is the underdog readily from outward manners but I simply was not getting why that should really matter so much in terms of everyday interaction. After all, in the place I grew up, a factory owner still lives in the same block of flats with an unemployed single mother. Neither of them is moving out and they are good neighbours to each other.

Indeed, some twenty five years back they together used to take care of now plundered communal flowerbed in front of the block on designated days. The generation which brought me up will not and cannot stratify along the logic of class distinction, or at least not authentically and persuasively. As with the combination of polished black shoes and shining white socks, which was a trademark of the new class of enterprisers in the early 1990' s Czechoslovakia, the attempts to act classist in my post-communist country often than not end up in a farce, and both sides, in the back of their minds, somehow know it.

Thanks to this upbringing I entered many Bengali households, even middleclass households, and foolishly tried to greet the unknown family members and domestic helpers with equal formal respect, not being even able to recognise who is who. Gradually, I made it up. The temporary helpers or permanent servants – depending on the class status of my hosts, as I know now – were always darker in complexion than the hosts. I also learned to understand the quality of fabrics in sarees at a glance and finally to guess class from speech. Now I am nearly perfect in distinguishing those who are at par, from those who are up there, those who are lower and those who move around like useful breathing air without any recognition. But I loathe myself for that.

As a regular street walker I learnt to differentiate beggars from drug dealers, from back lane touts, from the congested crowd, from those who want to practice English, from those who would not even look a sweaty European into his eyes, from the middleclass shoppers, from the upper crust cream appearances, from rickshaw-wallahs, from taxi-drivers, from taxi-driver' s helpers, from street dwellers, from prostitutes, from shop owners – like the one on Chowringhee who was drinking an earthen cup of tea in front of his philatelist shop and though he never left Bengal he could speak about Prague, the city I was born in, so passionately and with so deep a knowledge that I had nothing to add.

It was my fieldwork guide and then head of the Department of Sociology at Calcutta University, Professor Swapan Kumar Bhattacharyya who took me there one day. I met Professor Bhattacharyya in the lift of the New Campus building of Calcutta University during my first stay in the process of having my tenure in the framework of the Indo-Czech cultural exchange programme approved.

"Excuse me, which floor is the Department of Sociology?" I asked, not knowing whom. I ended up in his office and after a short talk he invited me to his residence. While sitting in his living room we talked about the relationship of East and West more than about the misconceptions of my research proposal. Eventually, the conversation turned out to be friendly and challenging, challenging for me at least, and we shook hands. Professor Bhattacharyya became my fieldwork guide at Calcutta University and I am grateful to him for merciless and relentless criticism of my own misconceptions about the culture I came to study with so naṅ ve a *veni-vidi-vici* attitude. We had many fights I am still ashamed of. At one point we separated at the platform of Rabindra Sadan metro station because the charge was too much. The dialog was equally academic and political. Challenges run through politics of identity, role of establishment, and other themes but the most crucial one for me was about the delimitation of what is actually Durgā pū jā , the subject of my fieldwork. He made me think harder about what can be studied under the bracket of ritual in general and about the not so obvious question of what is and what is not the "real" Durgā pū jā in particular. Finally, I was glad to receive him one afternoon at the Prague airport and to attend the passionate lectures on Bengali culture he delivered to my students.

Then there were loves that made the hell, experienced with inexperienced eyes on my first arrival to Calcutta, forever my second home. It would not suit a self-proclaimed gentleman to go into details. Out and all, it was strong. Once I even cried alone on my way to the airport. Not for the one beloved but for the fear that I would not return. After several years spent in Calcutta with summer breaks in Prague, my identity shifted.

It was after Holi, the festival of colours, spent in convivial atmosphere with friends in Tagore's abode of Shantiniketan in 2005. I was waiting for a train to the pilgrimage town of Tarapith at Prantik station near Shantiniketan. The platform was nearly empty and the train was late. The twilight of that evening would make every photographer restless. I was standing beside a tea-stall, chatting with people around. Gusts of wind played havoc with the red soil sending columns of dust above the ground in whirlpools. Banana leaves waved and bamboo grove murmured in response. The countryside was immense with its paddy-fields, clay house villages and ponds. Nothing could make me feel alien. I felt like a city boy, some twenty

years back, waiting for a local bus in the village where my grandmother had her summerhouse, poised to leave the familiar garden with all the trees heavy with fruits and carefully kept flowers.

1.6. Learning and belonging

That brief span of time spent at the platform of Prantik station was one of the greatest experiences and greatest rewards for all the stumbling over an uncertain cultural terrain. But that experience was not granted to me. It took some effort. I had to adjust on so many occasions, which was painful, sometimes physically painful. Picture yourself sitting barefoot and cross-legged (without any previous practice of that posture) on a marble floor in nearly forty degrees Celsius humid heat till numbness of your limbs and then enjoy an unbearably spicy curry with fish, the flesh of which comes with myriads of tiny bones, struggle with them using fingers of your right hand, neurotically chase all the near flying mosquitoes with the left hand and still try to reciprocate with smile your host's affection which comes with another piece of bony fish.

I believe that whatever degree of enculturation an ethnographer achieves in the field, he always does so through experiences like this: by submitting his body and mind to some form of disciplining practice, which may hurt, and not by merely reflecting upon the symbolic universe of the Other. Being-in-the-world, after all, directs all understanding. It is imaginable that someone learns a lot about Bengali culture from good books without being able to share daily routine with those who live it. However, it is hardly conceivable that someone who learnt the ways of those people by instruction and imitation from life situations and became capable of interacting with them on their terms, would still know nothing about their culture.

The bodily aspect of this process is of crucial importance.[4] Through the disciplinary practice, the body of the anthropologist, which initially signifies only strangeness to his interlocutors, gradually becomes akin to their culturally normalised bodies. The researcher can hardly be ever accepted as fully native – and there is no need attempting it – but the possibility of blurring his strangeness with self-conscious effort directed to changes in his bodily practice is always open and productive.

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[4] For Bengali context see, e.g., Kotalová 1996:29-36.

Limbs slowly take more time before they get numb; tissue of the skin covering the outer part of joints develops rough thickness which cushions them from pressure over hard surfaces; with proper diet, heat and humidity become more bearable and even fingers can learn to cope with rice and lentils with such a boldness that everyone around does not have to turn away in disgust. In the long term, sharpness of the fishbone becomes a familiar sensation and spicy food an addiction.

It is this intimacy based on commonality of bodily experience (feeling the heaviness of Heidegger's hammer) which establishes understanding before it has to be expressed in language. Though mostly it is not the case, instruction initiating a novice into a new experience does not have to be always expressed in language. An example of behaviour or a visualisation is sometimes worthier a sermon. Small children up to certain age do not ask the question 'why', follow adults' example and play adults among themselves. Later on, they are subject to regimes of life-cycle rituals, vocational training and the system of education.[5] Thanks to this commonality of experience they do not need to interpret their culture for themselves in theoretical terms. What people share before they ask for meaning are analogous constellations of blisters on their body-minds.

I am further inclined to suggest that those domains in life of an individual or a society, which require performance of the most rigorous disciplining practices as a prerequisite of cultural competence in that domain, stand closest to the identity, both individual and collective. I deliberately use the term 'disciplining practice' instead of simply 'discipline' in order to move away from Foucault's definition. By 'discipline' Foucault understood specifically new methods of coercion developed in the beginning of European modernity that used classification and mechanical organisation of individuals to effectuate dissociation of body from its power: "In organising 'cells', 'places' and 'ranks', the disciplines create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical. It is spaces that provide fixed positions and permit circulation; they carve out individual segments and establish operational links; they mark places and indicate values; they guarantee the obedience of individuals, but also a better economy of time and gesture" (Foucault 1995:140). Foucault refuses to include pre-modern phenomena

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[5] C.f. the importance of a centralised system of education for development of European nationalism in Gellner 1983.

such as asceticism or monastic discipline into his concept of discipline in order to make the paradigm shift brought by modernity stand out. His concept of 'discipline' is thus one of a mode of oppression.

My notion of 'disciplining practice' differs in two ways. First, I do not equate it with the evil of oppression. I understand the term in a neutral way as any practice directed towards structuring bodily experience in order to create identity with others who share it. Ethical judgement on the practice is a separate issue. Moreover, the commonality of experience, even if undesired for, is a positive basis for understanding and bruises may also empower the body. Second, this notion refers to all such practices regardless of their historical or cultural origin. If modernity was exclusive property of the West, India would be only lacking behind in devising efficient systems of control. This perspective in fact denies other cultures the capacity to build or even contribute to building of an authentic alternative modernity. In this study I want to focus exactly on such contributions.

Now let me differentiate between what I propose to call horizontal and vertical disciplining practices. The vertical disciplining practices train individuals to outstanding achievement in the domain concerned, e.g., higher education, training in arts and sports, various special techniques of spiritual practice. They result in segmentation of society into classes, sects and professionally or life-style based groups. The vertical disciplining practices lead both to horizontal segmentation and hierarchy.

The horizontal disciplining practices, on the other hand, ideally encompass the group in question as a whole. To put it metaphorically, they aim at imprinting exactly the same constellation of blisters over the body-minds of possibly all members of the group; that is to enforce commonality of experience. Initiation rituals at puberty provide the most pregnant example. Should the given group be the whole society, institutions like general suffrage, mandatory primary education and mandatory health insurance, public celebrations of national holidays or annual religious festivals would fall within this category. The horizontal disciplining practices result in horizontal homogenisation within the group and atonement for hierarchy, without however necessarily annulling it. The double function of horizontal disciplining practices thus consists in protecting the segmented and stratified group from disintegration and in legitimising the hierarchy in some form by effectively

transcending horizontal segmentation. I am particularly interested here in the horizontal disciplining practices that imprint the sense of polity. Because the success or failure of horizontal disciplining practices threatens to redefine the borders of the polity with all conflicts it could bring about, those practices are most likely to become a matter of political contest. It belongs to the dialectics of the horizontal and the vertical that success of a horizontal disciplinig practice legitimises verticality inherent at different level within the same group. At a later stage I will argue that festival of the goddess Durgā , the most important annual festival in Bengal, has worked throughout the history as disciplining practice imprinting Bengali identity.

The vertical disciplining practices train the body and mind towards an ideal of perfection (study that subject; learn those forms of dance; master that technique of meditation). They create a space for competition and a hierarchy of mastership. The horizontal disciplining practices establish unity of a group (sit that way, eat that way, observe those rituals). It should be also noted that no such practice is *a priory* vertical or horizontal. This is absolutely relative to the arrangement of the society in question. For example, a graduation ceremony is a horizontal practice for the graduates but a culmination point of the vertical disciplining practice of university education from the point of view of the whole society. When people gather in a church or in a mosque, the disciplining practice they submit themselves to creates a sense of communion among them. However, every horizontal practice, unless it encompassed the whole mankind, also creates a horizontal segment when looked at from broader perspective – member of *this* church as opposed to member of *that* one, university graduate as opposed to a person without a degree. Needless to say, that some group identities are laden with more emotional charge than others and that their relative importance changes in time and with context.

The point I want to make here is that the sense of belonging comes primarily from the commonality of experience through submitting the body and mind to horizontal disciplining practices. When you learn the culturally proper way to eat, to dress, and to worship it makes you feel one with those who do it the same way and this feeling comes like a natural perception, like murmur of that bamboo grove or like a burning sensation of squeezed fresh chilly on the tongue. Unlike infatuation, love is contingent on common discipline. To feel one with others with strong emotional persuasiveness is to feel the heaviness of the hammer they use.

1.7. Cultural construction of personhood and pragmatics of interaction

What has been said about the physical adjustment and bodily experience is also to some extent true about pragmatics of communication in foreign language. Thanks to my previous training I did not really suffer from language barrier. My Bengali was imperfect, funnily obsolete and greatly limited in terms of vocabulary but I managed to improve my fluency at reasonable speed and an easy escape into English was nearly always an option to settle unintended misunderstandings. More serious challenge proved to be the language use with all its cultural significance and I have to admit that with growing consciousness about the intricacies of the pragmatics of interaction in Bengali culture I became increasingly prudent user of what is not authentically mine.

When I did not know what my interlocutors meant by what they said, my frustration was growing. Still more frustrating was acting on the illusion of understanding. Setting up a meeting, organising a trip, shopping, arranging a library card, buying a train ticket, talking to bureaucrats, small things of life as if turned into a tall wall I had to slowly and patiently climb. Indeed, my inclination to address conversational topics directly and to the point, in yes or no term, offended many. The doctor who handed me over my HIV test was interested only in counting my horoscope. The officer at the Foreigners Registration Office did not check the test either but spent an hour with me talking about subjects as irrelevant to the subject of our dealing as the history of Indo-European languages, and finally, being happy with the conversation, he gave me the stamp. Apparently, rules could be bent with a smile but they equally easily turned into an impervious jungle at unpredictable intervals. Comprehensible difference in expressing yes, maybe, and no has remained obscured to me for a long time. And to cope with ensuing disappointments was sometimes as agonizing as sitting cross-legged on the marble floor.

The individualist Western ethos clashed with an ethos of interaction directed to a subject defined by levels of co-substantiality he shares with other subjects, rather than by his individual position in the objectified structure of facticity. The use of language and pragmatics of interaction reflect the way a person is culturally construed. Consider a journey in a coach of an Indian train. Passengers rush in and

take their places on benches with numbers indicating seats. There are three seats per bench. More passengers with luggage keep on coming in and with smiles, barely expressed requests and sometimes arguments they all get in and as many get seated as the physical space in between human bodies allows. It is not simple tolerance for congestion that can be explained by lack of infrastructure and enormous population. It is an ethos of accommodating those with whom I share. After all, we are passengers of the same class. And more often than in our part of the world, people would crack a conversation with a stranger. The seat numbers formally divide the sitting space into areas designed for individuals. The significant correspondence is between a formally delimited unit of space and a human unit, thought to be equally indivisible. Our etiquette teaches us to give up the seat in favour of the elderly or the disabled. Even if most of us would do it gladly, we would never squeeze to share our space. Indeed the seats in Western public transport are nowadays designed in such a way that they cannot be occupied by more than one individual. But in my country we still have bench-like continuous seats on regional tracks with numbers and we would still never squeeze.

In Bengal, the significant correspondence is between the shared space and relative con-substantiality of those who share it. What I said about an " ordinary" Indian coach is true about lower classes of Indian Railways' elaborate class structure. With increasing class, the level of accommodativeness decreases. The top air-conditioned classes are strictly accessible by reservation and even passing beggars and peddlers with all possible goods are bared entry. It is a septic environment of affluent travellers and railway staff serving. In any case, no respected upper-class traveller would like to see himself requesting some space from an unknown person of his stature he incidentally met on the platform. The ability to get a top end seat shows not just wealth but implicitly also the social capital in terms of staff who arrange it, negotiating the corruption ensuing from lower offer than demand. The decrease of accommodativeness on the upper end, however, does not contradict the general ethos. Rather, it is an expression of classism in public space where class distinction has to be guarded most cautiously against contamination, for even multimillionaires happily squeeze in an overcrowded jeep with those they consider as peer and friends. Analogically, Brahmins who are on top of the caste hierarchy, traditionally had to guard themselves most carefully against

pollution even if they lived in a congested and poor area. As if the top status required performance of hygienic acts in public to remain credible.

In Europe we have normally just the division into the first and the second class, which corresponds to affluence, and the rest of distinctions in train services relate to speed and similar objective criteria. The price of the ticket relates to effective value for money and who can afford it. The seat is a slot for any individual who normally can or exceptionally does afford it, not a space for sharing and negotiating one's relation to others. This is not to say that some our businessmen do not prefer to get stuck in their SUVs in a regular traffic jam every morning instead of going fast by tube, and that absolutely no-one else but upper class can actually buy a first class train ticket in India. Nevertheless, I would argue that a culture which largely identifies a person with formalised slots of societal structure he occupies at the moment (e.g., delimited seat, academic degree, profession, income group, and nationality), presumes different interaction among its members from a society that sees a person as formed by substances that others also share to differing degrees. It is a question of dominant governing principle and not of a universally applicable rule.

McKim Marriot (1976) coined the term "dividual" for South Asian personhood as opposed to Western individual. The person in Indian culture, he argues, is thought to be composed of substances he exchanges with others (e.g., food, blood, semen, money, or words). He refers to them as substances-codes. Through continuous exchange of substance-codes a social identity of a person is formed. The substance-codes are of different quality and depending on a person's status, some should be absorbed and other avoided. "Caste and personhood are absolutely dependent on transaction, and these transactions are carried out according to what practices are deemed appropriate or effective by any caste. In sum, the dividual person is able to process the substances of the world within their person, and these essences also make up the person. However, unlike the essences of the indivisible western individual (e.g., our genetic material, which can only be transmitted in reproduction) these essences can be continually circulated, monitored, transformed – indeed the attainment of personhood depends upon it. Giving and receiving between people alters each person internally" (Fowler 2005: 25). Since other people are sources of substances that can alter one's

personhood, it is necessary to guard oneself against interactions that potentially may cause defilement. At the same time, however, one can never escape giving and receiving altogether. It is only possible to attempt at controlling the process but it never ceases, not even after death when the body is cremated and therefore transformed and the soul released.

This notion of divisible and permeable personhood is also reflected in Bengali kinship.[6] Bengali kinship is patrilineal and patrilocal. The most general term for a relative in Bengali is *ātmīya-svajan*, literally "one's own people". This category includes both those related by consanguinity and the broadest spectre of persons related by affinity, but it may also encompass residents of the same neighbourhood or even those who became close by choice. More restricted are the terms *jñāti*, which denotes consanguines, and *kuṭumba*, which refers to affines. The Bengali categories do not exactly overlap with the anthropological ones but generally they do and detailing the difference is not relevant for the present argument. It suffices to note that the major difference consists in the fact that brides who are married off into a different patriliny according to the principle of clan (*kula*) exogamy become members of that patriliny while their original *jñāti* remains *kuṭumba* for their husband's family. The *jñāti* is explained as consisting of one body (*ek-deha*, *sapiṇḍa*) since the bodies of a *jñāti* are composed of parts they share. The idea of inner sharing of the same body is sustained by the code of conduct that ordains bodies of the same *jñāti* to share a household, food cooked on the same fire, wealth, household work, and the practice of worship (*pūjā*). Each clan has its clan deity (*kuladevatā*) to this effect. The dead ancestors are also included into the *jñāti* and balls of rice (*piṇḍa*) symbolising the shared body (*sapiṇḍa*) are offered to them. The day when those offerings are made is called *Mahālayā* in Bengal. It is a culmination of the dark or waning moon fortnight of the autumn moth of *Āśvin* (mid-September to mid October of our calendar), the fortnight of forefathers (*pitṛpakṣa*). The bright or waxing moon fortnight of the same month is reserved for the worship of Durgā and it is called the fortnight of the goddess (*devīpakṣa*).

The relationship between *jñāti* and *kuṭumba* is one of giving and receiving (*ādān-pradān*). The usage of the term *ādān-pradān*, however, extends beyond the domain of kinship and is sometimes referred to in order to express an ideal of relationship between people not related by blood. The gift, which establishes a relation of *jñāti-kuṭumba* is the gift of the bride (*sampradān*). This gift of a bodily substance, once accepted, establishes a relationship which is further reinforced by ritual exchange of gifts on proper occasions and sumptuous feeding of one's *kuṭumba* relatives. Durgā pūjā is one of such occasions. During the festival, married off daughters come to their parental houses as *kuṭumba* relatives along with their children and enjoy sumptuous treatment. Analogically, the goddess herself is considered to be the returning daughter of the house who sponsors the pūjā. The statue of the goddess in particular and to lesser degree those of her children are treated in a similar way as the actually returning daughter and her family. This attitude is most prominently expressed at the end of the festival when married women from the household feed the clay statue of Durgā with sweets and present her with gifts. Durgā is imagined to be departing back to her husband's house and the clay statue is deposed to the Ganges. Interestingly, the goddess is at the same time conceived as mother of her devotees, hence a *jñāti* class of relatives, and thus encompasses the two basic codes of conduct – that of sharing of substances as well as that of exchanging substances.

The pragmatics of interaction in Bengali culture is thus oriented by the ethos of sharing substances and the exchange of substances, which translates into behaviour in public space. This is reflected in the way that unrelated people are naturalised as quasi-relatives. A shopkeeper who is elder would be called "elder brother" or "elder-sister". An elder person's wife would be called by the term originally signifying "elder brother's wife". If the age difference is bigger, than the polite terms of address of shopkeepers or similarly unrelated individuals one encounters are "father's younger brother" and "father's younger brother's wife". Two unrelated women of the same age who meet on the account that the son of one is a tenant of the other's husband would call each other "father's sister" and "mother's sister" respectively. The proper way for man of treating an unrelated woman is to follow the code of conduct one should keep with his sister or daughter, depending on the age difference.

Both modes of interaction, the one modelled on *jñāti* relationships as well as the one modelled on *kuṭumba* relationships, involve hierarchy. The *jñāti* group of relatives distinguishes itself by the most precise distinction between elder and younger relatives and goes into such details as discriminating " younger father' s younger brother" from " middle father' s younger brother" from " older father' s younger brother" . Indeed those relatives and their children should ideally share one household. Conversely, there is just one term for mother' s brother (a *kuṭumba*) since this relative comes for visit or is visited only several times in a year, and this meeting is always a festive occasion connected with exchange of gifts and no framework of authority from the point of view of nieces and nephews. Yet the exchange of substances has a hierarchy involved too. The Bengali kinship is based on clan exogamy and sub-caste endogamy. Within the endogamous group, the clan accepting the bride is placed higher in the hierarchy then the clan of bride givers, which translates into inequality in the constant flow of gifts between the two clans. There is, however, also exchange of substances between the sub-castes and across the whole caste system. The sweepers or handlers of corpses, who stand lowest in the hierarchy, absorb the impure substances of the rest of the castes. They partake impurity of others and consequently remain themselves impure. The highest standing Brahmin castes, on the other hand, have had to be most cautious with whom they partake food, who cooked it and what substances the food contains, in order to protect their purity. In their pure state given by birth and control of the flow of substances, they have the capacity, after further purifying procedures, to purify, or to mediate purification of others by the means of mantras and by the means of the substances exuded from the deities the Brahmins invoke. The exchange of relatively pure or impure substances thus founds the caste hierarchy.

In a situation like a train journey, the caste of travellers is not obvious and is not really a matter of concern. But the general ethos is still at work – accommodate some and share with them, exchange freely with others; beware from sharing with some and make sure the exchange with others takes place along a certain hierarchical structure. This is dramatically different from the Western mode of interaction whereby individuals are identified with fixed, delimited spaces in an objectivised structure of matter and their interactions are more goal oriented and do not change the interlocutors internally. Also the visual representations of Hindu

deities are treated as living persons, served as royal guests in the process of worship and interacted with according to the same ethos. The deities are presented with valuable gifts – clothes, cosmetics, food, flowers, ornaments, coins etc., and worshippers receive deity's substances in return – leftovers of food, water in which the idols were bathed, the sight (*darshan*) of the deity, touch of the flame that was waved around.

The deities present in anthropomorphic images or natural objects like stones and trees are important social others and form a network of relationships with people. The mode of interaction with them in the course of worship (pū jā) is modelled on one with a person on top of the imaginary hierarchical scale and the exchange of substances reflects it. According the logic of dividual personhood, both the deity and the worshippers may be internally transformed through the interaction.

2. Ritual in anthropology

Ritual has been a classical subject of anthropology and studies of religion alike. A typical textbook definition of ritual would stress characteristics such as formality, stylisation, repeatedness, stereotyped nature, liturgical order and the need to perform the ritual in a specific place and time. Even the basic characteristic features, however, are very unevenly distributed over particular instances of rituals – compare a complex, regular, liturgy-based catholic mass with an isolated case of exorcism involving trance, high level physical and emotional stimulation but no explicit structure and regularity of performance. Instead of attempting at outlining a more clear-cut definition that would specifically suit the purposes of our research, we prefer to summarise in the following paragraphs the scholarly understanding of ritual that shaped our project.

The preoccupation of contemporary scholars with ritual symbolism, ritual rules and identity formation through rituals has often Durkheimean roots. According to Durkheim (1912), religion is social life pronounced in symbolic language and sacred things are but collective representations fixed on material objects. Through common emotional experience of ritual an individual learns about the order of the world and the place of human being in it. Durkheim emphasised the role of ritual in forming and enhancing social solidarity.

The concept of ritual as a process of social change was put forward in Victor Turner's analyse of Ndembu religion. Turner developed further Van Gennep's concept of *rites de passage* in an individual's life and transposed it on the life of society (Turner 1969). Society too, as a whole, undergoes through "social dramas" stages of "liminality" or critical moments and rituals often work as reintegrating mechanisms. They transform symbolically social relations in such a way that the society is able to cope with inherent tensions and crises. His concept of "liminoid" aspects of modern societies extended the notion of ritual to include carnivals, political demonstrations, or leisure activities (Turner 1974). Turner also contributed methodologically to the study of ritual symbols by pointing out their multivocality and by proposing to differentiate between exegetical, operational and positional meaning (1967: 48-58). His later methodological emphasis on experience in turn inspired others to explore the relation between personal and cultural symbols (e.g., Obeyesekere 1984).

While for Turner ritual is a mechanism which under particular circumstances may result in social transformation, for Clifford Geertz, it represents a "window" into culture conceived as a shared system of symbols. In his view sacred symbols synthesise peoples' ethos (way of life, morals and aesthetic judgement) with their worldview (ideas about how the things really are; the most complex notions of order). Geertz (1973) assumes that human beings, contrary to other species, are not able to survive without cultural (symbolic) means of adaptation. Rendering the world understandable is, therefore, a basic need for man and it is through symbolic systems that this need is satisfied. Ritual and especially a complex public one is for Geertz, as it was for Durkheim, a mechanism by means of which an individual is incorporated into society. Religions as well as other symbolic systems provide people both with models of reality and models for reality.

Geertz also examines the role of ritual in social change. Because the ethos and worldview are expressed in ritual, the transformation of either economic and social relations or the cultural value system will find their sharp expression in ritual as well. Given the changed conditions, ritual is not able to fulfil its integrating function anymore. While Turner focuses on whether and how the ritual is able to embody symbolic reintegration, Geertz interprets wider context of transformative forces expressed in ritual.

Both Durkheim and symbolic anthropologists like Turner and Geertz assert that rituals convey meanings to participants and that these meanings can be "read" by researchers as well. Other authors, however, distance themselves from the concept of ritual as a means for communicating particular meanings or question the very notion of symbols (e.g., Sperber 1975) as it is used in the works of symbolic anthropology. Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) developed a new theory according to which the focus of analysis should be shifted from ritual as a special kind of event to ritualised behaviour as a specific modification which can affect virtually any human action. The specificity of ritual action lies in that the meaning of such action is not given by the intentions of actors. The actor both is and is not the author of his actions. Rituals do not have any meaning in themselves but those who participate in them try to struggle against the meaninglessness by attributing the ritual meanings they've read about, heard from others or simply invented. Ritual action in the view of

Humphrey and Laidlaw is not, therefore, based on collectively shared ideas about the ritual but on collective acceptance of its rules and abiding by them.

This point has been put even more radically by Frits Staal who states that "ritual is pure activity, without meaning or goal" (1996: 131). He argues that as such it can be found among other species than human as well and that ritualised behaviour phylogenetically precedes any belief or another symbolic structure. On the example of Vedic ritual he shows that precise performance is what matters and no messages or meanings are communicated. The notion of ritual as a pure self-contained activity constituted by a set of meaningless rules contradicts the theories of ritual current among most anthropologists and scholars of religion who refer ritual to something else – to myth, social structure etc. Staal is particularly critical of interpretive approach to ritual. He develops a structuralist model and brings ritual studies back to the field of science. Burde (2004) elaborated on Staal's conclusions and widened the scope of his theory to include rites of later Hinduism.

The polarisation between the scholars who pursue humanist or interpretive study of ritual and those who locate their method within the social science and seek explanations instead of interpretations defines contemporary ritual studies. Besides structuralists like Staal or Burde, cognitive science has also contributed to the explanation of ritual phenomena. Pascal Boyer supports the view that rituals are inherently meaninglessness. He too holds that "the most obvious feature that distinguishes a ritual from an ordinary action is that specific rules organise the performance" (Boyer 2001: 265). The existence of ritual actions, he assumes, can be explained by certain cognitive properties of human mind. The interconnectedness of mind, ritual form, and sensory stimulation involved was further explored and modelled by McCauley and Lawson (2002).

Alfred Gell's famed work on *Art and Agency* (1998) also attempts at explanation rather than interpretation. Although his goal was to develop an anthropological theory of art, he provides invaluable insights into the relation of actors and objects in the ritual context. Gell starts with radical dismissal of approaches to artworks based on aesthetics and semiotics. He finds them incapable to pave the way for a general anthropological theory that would be able to account for artworks in all cultural and historical contexts. The primary concern of his theory

is with social relations mediated via art objects. The central question, therefore, is how objects are embedded in the networks of social relations and possess agency.

Thus we have on one hand approaches that locate the essence of ritual in the compulsiveness of rules the individuals submit to without being able to explain them properly in terms of instrumental rationality. Lack of intentionality in ritual actions is explained with reference to extra-social phenomena. On the other hand we have approaches which ascribe the irrationality of actor's accounts of what does this or that ritual means or signifies to his partial awareness of the meaning. Each individual speaks from his particular position and the complete picture can be deduced only by detached researcher who is trained to link the ritual with social structure, mode of subsistence etc. and who has a comparative perspective.

The difference between the humanist's approach and the social scientist's approach has important implications for understanding what the ritual is and how it should be studied. Extreme emphasis on compulsiveness and meaninglessness places ritual action along such phenomena as bird songs and communication of bees. The preoccupation with meanings, on the other hand, approximates it to the bulk of other symbolic activities, by far not only religious, like politics and the media (c.f. Augé 1990). This dichotomy with all its ramifications forms a defining characteristic of the present status in the field of ritual studies.

In the light of contemporary theorising it is increasingly obvious that cultural context alone is insufficient to explain the nature of what has been described as ritual. Rituals, like languages, are historically formed and specific to groups that were encultured to perform them, yet there exit deeper mental structures over which they are based. This explains not only universality of this phenomenon but also its psychological and social saliency. In other words, rituals are socially significant not because of the desirability of their effects (binding people together, transmitting ideas, forming identity etc.) but they are psychologically and socially efficacious for various purposes because they provide intensive stimuli for performers' minds. This mental base has been explored by cognitive anthropologists. According to Pascal Boyer (2001: 275), for example, the purity – pollution dichotomy which is enacted in rituals worldwide but which is especially prominent in Hindu worship activates the mental Contagion system that originally evolved to protect humans from contact with

dangerous substances. Activation of the system triggers strong emotional response and motivates salient intuitions about people and objects involved in the ritual.

In the present study I have sought to differentiate between three levels on which rituals operate: the universal cognitive and emotional base that rituals exploit, the inherent structure of a ritual which is relatively stable, culturally specific, but which the participants are aware of only partially and to different degrees; and the semantic level, that is the exegeses by which participants interpret the ritual for themselves and for the researcher. I acknowledge that this distinction is an abstraction afforded by the interpreter and would be meaningless for the actual participants in the ritual. In fact it is a successful merger of the three levels what makes the ritual experience compelling. This analytical distinction, nevertheless, takes into account recent findings on psychological and social efficacy of rituals, allows for a study of an actual performance and its relative structural isomorphism to other Hindu rituals independently of their social function, and at the same time accommodates diversity of exegetical interpretations expressed under different historical, political or individual circumstances.

The distinction also permits to advance the direction of research inspired by theorising of Alfred Gell (1998) and subsequent developments of his theory, e.g., by Pinney and Thomas (2001) and Layton (2003). In *Art and Agency* Alfred Gell proposed an anthropological theory of art which offered an explanatory framework for social agency of inanimate objects, namely works of art. Although his main focus is on art objects, a great deal of his argument is based on examples of the treatment of ritual objects, on many occasions from South Asia. The images of deities in this region are, more often than not, at the same time acknowledged to be art works, which further validates the application of this theory. While Gell builds on some cognitivist postulates, his explanation is entirely sociological.

His crucial argument is about the social efficacy of what he is unhesitant to call idols. The idols, like artworks, are socially salient because they are themselves social agents. Unlike some sociologists of science (e.g., Latour 1993) who take the agency of inanimate objects and mechanical devices at par with human one, Gell distinguishes between primary agency, limited to people, and secondary agency that under certain circumstances can be possessed by artefacts. Idols and works of art are such secondary agents par excellence since they embody primary agency most

powerfully. In order to produce such secondary agents their makers and sponsors employ various " technologies of enchantment" and " strategies of animation" . Successful production and maintenance of secondary agents combine exquisite skills and imagination (e.g., that of best artists and artisans) with considerable investment of capital (e.g., funding of a temple by a local landlord) and regular, patterned collective participation (e.g., a big temple complex built around the central shrine with a central idol employing dozens of keepers and attracting daily scores of pilgrims).

3. Scriptural origins of Durgā worship

The concept of a goddess, which is perceived as mother to the community of worshippers, collectively as well as individually, probably dates back to prehistoric fertility cults. The existence of mother goddess cults has been explained either as invoking fertility, both human and vegetable, or psychoanalytically as a collective projection of the mother imago (for the latter C.f. Wulff 1995; Berkson 1995). The present tradition of goddess worship, however, is framed by the doctrines of Śaktism. Śaktism is, besides *Vaiṣṇavism* (worship of the lord Viṣṇu, his incarnations and related deities)[7] and *Śaivism* (worship of the god Śiva and deities related to him),[8] one of the three main branches of what is generally called Hinduism.[9] It is assumed that the original prehistoric or proto-Indian cult of mother goddess survived in the form of innumerable village goddesses who are worshipped throughout India and later merged or at least interacted on ideological level with the dominant religion of the Aryan invaders, which too in spite of being focused on male gods provided some basis for worship of female deities. The beginnings of Śaktism

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[7] Often described as "the sustainer" of universe, Viṣṇu is one of the trinity (*trimūrti*) of pan-Indian deities along with Śiva and Brahma and is the supreme deity of the *Vaiṣṇava* tradition. In the *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava* tradition of Bengal Viṣṇu is equated with Nārāyaṇa who was originally a separate deity. As Nārāyaṇa, Viṣṇu is present virtually in every home altar and every temple in Bengal in the form of an ammonite stone (*śālagrāma-śīlā*) and is worshiped in the course of daily rites as well as annual festivals of various deities. Iconographical representation of Viṣṇu is that of a light blue-complexioned and four-armed male figure holding a discus (*cakra*), a conch-shell (*śaṅkha*), a lotus (*padma*) and a mace (*gadā*). His vehicle is the mythical bird Garuda.

[8] Often described as "the destroyer" of universe, Śiva is the supreme deity of the *Śaiva* tradition. He combines the character of a householder and an ascetic and figures as a consort of many goddesses worshipped within the *Śākta* tradition like Durgā and Kālī. Śiva is often referred to as Mahādeva, the great god. His iconographical attributes include the third eye on his forehead, crescent moon in his matted hair, a trident, a drum, a tiger skin which serves him as a seat or as a cloth, and snakes. The most popular representation of Śiva is his "symbol" (*liṅgam*), which is often understood as a phallus within a vulva though this interpretation is disputed by some. His vehicle is the bull Nandī.

[9] For a comprehensive and insightful overview of Hinduism see Flood (1998). Recent critique of the term Hinduism is in Stietencron (2005: 227-248).

can be traced in terms of scriptural and archaeological evidence approximately to the first half of the first millennium AD.[10]

According to *Śaktism*, the source of the whole creation is an omnipresent and omnipotent energy or *śakti*, which is of female gender. Since it is difficult to picture oneself this vast and formless power it is represented to believers in the form of numerous goddesses. Each of them has a character of her own, which is considered to be one aspect or one quality of the all encompassing transcendental notion of *śakti*. So there are many goddesses who are different in iconographic representations and in actual worship but at the same time there is a theology postulating their ultimate oneness.

The gender aspect is also of crucial importance. The male principle would be inactive, unable of action, had it not been empowered by *śakti*. The particular goddesses are often imagined as wives of male gods and their *śaktis* though *śakti* may also exist independently of the male principle since goddesses also have their *śaktis*. The dialectics of ultimate oneness beyond the phenomenal world combined with gendered perception of reality thus create a possibility for a female figure or even a particular woman to signify some kind of unity at an abstract level. This aspect has been also explored by authors who deliberate the relation of the goddess worship to the position of the women in society, e.g., Hiltebeitel and Erndl (2000) and Sharma (2007).

The first mythological scripture that outlines the tenets of goddess worship is the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*[11] which dates back to the first half of the first millennium AD. Out of this vast text, chapters eighty-one to ninety-three are of crucial importance. They form what is called *Devī-Māhātmya*, or "Greatness of the Goddess".[12] *Devī-Māhātmya* is also known as *Śrī Durgāsaptaśatī* (Seven hundred verses on Durgā) or *Caṇḍīpātha* (Recital on Caṇḍī).

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[10] Bhattacharyya (1996) gives a detailed history of *śakti worship in India*.

[11] The *purāṇas* constitute a body of mythological texts dealing mainly with the creation, destruction and recreation of the universe, with the genealogies of royal dynasties, the genealogies of sages and gods, and with methods of their worship. There are eighteen main *purāṇas* (including the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*) and a number of minor purāṇas, so called *upapurāṇas*. The first *purāṇas* were composed before 500 AD. Historically, they document inclusion of then popular religion into the mainstream brahmanical Hinduism. For a survey of this genre of Sanskrit literature see Winternitz (2003, Vol. I.:495-558).

[12] For a lucid analysis of this seminal text see Coburn (1984).

According to Winternitz (2003, Vol. I.:540), *Devī -Mā hā tmya* is a self-contained whole and a later interpolation to the *Mā rkaṇ ḍ eyapurā ṇ a* and could have existed before the 7th century AD. It represents the oldest systematic treatise on goddess worship in the Indian tradition (cf. Coburn 2002, 53). During Durgā pū jā , *Devī -Mā hā tmya* is recited and partly symbolically re-enacted. It recounts a story of the king Suratha who lost his kingdom by the treachery of his ministers and the trader Samā dhi whom his own wife and children forced to part with his riches and expelled him out of their home. Each wanders aimlessly with grief-stricken heart till they happen to meet in the forest hermitage of the sage Medhas. They ask him to explain the reason behind their suffering. Suratha still worries about his subjects, about the justice of the administration and cannot stop himself longing for his favourite elephant. Samā dhi, despite being robbed of everything, does not regret what he lost but strangely, he cannot overcome the attachment to those who betrayed him.

Sage Medhas induces them to meditate and they all have visions of female deities which Medhas comments upon. He introduces them into the principles of *ś akti*. The sage explains that our phenomenal world, that is the qualitatively differentiated reality, is but a great illusion (*mahā mā ya*) the veil which the Great Goddess has thrown onto us. Birth and death, loyalty and betrayal, wealth and poverty, all these twists of fate are just a game of the *mahā mā ya*, which obscures the oneness of the ultimate reality. The right knowledge and understanding of this ultimate reality can be achieved by propitiating and worshipping the Great Goddess.

Suratha and Samā dhi have visions of three central female figures and learn about their deeds. The original energy (*ā di-ś akti*) appears in the form of Mahā kā lī , a ten-faced goddess whom Brahma extolled in order to destroy the demons Madhu and Kaitabha, Mahā lakṣ mī , a goddess of eighteen hands who is the slayer of the demon Mahiṣ ā sura and hence the most important for current ritual practice as I will show later, and Mahā sarasvatī , an eight-handed goddess who vanquished Sumbha and other demons. Each form is related to a particular mythological narrative where the deeds of each form are described. The three forms differ in appearance and represent three basic qualities of reality postulated by earlier Hindu philosophy: darkness or inertia (*tamas*), passion (*rajas*), and purity (*sattva*) respectively. The myth contains further complexities and more deities but

the three forms constitute the whole of the goddess in as much the three qualities and their proportion determine all reality. The threefold representation will be significant for her latter modern interpretations as well.

The *Devī-Māhātmya* describes in detail exploits of the goddess, in particular her battle with the buffalo demon Mahiṣāsura. Mahiṣāsura was the king of demons. In order to gain special powers he practiced severe austerities. It is within the logic of Hindu mythology that a person (human, godly or demoniac) who successfully performs austerities has to be granted his wishes by the gods. Mahiṣāsura was thus granted a divine boon that he would be invincible by a man or a male god. Consequently, Mahiṣāsura managed to drive gods out of the heaven.

Desperate, the gods got together and, united in their anger, produced a female figure, the warrior embodiment of *śakti*, from a radiant glow emanating from their foreheads. Each gave her a replica of his weapon and she set into fierce battle with the demon. The fighting goes through many sequences when the goddess is assisted by female helpers who emerge from her to slain Mahiṣāsura's generals and collapse into her again, until she finally defeats the demon. She is known in this last episode as Mahiṣāsuramardinī, the slayer of the buffalo demon. The demon is coming out from the body of a beheaded buffalo and in terminal agony is pierced by her trident.

The important implicit message of this myth is that at one level, Devī has a form which encompasses of all other goddess forms whom she produces for specific goals. Her origin in the glow emanating from the male gods and her ability to issue other individual goddesses of different qualities and absorb them again makes her a dividual personality par-excellence with the most encompassing imaginable personhood. One of the auxiliary goddesses who help to defeat Mahiṣāsura is Kālī, nowadays one of the most popular goddesses of Bengal.

In order to make the reader feel the flavour of this seminal scripture of goddess worship I will recount it once more, this time not as a narrative, but rather as sequences or sketches of imagery translated with original Sanskrit expressions left in brackets. As the primary text I used a Bengali edition of *Devī-Māhātmya* (*Śrī Śrī Caṇḍī*) by Jagadīśvarānanda (1999), which contains the original Sanskrit and Bengali translation with notes and commentaries. This edition is

popular in Bengal as a sort of " Bible" of the Goddess worship and notes and commentaries to the Sanskrit text intend to bring it closer to readers of the cultural area I had focused on in previous surveys.

The first canto of *Devī -Mā hā tmya* recounts the annihilation of the demons Madhu and Kaitabha who were born out of the dirt that slipped off *Viṣ ṇ u*'s ear when he was submerged in deep slumber. Brahma who was seated in the lotus coming from *Viṣ ṇ u*'s navel invoked the Goddess and she awoke so that he could destroy the demons.

The second canto of *Devī -Mā hā tmya* starts with the meditation on Mahā lakṣ mī who is here also addressed as a slayer of the buffalo (*sairibhamardinī*) with obvious reference to the role of the Goddess in the next canto. Mahā lakṣ mī is said to hold a lotus (*padma*) in one of her eighteen hands and to be seated upon a lotus (*sarojā sthitā*). Besides the *padma*, she holds a rosary of *rudrā kṣ a* beads, an axe (*paraś u*), a mace (*gadā*), an arrow (*iṣ u*), a thunderbolt (*kuliś a*), a bow (*dhanu*), a pot (*kuṇ ḍ ikā*), a club (*daṇ ḍ a*), a lance (*ś akti*), a sword (*asi*), a (leather) shield (*carma*), a conch (*jalaja*), a bell (*ghaṇ ṭ ā*), a wine cup (*surā bhā jana*), a trident or a pike (*ś ū la*), a noose (*pā ś a*) and the discus of *Viṣ ṇ u* (*sudarś ana*). She is of complexion shining like a coral (*pravā laprabhā*).

After this meditation, the story of the demon Mahiṣ ā sura unfolds up to the end of the third canto. The evil Mahiṣ ā sura is eventually slain. The gods in heavens, pleased with the Goddess´ victorious fight with the armies of Mahiṣ ā sura, shower flowers over her army. In the fourth canto, gods extol the Goddess under many names, pointing out her qualities and asking her for protection. In one of the verses she is termed supportress of the universe (*jagatā ṃ dhā trī*)[13] and the gods worship her with flowers of the kind growing in *Indra*'s heaven *Nandana* (*kusumairnandanodbhavaiḥ*) and with perfumes and unguents (*gandhā nulepanaiḥ*).[14] Jagadī ś varā nanda´s Bengali translation (1999: 171-

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[13] Dhā trī is a feminine of Dhā tṛ , the creator. Coburn (2002: 205-206) traces the origin of the epithet Jagaddhā trī to *Maitrā yanī ya* recension of the *Yajur Veda* (4.4.2) where the waters (*ā paḥ*) become supportresses (*dhā trī ḥ*) of the *kṣ atriya* to whom they had granted power. Durgā ´s form as Jagaddhā trī has gained independent existence in ritual practice of Bengal. Her festival follows that of Durgā by several weeks.

[14] *Devī -Mā hā tmya* 4.29

172) exemplifies these heavenly blossoms as *pā rijā t* [15] and other godly flowers (*pā rijā tā di dibya puṣ pa*). The perfumes are said to be saffron and other godly fragrances (*kuṅ kumā di dibya sugandha*). These are again specified in a footnote as five great fragrances, namely saffron (*kuṅ kuma*),[16] a kind of wood suitable to burn as incense (*aguru*)[17], musk (*kasturī*),[18] sandalwood (*candana*),[19] and camphor (*karpū ra*).[20]

The fifth canto of *Devī -Mā hā tmya* begins with the meditation on Mahā sarasvatī whose eight hands are said to be lotus-like (*hastā bjā*). In the narrative of the demons Ś umbha-Niś umbha, their generals Caṇ ḍ a and Muṇ ḍ a spot a beautiful form of Pā rvatī that sprung from her bodily sheath (*koś a*) and who is hence named Kauś ikī . The generals persuade Ś umbha to make her marry him and add this gorgeous lady into his collection of gems already taken away from the gods. The treasures enumerated by the generals include, besides other items, the never-fading tree (*pā rijā tataru*) stolen from Indra,[21] the great lotus (*mahā padma*), which is one of the nine gems that originally belonged to the lord of wealth Kuvera, and a garland named *kiñjalkinī* made of unfading lotuses (*amlā napaṅ kajā ṃ mā lā ṃ*) taken from the possession of the ocean (*abdhi*).[22] The demons send their messenger and after him their generals only to be eventually annihilated themselves by the Goddess. The fierce fight between the godly and the demon armies extends up to the end of the tenth canto.

The greater part of the eleventh canto comprises of the hymn *Nā rā yaṇ ī - stuti* by which the gods praise the Goddess for slaying Ś umbha and Niś umbha. After being praised by the gods, the Goddess offers them a boon. They ask for continuous protection by her. The Goddess then promises to return on earth when new Ś umbha and Niś umbha are born. She foretells that while devouring the demons her teeth will become as red as the flower of pomegranate (*raktā dantā*

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[15] *Pā rijā t* or amaranth is a mythological never fading tree, one of the five holy trees produced at the churning of the ocean. It is associated with Indra.

[16] *Crocus sativus* L. (*Iridaceae*).

[17] *Aquilaria agallocha* Roxb. (*Thymelaeaceae*).

[18] A fragrance produced by musk-deer (*Moschus moschiferus*).

[19] White sandal, *Santalum album* L. (*Santalaceae*), or red sandal, *Pterocarpus santalinus* L.f., (*Fabaceae*).

[20] *Cinnamomum camphora* (L.) Nees ex. Eberm. (*Lauraceae*).

[21] *Devī -Mā hā tmya* 5.94.2

[22] *Ibid.* 5.96

bhaviṣyanti dāḍimī kusumopamāḥ),[23] therefore she will be extolled by gods and men as the red/blood-toothed one (Raktadantikā).[24] Raktadantikā is invoked as presiding over a pomegranate tree (*dāḍimyadhiṣṭhātrī raktadantikā*) during the *navapattrikā pūjā* , the nine-plant form of Durgā , sequence of Durgā pūjā .

In the twelfth canto the Goddess reveals to her devotees the merits of reciting or listening *Devī -Māhātmya* as deliverance from all troubles and blessing with wealth, rice and offspring (*dhanadhānyasutānvita*).[25] Rice is here rather a metaphor for grains or food and prosperity in general. Similar association is enacted during the *navapattrikā pūjā* sequence of Durgā pūjā when the goddess of wealth and prosperity Lakṣmī is invoked as the presiding deity of paddy[26] (*dhānyādhiṣṭhātrī mahālakṣmī*).

The Goddess also induces her devotees to worship her annually by the finest animal sacrifices, flowers, valuable offerings and incense (*paśupuṣpārghyadhūpaiś ca*),[27] besides perfumes, lights, feeding Brahmins, oblations, fire offerings, sprinkling of consecrated water,[28] and other gifts. In the last verse of this canto it is again by flowers, incense and perfumes (*puṣpairdhūpagandhādibhiḥ*)[29] that boons of the goddess may be obtained. The king Suratha and the trader Samādhi eventually follow these injunctions and worship a clay image of the Goddess with flowers, incense, fire, and food offerings (*puṣpadhūpāgnitarpaṇaiḥ*)[30] and are granted their wishes. Suratha wants his kingdom back and Samādhi asks for the knowledge of overcoming the attachment. Durgā is thus able to provide her devotees both with material and spiritual gains.

The first mention of Durgā in Sanskrit literature comes from the *Taittirīya āraṇyaka* as Durgā or Durgi. She is here Katyāyanī , the daughter of the sage

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[23] *Ibid.*11.44.2

[24] *Ibid.* 11.45.2

[25] *Ibid.* 12.13.1

[26] *Oryza sativa* L. (*Poaceae*).

[27] *Devī -Māhātmya* 12.20.2

[28] The term *prokṣanīya* means water for consecrating. Jagadīśvarānanda, however, interprets it in his Bengali translation as five nectars (*pañcāmṛta*), namely curd, milk, clarified butter, sugar and honey, and other articles for ritual bathing (*abhiṣekadravya*) of a deity (1999: 335).

[29] *Devī -Māhātmya* 12.41.1

[30] *Ibid.* 13.11.1

Katyā yana but there is no indication here of her connection with Ś iva. She is associated with fire, Sun and the heat produced while practicing austerities (*tapas*). In the *Virā ṭ aparva* of *Mahā bhā rata* (6.20-22) and in the *Prakṛ tikhaṇ ḍ a* of *Brahmavaivartapurā ṇ a* (64.52) she is hailed as a remover of adversities (*Durgā ti*). The same promise of Durgā as Durgā tinā ś inī is spelled several times in the *Devī -Mā hā tmya* (e.g., 12.5-6, 12.26-29).[31]

Another etymological explanation is Durgā as the slayer of the demon Durga or Durgā sur. It can be found for example in the *Kā ś ī khaṇ ḍ a* of the *Skandapurā ṇ a* (72.71-72). In the *Devī -Mā hā tmya* (11.46-50) the Goddess is promised to descend onto the earth to support all living beings in times of drought by vegetables or edible plants (*ś ā kaiḥ*) grown from her own body (*ā tmadehasamudbhavaiḥ*) in the form of Ś ā kambharī . By the means of singing lauds, meditating, praying, worshiping and praising Ś ā kambharī one can quickly attain an infinite plenitude of foodstuffs and immortality. Also according to the *Lakṣ mī tantra*, as Jagadī ś varā nanda notes, the worshipper of Ś ā kambharī will be endowed with unlimited food, drinks and glory in his next life.[32] In this form the goddess will also slay the demon Durgā . Interestingly, the iconography of Mahiṣ ā suramardinī and Ś ā kambharī as the slayer of Durgā sur is very different.

In *Mū rtirahasya* section of the *Ś rī Ś rī Caṇ ḍ ī* ,[33] Ś ā kambharī is described as blue-complexioned (*nī lavarṇ ā*), having eyes like blue lotuses (*nī lotpalavilocanā*), seated upon a lotus (*kamalā layā*) and besides a bow and arrows she holds another lotus (*kamala*) in her hand. She also holds flowers (*puṣ pa*), leaves (*pallava*), roots (*mū la*) and heaps of various vegetables and fruits teasing the palate (*phalā dhya ś akasañcaya kā myā nantarasairyukta*) which keep off hunger, thirst, decrepitude and death. Similar description of Ś ā kambharī can be also found in the *Devī bhā gavatapurā ṇ a* (28.34-36). The *Skandapurā ṇ a* says that Durgā sura was killed by the goddess Vindhyavā sinī (the one who dwells in the Vindhya Mountains) who kept on creating other warrior goddesses during their battle and one of them was Ś ā kambharī . According to

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[31] C.f., Bhaṭ ṭ ā cā ryya (1997, vol. 3:162-264).

[32] *Op. cit.*, p. 322.

[33] *Mū rtirahasya* 12.-17. In: Jagadī ś varā nanda (1999, 387-8)

Bhaṭṭācāryya (1997, vol. 3: 194), however, authors of the *purāṇas* never fail to emphasise oneness of the slayer of Mahiṣāsura and the slayer of Durgāsura.

The method of worship is further elaborated in later *upapurāṇas*, namely *Kālikāpurāṇa*, *Devīpurāṇa*, and *Brhannandikeshvarapurāṇa*. The three form, along with still later digests and compilations, the basis for manuals (*pūjā paddhati*) used by ritualists during actual worship. The *Kālikāpurāṇa* contains also a story about Rāma worshipping Durgā in order to vanquish Rāvaṇa and the *Devīpurāṇa* briefly mentions his worship (Prajñānānanda 1990, 242). They specify it was an untimely invocation (*akāl bodhan*), since desperate Rāma worshipped the goddess on Brahma's advice in autumn and not during the prescribed spring season. This story has been adopted into the Bengali rendition of *Rāmāyaṇa* by a medieval poet Krittibas Ojha. The Bengali version of *Rāmāyaṇa* has been one of the most popular pieces of literature among Bengalis for more than five hundred years.

In the original *Rāmāyaṇa* by Valmiki it is the Sun god Surya, not Durgā, whose worship leads to the killing of Rāvaṇa. The demon king of Lanka is described as a goddess worshipper in both versions. In the latter, however, Durgā is so powerful a protectress that the godly hero is unable to defeat his demon rival until he propitiates her himself and secures her help in vanquishing Rāvaṇa. It seems to reflect the historical shift in mainstream Hinduism from Aryan Vedic ritual to the originally non-Aryan idol worship.

The origin of Krittibas's *Rāmāyaṇ* is not entirely clear. Krittibas is supposed to be the first translator of *Rāmāyaṇa* into Bengali. Different authors place the date of his birth it between the end of the 14th and the middle of the 15th centuries (Zbavitel 1976, 141; Sen 1992, 63—64). The time of composition of this great work was consequently some time in the 15th century, most probably in its first half. Available manuscripts are considerably later versions of the original, which was subject to natural changes in the process of retelling by many copyists and singers. Yet Krittibas himself had turned the Sanskrit heroic epic into a piece of devotional poetry full of emotionality. Zbavitel points out that Krittibas's main goal was " to create a hymn of praise upon the Rāma's incarnation of Viṣṇu" (Zbavitel 1976, 142). Its closeness in style and form to folk poetry, as well as references to the Bengali cultural milieu, are also a noteworthy modification of the Sanskrit

original. The appeal to the masses, as well as the resonance of the *bhakti* attitude corresponding with the then flourishing *Viṣ ṇ uism*, resulted in the immense popularity of this work.

The authenticity of Krittibas' s version was also accepted by the influential sage Smā rta Raghunandan, author of the *Ś rī Durgā rcan paddhati*, who might have given major impetus for the institutionalisation of the autumnal worship of Durgā (cf. Prajnananda 1990, 246). With a bit of license we may say that the non-Aryan goddess who is worshiped by the demon Rā vaṇ a in Valmiki' s *Rā mā yaṇ a* becomes worth propitiating by the Aryan god Rā ma in later *purā ṇ as*. This episode enters the Bengali *Rā mā yaṇ* through Krittibas' s interpolation and, with the intervention of Smā rta Raghunandan, her worship gradually starts turning into a major regional festival.

The description of Durgā pū jā is part of the sixth canto of Krittibas' s *Rā mā yaṇ* (*Laṅ kā kā ṇ da*), in which Rā ma' s excursion to Lanka and his final victory over Rā vaṇ a is narrated.[34] It starts with the desperation of Rā ma and his retinue, followed by Brahma' s revelation that untimely invocation of the goddess is the only means of defeating Rā vaṇ a and by Brahma' s instruction about the time and means of doing so. Rā ma thus starts reciting the *Devī -Mā hā tmya*, invokes the goddess in a branch of the wood-apple tree[35] on the eve of the sixth day[36] and worships her in the form of nine plants (*navapattrikā*, B. *nabapatrikā*) on the seventh. The description of Rā ma' s *pū jā* on the ninth day (*navamī*) includes a rather long list of forest flowers that he arranged for the worship.

The list of flowers for *pū jā* is followed by an episode of offering one hundred and eight blue lotuses (*nī l padma*).[37] Even after being offered all the blooms of the forest, Durgā does not seem to make her appearance. Hanumā n suggests to Rā ma that she would not be satisfied unless he offers her one hundred and eight

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[34] The two popular editions of Krittibas' s *Rā mā yaṇ* that were at my disposal — Shī l (ed.) 1954; Majumdā r (ed.) 2003 — differed only in the division of the cantos into chapters, names of the chapters and sometimes in spelling but the original text remained the same.

[35] *Aegle marmelos* Correa (*Rutaceae*).

[36] The sixth day of the bright half of the month *Ā ś vin*. Durgā pū jā lasts from the sixth to the tenth day of the bright half of this month.

[37] *Nymphea stellata* Willd. (*Nympheaceae*).

blue lotuses. Rā ma sends Hanumā n to the forest to arrange for the precious flowers and continues to invoke different incarnations of Durgā . He is about to finish his worship of praise when Hanumā n returns with the hundred and eight *nī l padma*s. Rā ma is offering them one by one but at the end he is terrified to find the last lotus missing. After a prolonged lamentation over his fate and mercilessness of the goddess he decides to take out one of his blue eyes and place it in front of Durgā ' s clay idol instead of the missing *padma*. When he is just about to prove his devotion by committing this act of self-immolation, the goddess appears in front of him. Indeed, it was she who removed the last lotus to test him. Now being fully satisfied *Durgā* grants him the victory over Rā vaṇ a and Rā ma sets out to win the last battle.

Pū jā , or the worship of idols (painted, engraved in stone and wood, cast in metal or modelled of clay) of Hindu deities was first enjoined in the corpus of puranic literature. The original Aryan sacrifice required no visual representation of the deity worshipped. The most common was the fire sacrifice (*yajña*) when oblations were made into the fire and were believed to reach the heaven with the smoke. Both Hindus and professional students of Hinduism generally accept the opinion that *pū jā* structurally follows the pattern of respectful attendance to an honourable guest.[38] The sequence of actions performed either in deed or in imagination resembles the service to a living person as the deity is bathed, offered fresh cloth, perfumes, food and other pleasing items and is attended to in various ways. Durgā is imagined as a daughter of the householder who has the *pū jā* performed on his behalf. She is believed to reside on the mountain *Kailā sa*, the abode of her husband Ś iva. During the festival she comes back to the house of her father along with her children, which reflects actual practice among Bengalis. She is thus welcomed after a long journey and attended not just as a divine guest but also as a loved family member.

Durgā pū jā is the most important religious festival of Bengali Hindus. Curiously enough, unlike other annual Bengali festivals celebrating goddesses (e.g., Lakṣ mī pū jā , Kā lī pū jā , Sarasvatī pū jā etc.), Durgā pū jā takes place twice a year. The original (B. *ā sal*) one is scheduled for the bright half of the month

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[38] For general structure of *pū jā* see heading *Pū jā* in Eliade' s *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (1987).

Caitra (mid-March to mid April of our calendar) and its celebration is rather modest in numbers of individual performances as well as in its impact on social life.

The real thing for Bengalis is the spectacular autumn festival, held in the bright half of the month *Āśvin* (mid-September to mid-October of our calendar), which is popularly labelled as " imitated" (B. *nakal*) Durgā pūjā, or " untimely invocation" (B. *akāl bodhan*). A mythological explanation can be found in the Bengali rendering of *Rāmāyaṇa* by Krittibas as I have explained earlier. Besides the *āsal - nakal* distinction, the difference between the two Durgā pūjās is linguistically expressed in terms of season, the former being termed *Vāsantī pūjā*, the spring worship, and the latter *Śāradīyā (mahā) pūjā*, the (great) autumnal worship. Equivalent appellatives of Durgā are Vāsantī devī and Śāradā.

Durgā pūjā may be held for maximum of sixteen days starting on the ninth lunar day (*tithi*) of the dark half of the lunar month of *Bhādra* which precedes *Āśvin*, the month of *pūjā*. This ninth lunar day of the dark half of *Bhādra* is known as (*kṛṣṇanavamī*). Another standard length spans from the first to the tenth lunar day of the bright half of the month of the *pūjā*. This tradition is reflected in another term for the festival – *navarātra* (festival of nine nights). Nowadays a shortened and more economical version comprising five days of worship from sixth to tenth (*ṣaṣṭhī, saptamī, aṣṭamī, navamī, daśamī*) is mostly in vogue.[39] In the Medinipur district of West Bengal I witnessed even a two-day long spring Durgā pūjā. All the performances took place in a condensed form on *navamī*. Similar method (*paddhati*) of worship is observed on Jagaddhātrī pūjā [40] in the city of Kṛṣṇanagar in the Nadia district. Whatever the length of worship, the tenth day (*daśamī*) is reserved for the concluding ceremonial immersion (*visarjana*, B. *bisarjan*) of the idols.

The most common depiction of Mahiṣāsuramardinī Durgā in iconography portrays her as a female figure with five pairs of arms, holding a weapon in each hand. She has three eyes, the third one in the middle of her forehead signifying

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[39] For Bengali ritual year and time divisions within the calendar see (Östör 1978; Nicholas 2003: 13-27).

[40] Jagaddhātrī is a form of Durgā, her annual *pūjā* takes place several weeks after Durgā pūjā.

spiritual insight. Her figure rises above that of the buffalo demon as she slays him in the last moment of the battle. There are representations of the demon in fully human form where his animal connection is only referred to by a buffalo head lying near his feet, as well as those which portray him in the final exit motion of the upper part of his human form from the neck of the full buffalo body with chopped off head.[41] In Bengali tradition, since medieval times Mahiṣāsuramardinī Durgā is accompanied with her children, Gaṇeśa, Kārttikeya, Sarasvatī, and Lakṣmī. Lakṣmī stands by her right side and Sarasvatī by her left. Usual position of Gaṇeśa is by the right hand of Lakṣmī while Kārttikeya stands by the left hand of Sarasvatī. The East Bengal tradition, however, prescribes reverse position of the two gods. The two goddesses are not considered to be children of Durgā and Śiva in the pan-Indian tradition. The Bengali representation of Mahiṣāsuramardinī and her children is a recurrent theme of all genres of visual arts in Bengal, from clay-modelling to terracotta temple plaques, to wood carving, to folk painting, to 19th century prints to modern reinterpretations in contemporary painting and cinema.

The clay idol is not the only anthropomorphic form Durgā is invoked in during the festival. On *aṣṭamī* so called *kumārī pūjā* is held. A virgin girl who has not yet had her first period (usually from 5 to 9 years old) is worshipped as Durgā. This spectacular part of the *pūjā* takes place very rarely otherwise than symbolically. One of the few places where it can be seen in all splendour is the Ramakrishna Mission Headquarters in Belur Māṭh, north of Calcutta. Though association of the goddess with a virgin is more known from Nepal, even in the case of Durgā pūjā in Bengal we can see that borders between the human and the divine personhood are transgressible.

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[41] For an overview of Mahiṣāsuramardinī iconography see Nagar (1988); For the development of Mahiṣāsuramardinī iconography in relation to myth see v Stietencron (2005: 115-172).

4. Smoking the demon out:

Pathways and intersections of two contemporary rituals

The first Durgā pūjā I witnessed in Calcutta in 2001 took place just a month or so after the 9/11 attacks in New York. The images of war and multiple diplomatic negotiations, public activism and protest, warnings of future threats, as well as daily reports of how the international events influenced the life of the city became an intimate part of my life. Not only mine. The atmosphere of Calcutta was highly politicised. Various rallies were taking place, local politicians were taking sides. In spite of all cultural barriers, this was a topic I could talk about with virtually anyone.

I soon realised I could not escape global events through the examination of " my" centuries-old Hindu rituals. I could not ignore political events if I wanted to understand what was going on in front of my eyes since the very subject of my fieldwork displayed reminiscences of current political affairs. Yet the impact of stories transmitted by the media was neither unpredictable nor surprising since there were precedents from previous years. In fact, the festivals, as held in their present form, are composed of elements originating in different historical periods. To account for the composite nature and present variability of individual festival performances I find useful the concepts „ contemporary worlds" and " extended ritual technique," which Marc Augé develops (1994). In this paper I argue that the

„ war on terror" should be understood as a ritual of the world of international politics, and that this viewpoint enables us to think about how globalised worlds intersect with more localised ones.

Marc Augé analyses the new condition of the world, often caused by a process generally - and simplistically - called " globalisation" (or " mondialisation" in French). He assumes that globalisation is the result of the rapid development of communication technologies as the globe becomes a single frame of reference for all its inhabitants - as if temporal and spatial distances have lost their limiting power in the more immediate transfer of cultural symbols.

Augé explores his " anthropology of contemporary worlds" in order to focus on this new condition. The term „ contemporary worlds" refers not only to „ traditional" local cultures and subcultures of a modern megalopolis but to much less localised „ worlds" like the world of football, the world of fashion or the world of finance. The proposed object of anthropological research is the particular ways in which these worlds become contemporary to each other. According to Augé, anthropologists should be asking questions about how identities are constituted when spatial and temporal distances are, thanks to recent communication technologies, much less limiting then ever before.

Augé holds that anthropology as a science is made possible by the threefold experience of plurality, otherness and identity. It has always been concerned with the plurality of othernesses as opposed to the cultural identity of the observing researcher. At the same time, the otherness of the others was limited and transcended by a general notion of humanity. Ultimately, the identity of the researcher became relativised (in this respect Augé highlights the role of Marxism and psychoanalysis) and plurality was found at its core. Consequently, the very process of constituting identities and othernesses, that is the process of relating oneself symbolically to the other, became one of the central objects of anthropological study.

Identity, in Augé´s sense, is the transcendence of certain established and acknowledged differences which constitute otherness. To take some examples, identity-making processes can be seen working when differences in sex, age or economic status are transcended by reference to nation, or caste differences by

reference to symbols of Hindu religious community. Conversely, ethnic, national or religious differences may be transcended when a particular gender identity is invoked.

Identity is inseparable from the plurality of othernesses. Thus, if we are to answer the question of how worlds become contemporary, symbolic relations constituted through identity making should be the first object of enquiry. Drawing on Augé,[42] I argue that the practices by which such relations are constituted and enacted are ritual practices. Ritual processes, therefore, should themselves be understood as a means of identity making.

Augé expands the concept of ritual beyond a familiar definition like formal, repeated behaviour. He defines ritual as the implementation of symbolic techniques of identity formation, mediated by certain otherness(es). The result of the technique is the relative (because permanently challenged) stability of symbolically-constituted social relations. The technique aims at interpreting and taking control of an event representing otherness (illness, death, accident). In other words, by establishing bonds of identity (as when a new-born child is made a member of a Christian community by baptism, or a member of secular society by obtaining the birth certificate), otherness is relativised.

Augé distinguishes between what he terms " limited" and " extended" ritual technique. If an identity is formed during the course of a particular, well-defined rite with the result of (re)integration (e.g., baptism), it is a „ limited ritual technique" . „ Extended ritual technique" is more characteristic of our present. It is performed within a wider setting, which is, intentionally or unwittingly, changed at the same time. Extended ritual technique does not bring about results directly, as in the case of a wedding rite, for example, but indirectly, through images transmitted through the media and advertisements. Augé calls this process the „ theatralisation" of the world. The extended technique is not limited to a small group participating in a rite at a certain moment and in a particular place, but affects large numbers of individuals who may be located at a distance from each other but listen to the same radio or TV channel, read the same papers, or browse the same websites.

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[42] Particularly chapter IV.

An example of extended ritual technique may be, Augé argues, certain political moves, such as a declaration or important speech given with certain aims and expectations, which sets into motion the play of temporary identities. Reinforcing some and weakening others, the ritual changes the balance of political (social) forces or at least reconfigures them. When analysing the extended ritual technique we must take into account not only the time and place of the happening itself, but also the communication networks that transmit it world-wide, the surveys of public opinion which themselves influence public opinion, as well as the political and social forces likely to respond.

There is no doubt that Durgā pū jā is a ritual in the classic sense. The timing of all component rites is meticulously maintained through the precise measurement of lunar days, though it may vary according to different traditions. Worship must be held in a temple consecrated to Durgā or, more commonly, inside temporary temples (pandals) built in the streets just for the festival. Even in the simplest open-air street pū jā s, the sacred space is clearly marked by a mat which passers-by must not step on unless they take off their shoes and hail the idol of the goddess. The space where Durgā is believed to reside temporarily is further marked by four twigs with a red thread roped around them.

During the heydays of Hindu kingdoms, subjects of different castes participated in grandiose celebrations sponsored by the ruler. His royal might was symbolically associated with that of Durgā and the participation of diverse sections of Hindu society ritually emphasised the unity of the community divided by caste barriers. If Durgā represents the most encompassing form of *ś akti*, the one which is perhaps the closest approximation to the idea of universal female energy as opposed to multiple female deities created for specific purposes, the collective worship of Durgā transcends symbolically the differentiation within the society.

Despite the religious significance of Durgā ' s defeat over Mahiṣ ā sura, the Durgā pū jā festival and its usefulness to political and economic leaders has not remained unchanged over time. It was introduced to Bengal by local chief Kamsanarayana around the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries (c.f. Banerji 1992:188). During the heydays of Hindu kingdoms, subjects of different castes participated in grandiose celebrations sponsored by the ruler. His royal might was

symbolically associated with that of Durgā and the participation of diverse sections of Hindu society ritually emphasised the unity of the community divided by caste barriers. If Durgā represents the most encompassing form of *śakti*, the one which is perhaps the closest approximation to the idea of universal female energy as opposed to multiple female deities created for specific purposes, the collective worship of Durgā transcends symbolically the differentiation within the society.

The *pūjās* organised and financed by ancient kings thus reflected and sanctified the social structure drawn along caste and feudal economic divides. As a direct result of the British colonial presence in Bengal, a social stratum of nouveaux-riches Indian merchants, who collaborated with the East India Company, emerged. In 1757, the British won control over Bengal after their victorious battle against the Muslim Nawab of Murshidabad at Plassey. One of their chief Hindu allies, Raja Naba Krishna Deb, organised a pompous celebration of Durgā pūjā for the British officials and Hindu aristocracy of Calcutta. He associated the victory of Lord Robert Clive (later governor of India) over the Nawab with the victory of Durgā over the buffalo demon. Other rich Bengali landlords and merchants from the new class started to organise similarly pompous Durgā pūjā, turning it into spectacular displays of their might and affluence.

The opportunity to show one's affluence by patronising pūjā festivals was taken up by more and more upper-class families. By the end of the 19th century, the first community pūjās took place. Their expenses were met by public subscriptions. Further proliferations of celebrations organised by clubs, neighbourhoods, housing societies, and enterprises were largely the result of a postcolonial moment that prompted, at least formally, a shift toward the greater influence of civic institutions and a " civil society" . The capacity to perform the festival was transferred to a wider range of social groups as society transformed.

Despite social transformations, the ritual practice of worship has not been substantially altered, although the structure of pūjā might be shorter or longer depending on a patron's wealth. As a limited ritual technique, in Augé's sense, Durgā pūjā reflects and enacts the identities of participants and differences among them - the caste-based, feudal society of the past, and the clubs, housing co-operatives, private enterprises and other institutions of the present.

Above I depict Durgā pū jā as a Hindu ritual and as the central festival of Bengali society, that is, as a limited technique. Now I focus my examination on another ritual technique, extended by its nature and very contemporary. I suggest that we treat the decision of the United States and its allies to wage a " war on terror" as an extended ritual technique.

Strikes on the heart of the world' s strongest power on September 11th posed a serious challenge to the established world order. Soon after the culprits were identified and subsumed under the vaguely defined category of „ terrorists" , a " war on terror" was deployed to restore a threatened (im)balance of power.

The spatial and temporal definitions of the event are unbounded. The space where the war is being led is apparently the entire globe. Temporal delimitations are no more clear. I argue that these characteristics, which seem to exclude the events following September 11th from categorisation as a ritual, justify its inclusion as an extended technique.[43] Indeed, the " war on terror" is comprised of many ritualised actions, such as political declarations, the implementation of security measures, and urgent legal amendments. The operation in Afghanistan, a strike supported by a broad international coalition against an isolated state, finds precedents in military actions against Iraq and Yugoslavia in the 1990' s.

The attack of September 11th immediately became a headline world-wide. Billions of people saw the destruction live, and ensuing responses were no less theatralised. The " war on terror" may be understood as an attempt to interpret and take control over an unprecedented event. The unknown danger, the other, had to be identified. The " anti-terror coalition" emerged as a new identity in the world of international politics and transcended many previously established differences (e.g., the opposition between the USA and China). The " war on terror" affected the ongoing negotiation of geo-political identity borders.

Sides in the war were defined unambiguously by American leadership: you are „ with us or against us" . Comments like „ smoke them out" or „ hunt them down" made it clear that nation-states would either go to smoke or go out. One either joined the " anti-terror coalition" or risked being branded a terrorist. Consequently, many identities had to be redressed to fit the new framework. For

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[43] In a more general discussion of globalisation Augé speaks about the „ acceleration of history" , and the „ contraction of the planet" .

example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE - who cash in heavily on their friendships with the United States - were forced to reinterpret their relations with Afghani brethren in faith.[44] Pakistan was pressed to join the " war on terror" , that is, to make a U-turn both in foreign and domestic policy. India, on the other hand, joined the coalition without hesitation and, advancing its Kashmir agenda, tried to persuade the world that Pakistan is „ part of the problem, not the solution" .

China, an important supplier of weapons to Pakistan, poised itself as a permanent influence in Central Asia on one hand, and as a reliable, modern and responsible country about to join the WTO on the other. These events enabled Russia to position itself as morally justified in claiming that Islamic and insurgent groups on Russian territory were security threats. Many transnational organisations (e.g., the WTO, ASEAN, SAARC), declared their supportive views on the ongoing hunt for terrorists at their regular meetings. These institutions made it clear that taking sides was imperative.

These were not, however, the only interpretations of post-September 11th events. At a meeting of Muslim states in Malaysia, an interesting attempt was made to define „ terrorism" . Attending representatives did not want Islam to be associated with terrorism, which would cast many Islamic countries in a bad light. Attempt at issuing a collective statement eventually failed because participants could not come to an agreement as to the meaning of Palestinian suicide attacks on Israeli civilians. For some, suicide bombers were terrorists; while for others, they were legitimate freedom fighters. The task of defining terrorism was referred to the United Nations. Independent Muslim organisations also attempted to distance Islam from fundamentalists who, in their view, misused the religion for non-religious goals.

Human rights groups strove to create a space between the with/against divide - a space to stand simultaneously against the Taliban regime (which they had criticised for years) and against the US-lead coalition (a force causing the deaths of innocent civilians and working with human rights abusers within Afghanistan). Additionally, some leftist powers tried to strike a balance by condemning both " terror" and the " war on terror" . For example, in October 2001, West

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[44] Save Pakistan, these were the only countries to have regarded the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

Bengal's capital of Calcutta[45] witnessed a massive rally "against terrorism and imperialism". According to a familiar Marxist model, imperialism was here considered the root of impoverishment and resulted in desperate terrorist actions.

These alternative responses challenged the dominant one, enacting different identities and othernesses in the context of rallies and critical political declarations. Yet through their direct response to the "war on terror" they form a part - and participate in - an extended ritual technique. The technique, however, was not limited to state alliance making, diplomacy, international organisations and political parties. Not only governments and institutions reacted. While reading the news, discussing current events in the workplace, pub or tea stall, individuals reasserted their place on the shaking earth. Many of them were, either willingly or under social pressure, expressing what they stood for and often did so in ritualised manners. Some attended the kinds of rallies held throughout the world - openly pro-Taliban, moderately pacifist, „anti-imperialist", or war supporting. Others sported American flags and sent money to relief funds; those with different views wore T-shirts portraying Osama. Still others expressed their opinions by changing their economic behaviour. Americans were encouraged by the US government to support the state and the war effort by increasing consumption, while Muslim hotel owners in Bombay boycotted American goods. This kind of spontaneous economic sanction can also be considered a ritualised pattern of protest because of its previous use against both states and private companies. Surveys of public opinion offered another expression of the will of individuals. The outcomes of the surveys, in turn, influenced the standpoints and actions of political parties, particularly those in opposition.

Political declarations provoked reactions world-wide, often in the form of ritualised actions that aimed at strengthening or reconfiguring existing identities. No less important, violent media images of the attacks in the US and of the "war on terror" in Afghanistan reverberated in rituals in other "worlds," making the two contemporary. Much in the same way, these events made me contemporary with the people I interacted with in Calcutta. In a similar way, reports of the attack and its alleged conspirators became the topic of folk songs in Mexico and carnival

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[45] West Bengal is led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

processions in Brazil. A huge sand structure depicting the WTC attack was admired at the Beach Festival held in Puri in Orissa. The same scene was popular during the Durgā pūjā festival in Calcutta as well.

For relatives who gather in front of their family idol with the family priest, or for neighbourhood friends who organise a pūjā on their street corner, Durgā pūjā is a limited ritual technique. In addition to being a limited technique, however, the ritual works on an extended level.

In the largely anonymous, cosmopolitan milieu of Calcutta, most people don't stay with "their" Durgā but join the crowds crawling from one place of worship to another through the corridors of an elaborate pūjā traffic system. Hundreds of temporary temples (pandals) mushroom all over the city only to be destroyed when celebrations end. Some of the pandals reach the height of three- or four-storied buildings, and their artistic decoration and illumination is extremely elaborate, inventive and expensive. These aesthetic features are not directly linked to the religious programme. Rather, they stand for the wealth and prestige of the organiser and aim at attracting crowds full of visitors, journalists and TV crews. Special TV shows and newspaper coverage of the festival in turn inform potential visitors about the most traditional, the most expensive and the most inventive pandals. Travel agents sell trips to the most pompous celebrations, and more leisurely "visitors" browse interactive web presentations of individual pūjās.

The aesthetics of a pandal and Durgā pūjā idols sometimes expresses coherent programmes or positions such as ecological concerns, or rural traditions at the heart of Bengali culture, or the unity of India made up of a diversity of religious communities. These are all very contemporary identities related to current policies in India. Sometimes a conglomeration of disparate images including elements from outside the heritage of Indian civilisation is displayed, like temples in the form of Egyptian pyramids or a Martian landscape. Commentary on the interesting events of the previous year are frequently included in displays, ranging from local political murders to the assassination of a federal parliament member, to regional affairs like the royal massacre in Nepal, to the dominant story in international politics. Animated scenes of the twin towers being hit by planes and reduced to rubble were among the

most controversial, yet nevertheless favourite themes of the 2001 Durgā pū jā . Air raids against Afghanistan were displayed as well.

There were more complex links between the exorcist ritual of the „ war on terror" and the Bengali festival than mere images of the famous catastrophe. Each of the pandals is outfitted with elaborate clay idols of the goddess Durgā and her four children. The idols in all their splendour end up immersed ceremonially in the Ganga River on the last day of the festival. Despite a surviving iconographic tradition, these statues tend to be the subject of fantastic experiments, particularly in design. Various contests sponsored by newspapers and private companies encourage this creativity. The theme of the main idols is everpresent with Durgā as Mahiṣ ā suramardini at its centre.

There were several attempts in Calcutta to face-lift the demon and turn it into Osama bin Laden – to equate „ the Evil one" of local myth with the most wanted enemy of the anti-terror coalition. One artisan explained to a local newspaper: „ …Durgā is said to be the destroyer of all evils. We had tried to portray Durgā as the destroyer of terrorism" (Banerjee and Konar 2001). The police, however, raided the quarter of idol-makers and destroyed these statues on security grounds. Such idols were said to trigger Hindu-Muslim communal tension. Similar attempts were reported in the Indian states of Orissa and Assam.

But associations between the mythological image of Durgā and current events did not stop with the demon figure. A Calcuttan columnist compared the traditional weapons of the goddess, the destroyer of evil, to the modern hi-tech weaponry used in the raiding of Afghanistan. The goddess' s magical discus „ is nothing but what we call a guided missile that can precisely hit a target," he wrote (Chakrabarti 2001). One high-budget pandal, on the other hand, portrayed an appeal to peace. It showed a replica of the Bamiyan Buddha, one of the huge rock carvings destroyed by the Taliban, behind Durgā . The goddess, in turn, held flowers instead of traditional weapons in her ten hands.

Feasting is central to Durgā pū jā . Traditionally held in family houses, feasts in the post-liberalisation period have become an occasion for eating out among a section of Bengali society. Upmarket restaurants and hotels compete to win customers with exclusive offers. This marketing fervour lasts long beyond the festive season. In the middle of the war (well after the end of the pū jā s), one of the

poshest hotels in Calcutta organised an Afghan food festival for its clients. The chef was shipped from Kandahar. To enable the guests to relish the dinner within an authentic Afghan atmosphere, sounds of air-raids and blasts were replayed from loudspeakers, and an entertainer masked as Osama bin Laden travelled from table to table.

The powerful narrative of the WTC attack and the ensuing retaliatory war was omnipresent on a global scale. Military struggles from all over the world, in particular those between state powers and their armed opposers, could be understood suddenly in terms of a universal schema. Additionally, within the newly established framework, parties involved in latent conflicts reinterpreted disputes in their favour. Even such unrelated routine matters as security measures for Durgā ' s idol immersion processions in Calcutta were accounted for in reference to the anti-terror struggle. From international think tanks to Mexican folk songs to Brazilian carnivals to Bengali festivals, a single plot was grafted on to local narratives.

The „ war on terror" aimed at restoring a previous world order. It can be understood as a cultural practice deployed to heal weaknesses exposed by attacks on the world' s strongest power and of the political, social and economic system it represents. It affected the entire world and led to the restructuring of existing identity borders. A new anti-terror identity emerged. It never reached the formality of a „ church" in Durkheim' s sense, nevertheless a new identity materialised. Membership in the church was a matter of ongoing negotiation - as is clear in the dubious position of Pakistan. Similarly shifting - though more compelling - was the position of some leftist and human rights organisations that tried to express their stance outside of a hegemonic with/against binary.

Defence of their sacred faith was the declared motive of the Taliban, and without a doubt also the genuine goal of many of its supporters in Muslim countries. They burned American flags along with effigies of the US president, while their opposers displayed symbols of America more proudly and fervently. The American leadership occasionally used Christian metaphors (e.g., labelling Osama „ the Evil one"). American victims of the terrorist attack were cast as sacred, while the victims of the other side were branded as „ collateral damage" in response. War as a ritual technique was highly theatralised when state-of-the-art technologies of

communication were deployed in conjunction with military ones. The expression „ with us or against us" would have been ridiculous had it not been pronounced by the person holding the joystick of the world' s strongest military machinery. It would have been ineffective had it not been instantly transmitted to the ears of billions.

Durgā pū jā works as an extended ritual technique as well. It is not just a gathering of worshippers around an idol. Durgā pū jā at present is highly theatralised. It reflects local, federal and international politics since all levels are closely linked to the fate of participants. As a ritual of all Bengali Hindus, Durgā pū jā is celebrated among Bengali communities around the world. Organisers of famous pū jā s in London and New York import idols directly from Calcutta artisans. Each year Bengali papers report new territories " conquered" by Durgā - countries and cities where the festival is being held for the first time. Durgā pū jā thus becomes part of the landscape of other worlds in the same way that images of other worlds become part of Durgā pū jā in Bengal.[46]

Both of these extended ritual techniques are contemporary and, in a way, analogous. They enable the relativisation of otherness, an endangering event, and the unknown by establishing identity bonds - by creating the " anti-terror coalition" and waging the " war on terror" , by incorporating the issues of national and international politics into the familiar structure of the festival. Reactions to both ritual techniques form part of the technique itself and as such are partly predictable. It was to be expected that the " war on terror" would be met with mixed feelings among Muslims and the Left. Similarly, it was predictable (and predicted) that the September 11th attack would resonate in the Durgā pū jā festival and that those iconographic responses would be controversial.

The global character of the " war on terror" made this ritual technique stand out in one important respect: it made us all participants. Previously unconnected happenings, events and actions of individuals started to be meaningful within a single and powerful interpretive framework. Irrespective of nationality, religion or

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[46] I remember a young white American attending Durgā pū jā in the Ramkrishna Mission Headquarters in Belur near Calcutta. The method of worship practised by the Ramkrishna order is supposed to be one of the most traditional and the most intricate in the city and its surroundings. He, however, didn' t have a word of praise. Undisciplined crowds, noise, TV crews standing in view; how could he concentrate? How different was " his" Durgā pū jā in " his" cosy ashram in San Francisco!

place of residence, we could not escape images of destruction, images of our neighbours from the other hemisphere driven to despair, rightful anger, fear and aggression. Even if we did not want to listen to the war drums and dance around fires with the masks of our mythical heroes, we could hardly avoid the transformative effects of the ritual upon our lives.

The application of Augé's concept of extended ritual technique both to Durgā pū jā and to the series of events related to the September 11th attacks enables me to explore several questions that bothered me in the field. First, this framework sheds some light on „ postmodern" features of the Hindu festivals I studied. Thinking of the Durgā pū jā festival as an extended ritual technique allows me to account for it not as an arbitrary collage, but as the result of traceable historical processes. Moreover, these features can be isolated and seen in relation to elements of the festival referring to other processes. Secondly, these features can be re-contextualised with the help of seemingly disparate data like political negotiations and declarations, rallies, and media images of war. The intersections of contemporary worlds thus may be elucidated.

Finally, this approach brings about the possibility of reflexive awareness. Though more or less I was just a participant-observer of the ritual worship of the goddess Durgā , I was a " native" within the extended ritual technique called the „ war on terror". This, as a citizen of a particular country (formerly belonging to the Soviet block, nowadays a NATO member), and as a news reader, a person who along with millions of others experienced heightened security measures, as a foreigner who was on different occasions looked at through the lenses of a newly established framework. I was alternately seen as a western imperialist, a western humanist, an anti-Muslim, a supporter of Muslims (because Europe supposedly supports and encourages Muslims), and, by means of mockery, as Osama bin Laden himself. Each of these ascribed roles was intricate since it established my relationship to the people I interacted with, whoever they were.

It is interesting to note that when wearing the shoes of an interested scholar my observations of the Durgā worship were comparatively non-controversial. As an observer I stayed removed from identities and relationships expressed in the ritual. Nor was I affected by the ritual. Whatever changes in Durgā pū jā might

have taken place during my fieldwork period, they would have little impact on my life. And whatever I would write about Durgā pūjā was not likely to dramatically alter the lives of my readers.

The aim of this chapter was to point out the complexity of symbolic relationships and to attempt to disentangle those relations with the help of the „ extended ritual technique" concept. Thus I conceive of the „ war on terror" as a global ritual to show how it intersected with the Durgā pūjā in Calcutta and possibly with the rituals of other worlds.

5. Flowers good to think:
Ritual use of plants in Durgā myth and ritual

This thesis with the exposition of contrasting approaches to the study of man and culture. After reverting the subject to the tradition of goddess worship in Bengal, its textual sources, historical development and contemporary bricolage-like character, I wish to return to the subject and present in some detail a study on the ritual use and symbolism of plants and their parts in Durgā pū jā . In the context of this thesis, which is concerned with a possibility of understanding ritual as a social technology that works on three levels (that is the level of natural perception and cognition, the level of cultural style or " grammar" acquired through disciplining practices of enculturation, and the level of individual or collective semantic creativity), the sharp shift of focus from the intersection of Durgā pū jā with global politics to the minuscule detail of a flower' s petal enables me to give more credence to what from distance seems metaphysically elusive.

The cult figure of anthropological structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, once argued that plants and animals are chosen as totems not because they are good to eat, that is because of their practical value, but because they are good to think – the differences between species are suitable to stand for differences in social world. Economic importance of a plant often coincides with its semantic fitness but not all main crops, fruits and healing plants are symbols in myth and ritual and symbolic significance of some plants is not matched by their practical usefulness. He criticised functionalist explanations for strained search for utilitarian ends and emphasised the role of plants and animals as signs (Lévi-Strauss: 1962). Questions like " what do rituals signify, if anything" and " how can they be explained" have been the subject of theoretical approaches (e.g., Staal 1990; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994), which I have mentioned in the chapter on ritual.

I shall start this enquiry into plant symbolism related to Durgā pū jā with a short introduction on ethnobotany and on how the nature science versus humanity approach to the study of man translates into the anthropological study of man' s relation to nature. Next section will discuss a discontinuity between scientific classification of Indian lotuses and water-lilies and vernacular Sanskrit terms for those plants. It will also point out the discontinuities within the two classificatory

grids. This will be followed by appreciation of some examples of symbolic uses of lotus and some other plants and finally by an account of ritual use of plants in Durgā pū jā .

5.1. Ethnobotany: nature as a system versus nature as a continuum

By ethnobotany I understand " all studies which concern the mutual relationship between plants and traditional peoples" (Cotton 1996: 1).[47] From among its sub-disciplines which include ethnoecology, traditional agriculture, traditional phytochemistry, paleoethnobotany, the study of material culture and cognitive ethnobotany, the latter is relevant to the present study. Cognitive ethnobotany studies " traditional perceptions of the natural world (through the analysis of symbolism in ritual and myth) and... organisation of knowledge systems (through ethnotaxonomic study)" (*op. cit.*: 17).

Two basic conceptual approaches to nature can be distinguished in ethnobotany as well as other sub branches of ethnobiology. The relativist approach follows Lock' s nominalist perspective and its proponents consider nature a continuum which is made discontinuous by the act of classification into more or less arbitrary categories. The comparativist approach, on the other hand, " seeks to discover and document general features of cross-cultural similarities that are widely, if not universally shared, and ultimately to develop theoretical explanations that underlie the empirical generalizations one observes" (Berlin 1992: 11). For comparativists the species are not creations of a classifying mind but an intrinsic quality of the natural system, " objective biological reality (that) allows for little variation in its perception" (Cotton *op. cit.*: 264). While the approach of relativists, who deny the possibility of cross-cultural comparison, is simply to describe the creative account of nature by a given community, the comparativists are looking for structural similarities in individual accounts, the rules that govern them and ultimately aim at explaining the relation of Man to Nature rather than that of a particular community to its environment.

After extensive studies of folk taxonomies worldwide several general principles of how these classifications are organised have been abstracted.[48] It has

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[47] The rather dubious term traditional refers to the opposition between face-to-face and complex societies.

[48] For their complete list see Berlin (1992: 13-35).

been found that morphological and behavioural traits are far more likely to become a marker of distinction in a folk classification than the economic, nutritional or pharmacological importance of a species. The culturally significant species, however, tend to become prototypes of taxa and their significance is often expressed in folk taxonomies by linguistic opacity: " In general, the more descriptive a plant name, the less cognitive effort is required to associate the name with its appropriate referent; hence plants with opaque labels are likely to be those of particular local significance" (Cotton *op. cit.*: 274).

Cognitive ethnobiology, however, goes beyond classifications. Part of its endeavour is also the symbolic analysis of plant and animal themes in art, myth and ritual, since the way nature is perceived by local communities is reflected in and communicated through them. Though religion, art and literature cannot be related to anything like the natural system and though they, being cultural constructs, involve a lot more arbitrariness, it might yield interesting results to summarise the species and taxa used by a particular language community as motifs and symbols in these areas of human experience. Another step would be to look into the way they are used, their interrelations and referents. Eventually, perhaps, some regularity in the semantic use of those motifs and symbols might be elucidated.

5.2. Matching uneven pairs: lotuses, water-lilies and their Sanskrit counterparts

During the study of plant symbolism in rituals and literature of Bengal I often found myself stuck for hours with a single Bengali plant name. Sometimes for lack of good books, sometimes for lack of experience with Indian nature, the task of locating the scientific name of its correct referent proved extremely difficult. More handbooks and more time spent in the countryside of Bengal, however, confronted me with more ambiguities than enlightenment. In this section I discuss the problem of identifying scientific plant names with vernacular ones and assess the limitations of this enterprise. I use lotuses and water-lilies as examples because they are well known as are the many Sanskrit terms for them.[49]

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[49] Relationship of lotuses to water-lilies in symbolic context have been discussed earlier, e.g., by Gail (2002).

A student of plant symbolism in Indian culture inevitably faces the problem of identification of vernacular plant names with their actual referents. Since the choice of a certain plant or its part in a particular poetic or ritual context is often related to the biological properties of the plant, like the colour of the bloom, smell, shape, and its practical usefulness, the correct identification of the referent is a rather important step in understanding the text in question. Consulting an available encyclopaedia which relates vernacular names to scientific ones seems to offer a straightforward solution; nevertheless it often becomes just the starting point of a bumpy ride through a taxonomical conundrum.

Generally, we can make use either of dictionaries compiled by linguists or encyclopaedias written by botanists. In the former we learn about the etymology and semantic context of the vernacular plant name but the identification with the species is, if stated at all, often unsure or outdated. In some cases we find more then one scientific name as the referent. The latter are lists of scientific plant names with descriptions of species and with identification in one or more Indian languages, sometimes with several vernacular words in each. While we can learn about the properties of the plants, the vernacular names are frequently given in anglicised phonetic transcription, which makes another search in a dictionary inevitable.[50] Since the exact botanical identification of a word denoting a kind of plant is not a priority for dictionary compilers and vernacular names of a species is not a priority for botanists writing compendia, we will not find references to the source of the identification anywhere. Needless to add, two different reference books may disagree about or vary in some identifications.

Some disagreements can be attributed to the development of botanical taxonomy itself which, far from representing a closed system, is constantly in flux.

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[50] The *Glossary of Indian Medicinal Plants* (Chopra, Nayar and Chopra 1956) and newer *Economic Plants of India* (Nayar, Ramamurthy and Agarwal 1989) are dictionaries of Latin plant names with brief information about each plant, more detailed in the former. In both cases their mention of vernacular Indian plant names is rather random and given in anglicised transcription. The five-volume compendium *Indian Medicinal Plants* (Warrier, Nambiar and Ramankutty 2002) is probably the best available with 500 species with illustrations, extensive description of plants and their chemical constituents, extracts of ayurvedic texts and corresponding vernacular plant names in the original script in Sanskrit, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam for each item. The *Medicinal Plants of Bangladesh with Chemical Constituents and Uses* (Ghani 2003) provides, in a much less extensive and systematic manner, some clues for those interested in Bengali plant names, the language missing in the previously mentioned compendium. Unfortunately it is provided in anglicised transcription.

Further revisions of type specimens in herbaria and ongoing field work result in the discovery of new species or in establishing two plant names originally thought to represent different species as synonyms actually referring to a single species. Since scientific plant names tend to have synonyms – names designating wrongly conceived or simultaneously described new species that turn out to be duplications of existing ones, which were, nevertheless, published and used in botanical literature at a certain point in time – we can consult an up-to-date encyclopaedia which lists them all. More conveniently, the International Plant Names Index (IPNI)[51] or the Germplasm Resources Information Network (GRIN)[52] offer an opportunity to check whether the two scientific plant names we found to be identified with a single vernacular name are synonyms referring to a single species.

Delving into the details of plant taxonomy may dispel some confusion but does not always lead to a solution. Alternatively, if the opportunity arises, we can consult native speakers' (e.g., ritual specialists', farmers') use of vernacular names in dealing with plants and, in collaboration with a botanist, have them identified. Time-consuming as this enterprise can be, it is still limited by our informants' range of vernacular names and their proficiency in applying them to perceivable distinctions in the natural universe. More importantly, the cultural competence of an Ayurveda practitioner, a ritual specialist and a farmer involves attention to different aspects of plants and sensitivity to detailed distinction at different levels; hence it can result in a fairly different ethnotaxonomy.

Let's take as an example the lotus. The only species native to South Asia is *Nelumbo nucifera* and it has a host of synonyms in Sanskrit. The lotus resembles flowers belonging to the group of water-lilies which are represented by several species in South Asia. As per the botanical taxonomy,[53] the genus *Nelumbo* comprising only two species (the other one being *Nelumbo lutea,* native to the Americas)[54] is the sole genus of the *Nelumbonaceae* family under the *Proteales* order. This in fact means that plane trees (*Platanaceae*) are closer evolutionary

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[51]www.ipni.org

[52] www.ars-grin.gov

[53] APG II system of 2003.

[54] USDA, ARS, National Genetic Resources Program. *Germplasm Resources Information Network - (GRIN)* [Online Database]. National Germplasm Resources Laboratory, Beltsville, Maryland. URL: http://www.ars-grin.gov/cgi-bin/npgs/html/splist.pl?8035 (24 August 2008).

relatives of the lotus *than is any other aquatic plant!* On the other hand, earlier taxonomical classifications used to consider the *Nelumbonaceae* family to form an independent order (*Nelumbonales*)[55] or placed it, together with water-lilies, under the *Nymphaeales* order.[56]

Turning our attention to water-lilies we find that the *Nymphaeales* order, consisting purely of aquatic plants, is divided into several families – the number depends on which system we follow – including the *Nymphaceae* family, which is by far the most numerous in terms of subordinate species. It is again split into several genera out of which we can limit ourselves only to the *Nymphaea* genus. This genus comprises 64 species out of which around six are native to South Asia.[57] Among these are the white water lily (*Nyphaea alba*) and another white species (*N. candida*), which is sometimes considered to be a variant of the former. The natural habitat of both is limited to high altitude areas, namely Jammu and Kashmir. Next comes the small white water lily (*N. tetragona*) extended over larger areas of North India. The other three grow all over the subcontinent. The flowers of the famous *N. nouchali* range from bluish to purple-red while those of *N. pubescens* vary from light pink to reddish. Another red water-lily – *N. rubra* is considered by some botanists to be a sterile red variant of the former and not a separate species.[58]

To summarise, the survey of botanical sources leaves us with understanding of changes in the taxonomy of water-lilies at higher as well as lower taxa, reminds us that crossbreeding and transfer from a natural habitat can result in unusual forms, and gives us a slightly confusing picture of exactly how many individual species are native to South Asia, what are their names and what are synonyms, especially when we try to compare different sources. Nevertheless we are left with one species of lotus and several species of water-lilies which tend to be white, red or blue in terms of their colour when in bloom.

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[55] E.g., in the Thorne system of 1993.

[56] The Cronquist system of 1981.

[57] Based on the survey of the GRIN [Online Database]. URL: http://www.ars-grin.gov/cgi-bin/npgs/html/exsplist.pl (24 August 2008).

[58] „ Cultivated forms of var. *pubescens* with red flowers, originating from India … although … reportedly sterile, they have sometimes been segregated as *N. rubra*.“ See **NYMPHAEA** Linnaeus, Sp. Pl. 1: 510. 1753, nom. cons. In Flora of China 6: 116– 118. 2001. http://flora.huh.harvard.edu/china/PDF/PDF06/NYMPHAEA.pdf

The Monier-Williams dictionary (MW) makes the uncertainty of correspondences between vernacular and scientific plant names rather explicit. Under the heading *padma* it states: " a lotus (esp. the flower of the lotus-plant *Nelumbium speciosum* which closes towards evening; often confounded with the water-lily or *Nymphaea alba*)" (p. 584, italics mine) . Though a lotus would be more readily confounded with the red water-lily rather than the white one and the scientific name for lotus is an obsolete synonym valid at the author' s time, this statement speaks for itself. *Utpala* is in MW identified primarily with the blue water-lily but it can also be " any water-lily" or even " any flower" ! In texts we often find specifications like *raktotpala* or *nī lotpala*, which seems to support the view that *utpala* is the generic Sanskrit term for water-lilies but *nī lpadma* can also be found, unlike blue specimens of *N. nucifera*. Similarly, along with *ś atadala* and *kamala*, both identified with the lotus, we come across *nī lś atadala*, *nī lkamala* and *ś vetakamala*.

According to MW, *kumuda* is either the white (*N. alba*) or red (*N. rubra*) water-lily.[59] *Kahlā ra* is identified only with the white water-lily, *rā jī va* only with the blue water-lily and *kokanada* only with the red water-lily. *Nala*, besides signifying among other things a kind of weed, is also identified with the lotus (*N. nucifera*). Some vernacular names refer to water-lilies that bloom at night, e.g., *candreṣ tā*, *candrikā mbuja*. The many terms signifying " water-born" , e.g., *jalaja*, *abja*, *ambuja*, *nī raja* are primarily identified with aquatic plants in general and secondarily with the lotus while *paṅ kaja* or " mud-born" and *saroja* or " lake-born" are solely associated with the lotus.

Interviewing native speakers, which I have cursorily attempted on several occasions, revealed similar ambiguities in relating vernacular names to actual plants. It raises the question of to what extent the classical poets themselves were aware of and troubled by the differences between individual species when composing their verses. What can we make out descriptions of nature' s beauty like " *kumudotpalakahlā raś atapatrā*" [60] referring to natural beauties of the mountain Kailā sa, the abode of the god Ś iva? The lotuses and water lilies form part of a long list of various plants, trees and animals. The list emphasises an idyllic

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[59] But Warrier, Nambiar and Ramankutty (2002) identify it with the blue water-lily (*N. nouchali*).

[60] *Ś rī mad bhā gavatam* (4.6.19).

heavenly landscape and no meanings are attributed to particular species. Chains of synonyms are frequent in other classical texts as well.[61]

It would be really difficult to conclude that the author meant individual species rather than many different lotuses and water-lilies in general. Yet in other instances distinctions between lotus and water-lily or in the colour of the bloom are significant.

The survey of scientific names has proved useful in several ways. First, it shows the limitations of botanical taxonomy itself, which though aiming at a universally valid description of the plant world and working in great detail with the properties of plants is, after all, a man-made classification applied to available data and develops over time. Second, it helps to demarcate the relevant segment of the plant world, e.g., lotuses and water-lilies native to South Asia, and basic divisions within that segment. Third, it makes us aware of the qualities of plants which could be significant in constituting distinctions in ethnotaxonomies in Indian languages. Fourth, some of those qualities and their saliency could be at the heart of the symbolic use of the plants, whether in literature, art or religion; there are many known examples where this is the case.

The list of vernacular terms referring to lotuses and water-lilies in Sanskrit (though far from being a complete one) illustrates that it is unlikely we could ever find a set of one-to-one correspondences with a register of synonyms. Tentatively, the etymology of vernacular terms suggests that (not far from the botanical taxonomy) lotuses and water-lilies were understood collectively as aquatic plants with a prominent flower and further distinguished according to the colour of the bloom and flowering time (day or night). Beyond this, the set of terms does not seem to reveal much orderliness. Perhaps in the case of a plant so laden with symbolic value as the lotus, which results in an enormous number of vernacular synonyms, this should not be surprising. Poetry simply defeats classification.

When the symbolism is less multifaceted and the species in question does not have several neighbours closely resembling one another, the conundrum of identification is not always so complex. It is, indeed, often clear enough, apart from the issue of synonymy. In the next section I will try to arrive at closer approximation between the world of nature and its symbolic reflection.

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[61] See PANDANUS website: http://iu.ff.cuni.cz/pandanus/

5.3. Examples of plant symbolism in myth, literature and ritual

5.3.1. Lotus

The *Devī -Mā hā tmya* contains references to several species of plants. The most frequent are synonyms of lotus. Lotus appears conventionally as an iconographic marker when a deity holds it in his or her hand, when a deity is adorned by it, or when a deity is seated upon it. Thus Mahā lakṣ mī holds a lotus (*padma*) in one of her eighteen hands and is seated upon a lotus (*sarojā sthitā*). The ocean gives her two garlands of unfading lotus blooms (*amlā napań kajā ṃ mā lā ṃ*), one for her head and another for her chest. A garland named *kiñjalkinī* [62] is a precious possession of the ocean. In addition, he gave her a splendid lotus (*pań kajañcā tiś obhanaṃ*)[63] in her hand. The great lotus (*mahā padma*) is again one of the nine gems of the lord of wealth Kuvera.

In *Mū rtirahasya*[64] of *Devī -Mā hā tmya*, Ś ā kambharī , the future incarnation of the Goddess who is promised to descend onto the earth to support all living beings in times of drought by vegetables or edible plants (*ś ā kaiḥ*) grown from her own body (*ā tmadehasamudbhavaiḥ*)[65] of the goddess, is described as blue-complexioned (*nī lavarṇ ā*), having eyes like blue lotuses (*nī lotpalavilocanā*), seated upon a lotus (*kamalā layā*) and besides a bow and arrows she holds another lotus (*kamala*) in her hand.[66] The garland of lotuses, or even unfading lotuses, marks the divine status and superiority of the deity involved.

Next, lotus may be associated with a body part like hand, eye, womb, face, or heart. Since in the context of Indian religion and art it denotes perfection and purity and it forms part of epithets of deities and of compounds by which their qualities are

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[62] Derived from the word *kiñjalka*, the blossom of a lotus.

[63] *Devī -Mā hā tmya* 2.28-29

[64] *Mū rtirahasya* 12.-17. In: Jagadī ś varā nanda (1999: 387-8)

[65] *Devī -Mā hā tmya* 11.48

[66] She also holds flowers (*puṣ pa*), twigs (*pallava*), roots (*mū la*) and heaps of various vegetables and fruits teasing the palate (*phalā dhya ś akasañcaya kā myā nantarasairyukta*) which keep off hunger, thirst, decrepitude and death. By the means of singing lauds, meditating, praying, worshiping and praising Ś ā kambharī one can quickly attain infinite plenty of foodstuffs and immortality. Also in the *Lakṣ mī tantra*, as Jagadī ś varā nanda (1999: 322) notes, the worshipper of Ś ā kambharī will be endowed with unlimited food, drinks and glory in his next life.

described. In the first canto of *Devī -Mā hā tmya* Viṣ ṇ u is called " the lotus eyed one" (*kamalekṣ aṇ a*).[67] Brahma who was seated in the lotus coming from Viṣ ṇ u´s navel (*nā bhikamale viṣ ṇ oḥ*)[68] invoked the Goddess and she awoke so that he could destroy the demons Madhu and Kaitabha. Lotus is again mentioned in an epithet of Brahma as lotus-born (*padmayoni*).[69] The eight hands of Mahā sarasvatī are said to be lotus-like (*hastā bjā*).[70] Lotus again symbolises face in the context of right-hand tantra.

Mandala is a circular diagrammatic representation of the universe in Hindu and Buddhist ritual contexts. This representation is more concretely portrayed as an eight, hundred or thousand-petalled lotus (*padma*). The mandala design thus " ...owes its origin to the widespread Indian philosophic conception of the intimate inter-connection and indefeasible unity between the animal world (Jiva Jagat) and the spiritual world (Adhyatmic Jagat).." (Dutt 1995: 6).

5.3.2. Bandhū ka

The initial chapter of *Ś rī Ś rī Caṇ ḍ ī* is preceded by several shorter compositions devoted to the Goddess. The first of them is the meditation on the goddess Caṇ ḍ ika (*ś rī caṇ ḍ ikā dhyā na*). In the opening verse she is termed *bandhū kakusumā bhā sā* , that is „ glowing as *bandhū ka* flower" .[71] Since authors of Sanskrit texts frequently take up *bandhū ka* or *bandhujī va* in poetic expressions I will dwell upon this plant for some time. The Bengali translation of *Devī -Mā hā tmya* by Jagadī ś varā nanda (1999: 8) specifies that the actual referent is the colour of the goddess´ complexion (B. *yini bandhū kapuṣ pavarṇ ā* – the one having the colour of *bandhū ka* flowers). The verse containing this

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[67] *Devī -Mā hā tmya* 1.101.1

[68] *Ibid*. 1.68.2.

[69] *Ibid*. 2.4.2

[70] Analogically to lotus-hands we have come accross sprout-like-hands (*karapallava*). In both examples, the qualities of plants are invoked in the description of a godly figure.

[71] Flor impia, noon flower, or scarlet marrow, *Pentapetes phoenicea* L., *Sterculiacea. Bandhū ka* is a native plant of South Asia, usually around one metre high, growing in wet areas, in particular as a weed in paddy fields during the rainy season. Its flowers open at noon and close at dawn. Their colour is scarlet and each one is composed of five petals.

simile is a part of her overall iconographic description. Caṇḍikā is imagined to be standing on Śiva (*pañcamuṇḍādhivāsinī*), having crescent waxing moon as her diadem (*sphuraccandrakalāratnamukuṭā*), wearing a necklace of human sculls (*muṇḍamālinī*), three eyed (*trinetrā*), clad in red/blood-coloured loincloth (*raktavasanā*), having breasts pleasantly round like well-formed pitchers (*pīnonnataghaṭastanī*), holding a book (*pustaka*) and a rosary of *rudrākṣha* beads (*akṣamālā*) in two of her hands, and showing *varamudra* and *abhayamudra* with the other two.

Coburn (2002: 94-98) argues that Durgā´s epitet Caṇḍikā, the violent and impetuous one as he translates it, is among the most important ones in the whole *Devī-Māhātmya* with twenty-nine occurrences. With the exception of Bāṇa´s *Devī-Māhātmya* based poem *Caṇḍīśataka* there is, however, „ no further contemporary literature, nor any contemporary iconographic evidence, to illuminate the *Devī-Māhātmya*´s use of the epithet Caṇḍikā " *ibid*. 98). Neither could I have observed the worship of a deity termed Caṇḍikā nor a clay statue of such appearance in actual ritual practice. The use of flowers to signify the colour of complexion of a deity as an iconographically distinguishing feature is, however, not unusual as the case of *atasī* [72] blossoms denoting the complexion of Durgā in *Durgādhyāna* clearly indicates.

In the religious poem recounting one thousand names of the goddess Lalitā (*Lalitāsahasranāma*), her 964th name is " the one resembling the *bandhūka* flower" (*bandhūkakusumaprakhyā*).[73] *Bandhūka* often denotes redness, particularly red glowing lips, in *Kāvya* poetry. When Rādhā longs in *Gītāgovinda* for Kṛṣṇa´s lips while he kisses other milkmaids she describes them as tender like leaves, sweet and resembling *bandhūka* flowers (*bandhujīvamadhurādharapallavaṃ*).[74] When Kṛṣṇa in turn describes Rādhā´s intricate beauty in another verse of the same text, he compares the lustre of her lips to glowing *bandhūka* flowers (*bandhūkadyutibāndhavaḥ ayaṃ adharaḥ*).[75] Similar comparisons can be found in other classic works as well.

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[72] Linseed, *Linnum usitatissimum* L., *Linaceae*.

[73] *Lalitāsahasranāma* 114.1

[74] *Gītāgovinda* 2.4.2

[75] *Gītāgovinda* 10.13.1

Mahā subhā ṣ itasaṃgraha speaks of lips as beautiful as *bandhū ka* blossoms (*bandhū kā dharasundaram*).[76] In *Ṛ tusaṃhā ra*, men separated from their lovers see the shining beauty of their lovers' lips in the *bandhū ka* flowers (*adhararuciraś obhā ṃ bandhujī ve*)[77] and few verses later, lips are said to be as lovely as blooming *bandhū ka*s (*bandhū kakā ntimadhareṣ u manohareṣ u*).[78]

In ritual, *Bandhū ka* flowers may also be used as offerings. Krittibas, the Bengali translator of *Rā mā yaṇ a*, included *bandhū ka* (*bā ndhuli*) into the list of plants arranged by Rā ma to perform the untimely invocation of Durgā prior to his battle with Rā vaṇ a. It does not, however, belong among the indispensable items for her worship.

5.3.3. The bunch *kuś a* grass and goddess Brahmā ṇ ī

When the gods praise the goddess after the victorious battle, besides her other forms, they invoke the seven little mothers (*saptamatṛ kā ḥ*) as well as the four additional ones (see above, footnote 17). Among these eleven goddesses, the first mentioned and the leading one is Brahma´s *ś akti* Brahmā ṇ ī . She is described as seated in the heavenly chariot drawn by swans (*haṃsayuktavimā nasthā*) and sprinkling water with a bunch of *kuś a* grass[79] (*kauś ā mbhaḥ kṣ arikā*)[80]. Jagadī ś varā nanda´s Bengali translation elaborates on this attribute by saying that the water she sprinkles is from the ritual water-pot (B. *kamaṇ ḍ alu haite kuś dbā rā jal siñjan karen*)[81].

The eleven mothers had already appeared in the Devī -Mā hā tmya´s eighth canto where they decimated the armies of Raktavī ja. All the forms issued from Caṇ ḍ ikā herself and were absorbed to her again after they fulfilled their goal. Brahmā ṇ ī emerged, like in the verse cited above, on the swan-drawn chariot (*haṃsayuktavimā nā gre*) with a rosary of *rudrā kṣ a* beads and the ritual pot

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[76] *Mahā subhā ṣ itasaṅ graha* 431.2

[77] *Ṛ tusaṃhā ra* 3.26.3

[78] *Ṛ tusaṃhā ra* 3.27.3

[79] *Desmostachya bipinnata* (L.) Staff., *Eragrostis cynosuroides* (Retz.) Beauv., (*Poaceae*).

[80] *Devī -Mā hā tmya* 11.13.2

[81] Jagadī ś varā nanda (1999: 307)

(*sākṣasūtrakamaṇḍaluḥ*)[82]. Few lines later the fight of these mothers with armies of demons is described. Brahmāṇī´s combat role is to make her enemies devoid of vigour and strength (*hatavīryān hataujasaḥ*) by sprinkling them with water from her pot (*kamaṇḍalujalākṣepa*)[83].

Despite the fact that *kuśa* is in all these characteristics of Brahmāṇī explicitly mentioned only once, it seems plausible to assume that all the verses refer to a single divine prototype whose attributes are but partially indicated in each of them and that Brahmāṇī is imagined to sprinkle the water purified by the *kuśa* grass even when not directly stated[84]. It would, indeed, conform to actual Vedic ritual practice as well as to its survivals in later Hindu ritualism. Water purified by the touch of *kuśa* (*kuśajala*) or *kuśa* as a purifying instrument shaped like a little broom by which the water is sprinkled are indispensable items for Durgā pūjā as well.

The function of *kuśa* in Brahmāṇī´s hand is, however, rather unusual in as much is unusual the function of *kamaṇḍalu* as a weapon. For Coburn it is " simply a reflection of the fact that Brahmā (sic) carries no ordinary weapon, so Brahmāṇī takes his *kamaṇḍalu* and makes a weapon of that" (2002: 146). This view is perfectly consistent with the iconography of *śakti*s of individual gods, which reflects that of their male counterparts. There might be, however, something more revealing about this functional transition.

Gonda in his impressively extensive survey of grass functions in Vedic religion devotes a whole chapter to *kuśa*[85]. This grass in different technical ways and on different ritual occasions brings about or mediates auspiciousness and purity and wards off the opposite, e.g., neutralises polluting substances. The water touched by *kuśa* used as a medium to neutralise the evil demons thus may seem to fulfil the same function. Yet nowhere in Gonda´s survey is *kuśa* harmful to the patient of the ritual action, nor are its effects otherwise destructive. The symbolic use of consecrated water from *kamaṇḍalu* and *kuśa* grass as a weapon in the context of the battle not only represents a reflection of Brahma´s attributes by his *śakti* but

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[82] Devī-Māhātmya 8.15.1

[83] Devī-Māhātmya 8.33.1

[84] Analogically, the Bengali translator in the above mentioned example readily inserted the words „ from the ritual water pot" to give more plasticity to the sketchy original.

[85] Gonda (1985).

also exposes the nature of the role reversal in the Goddess cult. It does so more visibly than in the case of other *śakti*s who are equipped by real weapons of their male counterparts, since in Brahmāṇī the rupture is more apparent. The *śakti*s in theology as well as in ritual practice always combine auspicious and beneficent features with the dangerous and destructive ones. In the function of consecrated water, *kamaṇḍalu* and *kuśa* as an instrument causing harm this ambivalence stands out.

The *navapattrikā pūjā* sequence of Durgā pūjā contains another plant association of Brahmāṇī when she is invoked as presiding over plantain (*rambhā dhiṣṭhātrī brahmāṇī*) as we will see in the next section.

5.4. Ritual use of plants in the worship of the goddess Durgā in Bengal

In this section I focus on ritual use of plants in the annual worship of the goddess Durgā. My aim is to present the data collected in course of ethnographic fieldwork in West Bengal, to frame the data by the context of the festival and, finally, to put them into the context of preceding discussion.

Representations of Durgā in the form of plants are of our interest here. Plants play an important role in the festival and convey multiple meanings. The plants related to Durgā pūjā and their parts (blooms, leaves or fruits) appear basically in two functionally different roles.

1/ Offerings or parts of offerings, which are offered either themselves or as symbolic substitutes for other kinds of offerings, e.g animal sacrifice.

2/ Symbolic representations of the goddess Durgā and her different manifestations.

There are other less important uses of plants, which do not play any of these two roles. A bunch of *kuśa* grass[86] (*kuśadaṇḍa*), for example, is not an offering but a ritualist's tool used as a brush for sprinkling the water oblations. Apart from the religious worship, some trees in blossom are a common metaphor for the whole festival. This refers particularly to the night jasmine (B. *Śiuli or*

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[86] *Desmostachya bipinnata* (L.) Staff., *Eragrostis cynosuroides* (Retz.) Beauv., (*Poaceae*). Grows all over India, particularly near water sources. It is also used in production of paper, ropes, and thatches and as a cattle fodder.

ś ephā li/ś ephā likā),[87] which starts blossoming just before the Durgā pū jā . Its intense smell reminds the passers-by about the coming festival and arouses in them the feelings connected with the festive atmosphere, devotion, family gatherings, feasting and pandal-hopping.

This functional distinction is *etic* not an *emic* one; it does not reflect the cognitive map of ritualists (*pū jā rī* s) and worshippers. The most general vernacular category of *pū jā dravya*, the articles for worship, covers offerings, ritualist' s tools as well as images and other representations of deities. It will be shown later that a certain object may act both as an offering and as a representation of the deity to whom it is offered. Some other vernacular categories and subcategories will be mentioned as well in following paragraphs. It is not, however, an ambition of this chapter to outline and interpret the whole vernacular cognitive map concerning Durgā pū jā .

First, the goddess is offered a wood-apple tree (*bilva, ś rī phala,* B. *bel*)[88] as a seat. In fact, Durgā is invoked in the form of the tree which serves as a representation of the goddess rather then an offering. This part of *pū jā* called " awakening" (*bodhana*) takes place either on daytime of *kṛ ṣ ṇ anavamī* or on the evening of *ṣ aṣ ṭ hī* , as the manual for ritualists (*pū jā paddhati*) says:

Kṛ ṣ ṇ anavamyā dikalpe kṛ ṣ ṇ anavamyā ṃ divā , ṣ aṣ ṭ hyā ṃ sā yaṃ vā ,
anyeṣ u kalpeṣ u ṣ aṣ ṭ hyā ṃ sā yameva bilvavṛ kṣ e devī ṃ bodhayet.[89]

A stem of wood apple with a pair of fruits (B. *phalyugma sahita beler ḍ ā l*) is the object of worship. Wood-apple is one of the most extensively used plants in *pū jā* s. It is a representation of Ś iva and its leaves are supposed to be his most favourite offering. It is also the central element of the myth related to Ś iva' s festival Ś ivarā trī . Typical trefoil symbolises the three qualities (*guṇ a*), Ś iva' s

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[87] *Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* L. (*Oleaceae*).

[88] *Aegle marmelos* (L.) Correa, (*Rutaceae*).

[89] This verse from *Kā likā purā ṇ a* is sourced from Vidyā vā ridhi (s. a.:19).

three eyes, his trident, or three states of man (*avasthā traya*) – waking, dreaming and sleeping.

In another context, the relation of wood-apple with the goddess Lakṣmī is particularly notable. Lakṣmī is considered to reside in the wood-apple tree. One of her appellatives is *bilvapattrikā*. Another appelative of Lakṣmī is Śrī and common designation of wood-apple is *śrī phala*. According to *Bṛhaddharmapurāṇa*, Lakṣmī once worshipped Śiva and in supreme devotion cut off her breast and offered it to him instead of a missing lotus. Śiva, moved by her devotion, made an appearance and turned the breast into a wood-apple. From then on, the tree is grown near his temples to remind this event. Another tradition holds that the wood-apple tree originated in a cow-dung produced by Lakṣmī who descended on earth in the form of a cow.

Besides its symbolic value, medical uses are no less important. Decoction from root, leaves, unripe fruit, and sherbet prepared from a ripe fruit are a remedy against fever and acute dysentery. Leaves are used as an eye poultice. Seed oil has antiseptic and antimycotic effects (Bera, D' Rozario and Mukherji 1999: 29-34). Products of the wood-apple tree are widely used in ayurveda[90] and help to relieve from constipation (Siṃha 1382:116).

Referring to the use of wood-apple in the *bodhana* rite, Berkson in her psychoanalytical interpretation of the Mahiṣāsuramardinī myth considers this wood-apple stem a „ symbol for the male“ and associates the presenting of the stem to the goddess with the primitive marriage rites (Berkson 1997:216-217). Östör (1991:187) holds the view that the tree is a dual symbol which stands for both Durgā and Śiva.

During the royal *pūjā* of Viṣṇupur, which he described (Östör 1980: 42-49), the rite of *bodhana* took place on *kṛṣṇanavamī* on a special platform called (B. *beltalā*) inside the former palace complex. The tree was represented by its branch as the real tree has long since disappeared. The branch was worshipped together with a painting of Durgā (B. *durgā paṭ*) and the sacred basil plant (*tulasī*)[91] representing, again dually, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī.[92] In the next stage a

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[90] *ibid*.

[91] *Ocimum sanctum* L. (*Lamiaceae*). Roots, leaves, blooms and seeds have various medical effects, mostly to relieve difficulties in breathing. Juice from leaves is a remedy against fever, difficulties in digestion,

representation of Durgā in a bunch of nine plants, so called *navapattrikā* (B. *nabapatrikā*) came to the stage. It was placed under the *durgā paṭ* and worshipped together with the former objects.

The complex royal festival in *Viṣ ṇ upur* included the worship of three idols of Durgā , each of them having been worshipped separately, and spanned over sixteen days. In ordinary shorter versions of Durgā pū jā , the *bodhana* takes place separately on *ṣ aṣ ṭ hī* and *navapattrikā pū jā* comes only on *saptamī* . This was the case of the spring Durgā pū jā I observed in Calcutta. In the morning of *saptamī* , the plants forming *navapattrikā* were tied together by a yellowish thread and by twigs of yet another plant called *aparā jitā* .[93] Each of the nine plants represents an individual goddess, an aspect or appearance (*adhiṣ ṭ hā na*) of Durgā , and all together stand for Durgā herself.

Yajamā na took the bunch to the bank of Huglī and purified it with water from the river. This was a very simplified version of the prescribed bath of the *navapattrikā* which should be sprinkled with waters from eight different holy places. In earlier times, long processions with musicians accompanied the ritual of *navapattrikā snā na*. When *yajamā na* brought the bunch of plants back to the place of worship, it was wrapped in a red bordered white *ś ā rī* and vermilion was smeared on its leaves. Then, before the actual begining of worship, it was fixed to a column by the right side of Durgā .

The most common practice, however, is to fix the *navapattrikā* by the right side of Gaṇ eś a. In popular interpretation the bunch of plants, of which a banana stem is the most dominant one, is termed " the banana wife" (B. *kalā bau*). Gaṇ eś a is told to have been very desirous for a wife but could not find any because of his wierd appearance. He was thus married off to the tree before he could realise that the thing in *ś ā rī* was not a real bride. Thus far the popular explanation goes.

Let us now explore the „ official" symbolism of *navapattrikā* .

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tuberculosis, bacterial infections. Seeds remedy constipation; leaves with raw turmeric and sugarcane molasses relieve skin allergies. Leaves mashed with bent grass (*dū rvā*) cool insect bites. See Bera, D' Rozario and Mukherji (1999:95-99).

[92] As a representation of Viṣ ṇ u and/or Lakṣ mī , basil is planted on special altars (*tulasī vṛ ndā vana,* B. *tulsī mañca*) in most of Bengali rural households. Women worship the plant at dusk by lighting oil lamps.

[93] *Clitoria ternatea* L. (*Fabaceae*).

The *navapattrikā pūjā* takes place towards the end of *saptamī*, being preceded by the main *pūjā* (B. *pradhān pūjā*) and followed by the *pūjā* of the aspects of Durgā that are the "covers" (*āvaraṇa*) of the goddess. Each plant is worshipped by mantras individually. The first one is plantain (*rambhā*, B. also *kalā*)[94] which represents the goddess Brahmāṇī, Brahma's *śakti*.[95] She is invoked in the form of plantain by the mantra:

„*oṃ rambhādhiṣṭhā tri brahmāṇi ihā gaccha*"

(Aum, Brahmāṇī presiding over the plantain tree, come here.)

After the invocation the goddess is imagined to be already present. Next she is hailed by the mantra:

„*oṃ rambhādhiṣṭhā tryai brahmāṇyai namaḥ*"

(Aum, hail to Brahmāṇī presiding over the plantain tree.)

Then the *purohita* worships the goddess and finally says a prayer by the mantra:

„*oṃ durge devi samāgaccha sānnidhyamiha kalpaya*
rambhārūpeṇa sarvatra śāntiṃ kuru namohastate"

(Aum, Goddess Durgā descend upon here and remain near
in the form of the plantain tree, bring peace far and wide, I salute Thee.)

The same structure is kept with the rest of the plant-deities as well. I will not, therefore, translate all the verses, but just the referents they contain. The second one is taro (*kacvī*, B. *kacu*),[96] also called coco or coco-yam in English. This plant

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[94] *Musa Sp.* (*Musaceae*).

[95] The masculine form of this term – Rambha – is a name of Mahiṣāsura's demon father. There is, however, no proof that this linguistic similarity would be mythologically significant.

[96] *Colocasia esculenta* (L.) Schott. *Colocasia antiquorum* Schott., (*Araceae*). Freshly harvested bulbs contain poison. Comestible only when boiled or fried.

with edible bulbs represents the goddess Kālikā, one of Durgā's female helpers in the battle with Mahiṣāsura. The virgin (kumārī) who personates the goddess Durgā during the Durgāpūjā, is termed Kālikā if she is four years old. Kālikā is also known as an appellative of Kālī.

The third plant of *navapattrikā* is turmeric (*haridrā* B. also *halud*)[97] which represents Durgā herself. The fourth plant is Sesbania (*jayantī*)[98] which stands for the goddess Kārttikī, Kārttikeya's *śakti*, and also an appellation of Durgā. The fifth worshipped plant is again a branch of the wood-apple tree, which stands at this point of worship for Śiva's *śakti*, the goddess Śivā. The sixth plant is pomegranate (*dāḍimī*, B. *dāṛisva/dālim*)[99], represented by a branch, which stands for the goddess Raktadantikā, „ the red-toothed one", another aspect of Durgā mentioned also in the *Devī-Māhātmya*. The seventh item of *navapattrikā* is a branch of the asoka tree, also kown as the tree sorrowless (*aśoka,* B. *aśok*)[100]. It symbolises the goddess Śokarahitā – „ the one void of sorrow".

The eighth plant to be worshipped is giant taro also known as „ elephant ears" (*māna*, B. *mān/mānkacu*).[101] It is associated with the goddess Cāmuṇḍā, a terrible form of *śakti*, often identified both with Durgā and Kālī. As a helper of Durgā in in the battle with Mahiṣāsura she killed the demons Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa. Cāmuṇḍā is sometimes included into the group of goddesses called *mātṛkās*, e.g., by the *Varāhapurāṇa* where she is associated with the inauspicious emotion of depravity (c.f. Kinsley 1987:159). The last plant of *navapattrikā* is the most important agricultural crop and source of the most widespread staple – paddy (*dhānya*, B. *dhān*),[102] which represents the goddess Lakṣmī. At the end of the *navapattrikā pūjā*, Durgā as represented in the bunch of the nine plants is hailed by the mantra:

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[97] *Curcuma longa* L. (*Zingiberaceae*).

[98] *Sesbania sesban* (L.) Merr. *S. aegyptiaca* (Poir.) (*Fabaceae*).

[99] *Punica granatum* L. (*Punicaceae*).

[100] *Polyalthia longifolia* Thw. (*Annonaceae*). Ground blooms mixed with water are a remedy for dysentery. See Siṅha (1382:22).

[101] *Alocasia macrorrhizos* (L.) Schott., (*Araceae*). Synonyms: *Alocasia alba* Schott, *Alocasia crassifolia* Engler, *Alocasia indica* (Lour.) Spach, *Alocasia macrorrhiza* (L.) Schott, *Arum indicum* Lour., *Colocasia indica* (Lour.) Kunth.

[102] *Oryza sativa* L. (*Poaceae*).

„ *oṃ navapattrikā vā sinyai durgā yai namaḥ* "

(Aum, hail to Durgā residing in the bunch of nine plants.)

And told a prayer by the mantra:

„ *oṃ pattrike navadurge tvaṃ mahā deva manorame.*
pū jā ṃ samastā ṃ saṃ gṛ hya rakṣ a mā m tridaś eś vari."

(May Thou, in Thy nine-fold plant form, so dear to Mahā deva,
accept my worship, and may Thou save me from harm, Oh Lady of the Gods.
)

Navapattrikā is immersed on the tenth day (*daś amī*) of the festival together with the idol. Women of a family or of a neighbourhood bide it their farewells and treat it in the same way as they treat the idol – feed it with sweets, betel, a *bel* leave etc., as they would treat their daughter who is about to leave along with her children to her husbands house for the next long year. The metaphoric cycle of *pū jā* comes to its end.

There is, however, yet another plant that serves as a symbolic representation of Durgā . It is *aparā jitā* , literally „ the undefeated one" , the same plant that had been previously used to tight up the plants forming *navapattrikā* and that had not been attributed its own symbolism.[103] The *aparā jitā pū jā* takes place on *daś amī* and follows the immersion (*visarjana*) of the main ritual vessel (*ghaṭ a*), that stands in front of Durgā ' s clay idol during the whole Durgā pū jā .[104] The plant is brought to the place of worship and offered *pū jā* as if it was Durgā herself. The rationale behind this *pū jā* is that human devotees never want to be defeated (*parā jita*), misled by their senses, beguiled by social evils like *kā ma*,

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[103] Also the virgin (*kumā rī*) who personates the goddess Durgā during the Durgā pū jā , is termed
Aparā jitā if she is ten years old.

[104] Real abodes of the deities are not their idols but ritual vessels (*ghaṭ a*), placed in front of the idols.

krodha etc. Therefore, they invoke the *śakti* of Durgā in the form of *aparājitā* to avoid moral wrongdoing.

I have described the plant representations of Durgā as they are worshipped during her annual festival. In all of them the plant stands for a goddess, either Durgā herself or its aspect under different name. Semantically different though functionally similar case is the widespread practice following the rule that any auspicious flower can be used as a substitute for the living virgin during the *kumārī pūjā*. To simplify the ritual, a not so easily procurable representation of the goddess is substituted with one that is always at hand. The symbolism is two-fold: the flower stands for the virgin who in turn stands for Durgā.

Flowers (blooms) often act as a kind of variables in *pūjā*s.[105] I mean the fact that the meaning of a flower in a ritual is often determined not by the kind or species of the flower in terms of native taxonomy (e.g., *dhānya* stands for Lakṣmī), but purely by its syntactic position among other ritual objects and actions. At one point of the ritual, for example, a lotus bloom (*padma*)[106] may stand for the virgin representing the goddess. Later, it is offered to the goddess as a flower offering; that is without symbolising anything else. Finally, during the rite called *puṣpāñjali*, the same kind of bloom is offered as *hṛdpuṣpa,* a symbol for the heart of the devotee. The offering of flower (B. *puṣpa nibedan*) expresses the basic principle of *pūjā*. To offer the bloom is, symbolically, to offer one's heart (B. *nijer hṛday nibedan karā*).

A parallel case to the substitution of the virgin by a lotus occurs when a fruit functions as a substitute for animal sacrifice. Various kinds of pumpkin (B. *kumṛo*), often wax gourd (B. *cāl-kumṛo*),[107] a bunch of paddy, cucumber (B. *śasā*), banana or sugercane (*ikṣu* B. *āk, ākh*)[108] thus stand for the sacrificial buffalo (*mahiṣa*). Östör (1980:183) reports that in the royal *pūjā* in *Viṣṇupur*, „rice and pulses mixed together constitute the sacrificial animal; the seven small piles of

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[105] For some general rules pertaining to the use of flowers in *pūjā*s see Banerji (1992:151).

[106] *Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn. , *Nelumbo speciosum* Willd., *(Nymphaeaceae)*.

[107] *Cucurbita hispida* Thunb., (*Cucurbitaceae*), synonyms *Benincasa cerifera* Savi., *Benincasa cylindrica* Hort. ex Ser., *Benincasa vacua* (F.Muell.) F.Muell.

[108] *Saccharum officinarum* (*Gramineae*), synonyms *Saccharatum hybridum* hort., *Saccharum officinale* Salisb., *Saccharatum violaceum* Tussac.

grain made by the priest constitute the sacrifice and stand for the seven *ś akti*s of the goddess.“ [109]

Dozens of other plants or their parts are offered as comestibles, purifiers, or items suposed to please the deity. Water given to the divine guest for rinsing her mouth (*ā camanī ya*) is made fragrant by adding cloves (*lavaṃ gaka*, B. *labaṅ ga*)[110] and flowers of the elengi tree (*bakula*, B. *bakul*).[111] Later a twig of the nimb tree (*nimba*, B. *nim*)[112] is offered as a toothbrush.[113] As regards the comestibles, different preparations of rice are the most important. Sunned rice (*akṣ ata*, B. also *ā tap-cā ul*, *ā tap-taṇ ḍ ul*) is offered on many occasions. The *pū jā* on *daś amī* requires flattened rice (*cipiṭ aka*) and parched rice coated with sugar or molasses (B. *muṛ ki*).

Other plant products (vegetables and fruits) along with sweets and milk products form basis of food offerings (*naivedya*, B. *naibedya*). According to common perception, all food that Bengalis eat over the year should be placed before Durgā on the occasion of her festival. In practice this refers to vegetarian food though the proper tantric method of worship includes non-vegetarian items. After having been offered eatables, the goddess is given betel-leaves (B. *pā n*) [114] as a digestive.

Many times during the *pū jā*, the idols are decorated with fresh flower garlands (*puṣ pamā lā*)[115] and with a garland of leaves of the wood-apple tree (*bilvapattra mā lā*). Moreover, the idols are given 108 plants/pieces of the bent

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[109] See Östör (1980:183).

[110] *Jambosa caryophyllus*, synonym. *Eugenia caryophyllata*, (*Myrtaceae*).

[111] *Mimusops elengi* L., (*Sapotaceae*), Elengi tree, fragrant white flowers, blooming from July to December. Flowers and fruits have antiseptic effects and are used for cleaning the mouth and gargling. See Siṅ ha (1382:108).

[112] *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss. (*Meliaceae*). Water boiled with Nimb tree leaves and oil extracted from its wood heal skin diseases. The juice of bark is used as tonic. See Siṅ ha (1382:104).

[113] Nimb twig is widely used as toothbrush. One end of the twig is chewed to make the brush. The wood contains antiseptic and mouth refreshing substances that substitute toothpaste.

[114] *Piper betle* L., (*Piperaceae*).

[115] Mostly made of *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* L, (*Malvaceae*), (*javā /japā*, B. *jabā*), hibiscus or china-rose; *Tagetes sp.*, (*Asteraceae*), (B. *g° ā dā*), marigold; and *Polianthes Tuberosa* L. (*Agavaceae*), (*rajanī gandhā*), tuberose.

grass (*dūrvā*, B. *dūrbā*, in this form B. *aṣṭottarśata dūrbā*).[116] Lotus blooms may be handed over to the palms of the idols together with fresh garlands.

A blend of leaves of five auspicious trees (*pañcapallava*) is required in many sequences of the *pūjā*. The combination I had observed included leaves of the asoka tree (*aśoka*), the mango tree (*āmra*, B. *ām*),[117] the sacred fig tree (*aśvattha*, B. also *aśath*),[118] another kind of fig tree (*yajñodumbara/ḍumbara*, B. *ḍumur*)[119] and the banyan tree (*vaṭa*, B. *baṭ*).[120] There are, however, different combinations of leaves known under the same term and the wood-apple tree and the elengi tree are likely to appear in the set.[121]

So called "five grains" (*pañcaśasya*) exhibit variability as well. The most common components are paddy (*dhānya*, B. *dhān*), pigeon-pea (*mudga*)[122], barley (*yava*, B. *yab*)[123], oat (B. *jaɪ*)[124], kidney bean (B. *śim*)[125], sesam and green gram (*māṣa*, B. *māṣ*, *māṣkalāɪ*).[126]

Other plant products listed as indispensable items for Durgā pūjā are: white mustard seed (*śvetasarṣapa*),[127] sesame (*tila*),[128] saffron (*kuṅkuma*),[129] flowers of the yellow myrobalan tree (*harītakī*),[130] individual leaves of the wood-apple tree, camphor (*karpūra*),[131] a nosegay of hibiscus flowers (B. *jabā phūler toṛā*),

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[116] *Cynodon dactylon* (L.) Pers., (*Poaceae*). Grows all over India, used also as cattle fodder. According to *Matsyapurāṇa* (22.29), *dūrvā* originated from the hair and breath of Varāha, Viṣṇu's boar *avatāra*. See Sullivan (1997), Heading Darbha.

[117] *Mangifera indica* L., (*Anacardiaceae*). Mango leaf is an emblem of well-being and prosperity.

[118] *Ficus religiosa* Decne. ex Miq.; Forsk.; L. (*Moraceae*).

[119] *Ficus glomerata* (*Moraceae*).

[120] *Ficus bengalensis* L. (*Moraceae*).

[121] See the entry *pañcapallava* in the Sanskrit-English dictionary by Monier-Williams.

[122] *Phaseolus Mungo* L., (*Fabaceae*).

[123] *Hordeum vulgare* L. subsp. *hexastichum* (L.) Schinz et Kell., (*Poaceae*).

[124] *Avena fatua* L. (*Poaceae*).

[125] *Phaseolus vulgaris* L., (*Fabaceae*).

[126] *Phaseolus Roxburghii* Wight. (*Fabaceae*).

[127] *Sinapis alba* L. subsp. *Alba*. Synonyms: *Brassica foliosa* (Willd.) Samp., *Brassica alba* (L.) Rabenh., *Brassica hirta* Moench., *Brassica alba* (L.) Boiss. (*Brassicaceae*).

[128] *Sesamum Indicum* L. (*Pedaliaceae*).

[129] *Crocus sativus* L. *Crocus autumnalis* Mill., *Crocus sativa* Linne., (*Iridaceae*).

[130] *Terminalia chebula* Retz. (*Combretaceae*).

[131] *Cinnamomum camphora* (L.) Nees ex. Eberm., synonym *Camphora officinarum*, (*Lauraceae*), *Camphor Laurel*, originally from China and Japan, source of camphor.

sandalwood paste (*candanapaṅka*) prepared by crushing white (*śveta*) and red (B. *rakta* or *lāl*) sandalwood (*candan,* B. also *candan-kāṭh*).[132] Cane-sugar is an ingredient of *madhuparka*. An unripe coconut (B. *ḍāb*)[133] with prominent inflorescence (in this form termed B. *saśīṣ ḍāb*) is very important item which is placed onto every ritual vessel (*ghaṭa*) containing the *prāṇa* of any deity. On other occasions, this vessel painted with ornaments and topped with the *saśīṣ ḍāb* is a symbol of auspiciousness and festivity.

I opened this section by pointing out the relation between the symbolic and practical use of plants. The use of plants in the context of Durgā pūjā festival was presented here with an effort to keep the reference between the botanical nomenclature, corresponding ethnotaxonomical terms in Sanskrit and Bengali, and the symbolic function of the plants in particular rites, so that a comparison with the use of plants in other Hindu rituals or, perhaps, with ritual use of the same species in different cultures is made possible. At first sight it becomes apparent that virtually all listed plants may be considered, in one or another way, useful in practical sense. It is also obvious, however, that importance of a plant in a ritual does not always reflect its practical value. Historically, there are reasons to assume that some aspects of present day Durgā pūjā originated in folk rites of rural agriculturalists. For people whose well-being depends on seasonal yields it makes sense to associate the goddess of wealth (Lakṣmī) with the most important crop and to worship her with grains. Kinsley (1987:95-115) recognises three facets of Durgā expressed in her festival: the warrior goddess and slayer of the buffalo demon, the married-off daughter returning home and, finally, the personified power of plant fertility. He finds the last facet particularly evident in *navapattrikā pūjā*.

What might explain the ritual use of grains, however, wouldn't account for the use of other plants. Any attempt at systematic interpretation clashes with the fact that Durgā pūjā festival is composed of elements originating in various historical and cultural contexts. Some ritual sequences, objects and actions point to tantrism, others to rural folk rites, to the pattern of Vedic sacrifice, to the colonial aesthetics... The syncretism does not happen in a mechanical manner. The layers of meaning

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[132] White sandal - *Santalum album* L., (*Santalaceae*). Also used as an ingredience in cosmetics. Red sandal - *Pterocarpus santalinus* L.f., (*Fabaceae*), also a source of red dye.

[133] *Cocos nucifera* L., (*Arecaceae*).

overlap and exegetical interpretations differ. It may well be plausible to assume that what is now the Śākta worship of Durgā in the form of nine plants had originally roots in the environment of rural agriculturalists. At the same time, however, a big part of native visitors may hold the view that *navapattrikā* is a funny banana wife of *Gaṇeśa*.

VI.

Discussion

Let me start the discussion of the presented material with a short detour through vernacular Bengali plant classification. The importance of the morphological and behavioural features of species as compared to their practical importance as a determinant of their ethno-taxa has already been mentioned. So was the assumption that folk taxonomies follow roughly the same system of differences and similarities as scientific classification. The following two examples will allow us a closer look at how it works.

The Bengali term *kalā phul*, literally " banana flower" , refers to the decorative and medicinal plant *Canna orientalis* (Rosc.) of *Cannaceae* family. *Kalā* or *kalā gāch* is a Bengali term for plantain, *Musa Sp.* of *Musaceae* family. *Phul* means " flower" or " bloom" and *gāch* is Bengali for " tree" or " plant" . Apparently, the striking similarity between the two plants at the first stage of their growths is behind the derivation of the former's ethnobotanical name from the latter's. An analogous example is that of the term *belphul*, *Jasminum sambac* (L.) of *Oleaceae* family, and the name of the wood-apple tree *bel*, *Aegle marmelos* (L.) Correa., of *Rutaceae* family.

In the first example, both plants are very close botanically as *Cannaceae* and *Musaceae* are neighbouring families and together form a part of the *Zingiberales* order. The other pair gives a different picture. While the *Rutaceae* family belongs to the *Sapindales* order, the *Oleaceae* family is a branch of the *Scrophulariales* order. Both orders fall within the *Magnoliopsida* class but their distance on the imaginary line of evolution is clearly rather great.

This, however, does not undermine the basic hypothesis that ethnobotanical terms are intuitively formed, though with much less precision, along the same sets of

similarities and dissimilarities as scientific classification into taxa and species. *Kalā phul* is clearly derived from *kalā gā ch* and not vice versa since *kalā* can stand both for plantain in general and its fruit. Although *gā ch* means plant or herb as well, it denotes tree in the first place. *Phul* clearly refers to flower. The two plants thus belong to different ethno-taxa. *Kalā* indicates just the similarity of their appearance, not taxonomical closeness.[134] The same is true of the second pair and the relative distance of its constituents doesn't go against the general rule. The salience of morphological and behavioural features in species, however, is not significant only in systems of relative classification.

The examples of the use of *bandhū ka* are largely limited to colour symbolism. The fact that redness of the bloom is so salient a morphological feature of this plant that the entire species stands metonymically for the colour in many different texts ranging in genres from *kā vya* to *tantra* can be further supported by lexical evidence. According to Monier-Williams´ Sanskrit dictionary, *Pentapetes Phoenicea* is a very common referent of the Sanskrit plant names based on a morpheme signifying redness, *e.g., raktaka*, *raktapuṣ pa*, *raktavarga*, *rā ga*, *rā gapuṣ pa*, *rā gaprasava*. Previous discussion of *bandhū ka* reveals that the authors of religious treatises shared in the pool of plant-related metaphorical expressions used by the authors of *kā vya* poetry. In any case, the metaphor is based on a morphologically salient feature of the plant.

In *Devī -Mā hā tmya*, there is also goddess Raktadantikā , as I have already mentioned, whose teeth will become as red as the flower of pomegranate (*raktā dantā bhaviṣ yanti dā ḍ imī kusumopamā ḥ*)[135] while devouring demons. She is also one of the nine-plant forms of Durgā . The flower of pomegranate displays little variability in terms of colour and hue, which makes it a particularly salient species for this symbolic association. As in the case of *bandhū ka*, there are other associations with pomegranate found in devotional literature as well as in poetry. To give just one example, the 560th name of the goddess Lalitā out of her one thousand names

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[134] Txonomical closness would be indicated by the reverse order of lexical constituents as in *bicikalā* , literally seed-plantain.

[135] *Devī -Mā hā tmya* 11.44.2

(*Lalitā sahasranā ma*) is the one shining like a pomegranate flower (*dā ḍ imī kusumaprabhā*).[136]

Pomegranate and *bandhū ka* both qualify the two respective goddesses iconographically in terms of colour. In both cases the use of these flowers seems to be purely poetic as examples from other sources show. There does not seem to be deeper symbolic association between the particular deity and the species. On the other hand, the association of Ś ā kambharī and Lakṣ mī with paddy is recurrent in textual sources as well as in ritual practice. *Kuś a* is also intrinsically linked to Brahmā ṇ ī as her attribute and, interestingly, acquires the function of a weapon.

The example of butterfly pea shows still more complex iconicity. Besides signifying the pea, (*aparā jitā*), literally " the indefeasible one" , is an appellative of the goddess Durgā and the plant serves as her symbolic representation in a ritual sequence called *aparā jitā pū jā* , which takes place on *daś amī* , the last day of Durgā pū jā . Also the virgin (*kumā rī*) who impersonates the goddess Durgā during the ritual virgin worship (*kumā rī pū jā*), is termed *aparā jitā* if she is ten years old. In the ritual context of right-hand tantra, however, the plant is a symbolic substitute for the female part (*yoni*) in ritual sexual union.[137] It is also interesting that Krittibas linked this flower to sexual excitement by attributing to *aparā jitā* the line " by which Durgā is pleased" (*yā te Durgā haraṣ itā*) in his list of flowers that Rā ma arranged for worship, and that Krittibas did so despite the fact that the whole list is clearly a poetic aggregation of plant names, which is by structure and content closer to descriptions of nature in classical Sanskrit poetry

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[136] *Lalitā sahasranā ma* 114.1

[137] " The substitutional Tattvas of Pashvacara also do not answer to their names, being other substances which are taken as substitutes of wine, meat, fish (see *Kulacudamani; Bhairavayamala,* Ch. I). These have been variously described and sometimes as follows: In lieu of wine the Pashu should, if a Brahmana, take milk, if a Kshattriya ghee, if a Vaishya honey, and if a Shudra a liquor made from rice. Coconut water in a bell-metal utensil is also taken as a substitute. Salt, ginger, sesamum, wheat beans (Mashakalai) and garlic are some of the substitutes for meat; the white brinjal vegetable, red radish, masur (a kind of gram), red sesamum and Paniphala (an aquatic plant) take the place of fish. Paddy, rice, wheat and grain generally are Mudra both in Tamasik (Pashvacara) and Rajasik (Viracara) Sadhanas. In lieu of Maithuna there may be an offering of flowers with the hands formed into the gesture called Kachapa-mudra, the union of the Karavira flower (representative of the Linga) with the Aprajita (Clitoria) flower which is shaped as and represents the female Yoni and other substitutes, or there may be union with the Sadhaka's wife. On this and some other matters here dealt with there is variant practice" (Woodroffe: 1918: chap. 27).

than to actual plants used for worship. *Haraṣ itā* means both pleased and sexually excited; the noun from the same root, i. e. *harṣ a*, also means pleasure as well as erection.

Aparā jitā is fit to denote the female part in sexual union as its blooms are strongly reminiscent of female genitals. Quite independently of the tantrics, Carolus Linnaeus while making the first scientific taxonomy named this plant, struck by the uncanny resemblance, *Clitoria ternatea*. It may be concluded without exaggeration that butterfly pea is fitter to symbolise female genitals then other plants, say, plantain. Such examples further testify to morphological and behavioural saliency being a reason for certain species becoming symbols.

Also lotus seems to be better to think then to eat (though its roots are edible and a part of Bengali cuisine as well). It is favourite object of poetic as well as religious imagery for qualities that are practically useless. As an aquatic plant rooted in mud and forming prominent flowers on the water surface and, in some forms, flowering at night it became a symbol of spiritual upliftment. Lotus has been metaphorically related to important body parts (face, uterus, eyes, hands) it has been source of iconographical as well as social distinction, it has symbolised the whole universe in the form of mandalas and the list could continue. While the basic level of its " semantic fitness" is the morphological and behavioural saliency, what does a particular lotus flower stand for depends on its structural position within a ritual, or a narrative for that matter. The same is true to lesser degree of *Clitoria ternatea* which too is used for garlands offered to Durgā and Kā lī or as a part of flower offering. The exegetical meanings are then the topmost level. Needless to repeat that lotus is a complex case and that in the case of other plants the three levels may easily conflate.

By collecting various exegetical interpretations (both historical and contemporary) of the meaning of plants and their ritual use, different contexts may be explored and evolution of the ritual and its dynamics traced. In synchronic perspective, rules pertaining to the use of plants reveal the " syntax" of the ritual actions. When the virgin is replaced by a lotus or when a pumpkin is cut instead of the animal sacrifice, ritual is simplified (e.g., all the ritual actions to be done before the girl is ready to play her role are omitted) but structurally unchallenged (*kumā rī pū jā* does take place). Thanks to such symbolical substitutions,

Durgā pūjā may be condensed into two days or extended up to sixteen days. Similarly, the "five grains" or "five leaves" allow certain variability of component species but as a whole are an indispensable item.

On semantic level, different kinds of symbolic relationships may be identified. Substitution of the throat of the buffalo with a pumpkin, sugar cane or banana is metaphoric as it is based on similarity in shape. The fragrance of *śiuli* flowers stands metonymically – on the basis of inner relation – for the festive season. The link between a plant and a deity sometimes points to etymololgy (e.g., when *aśoka* tree represents the goddess *śokarahitā*); in other cases a physical characteristic or profane use of the plant are suggestive (as when the most important crop is identified with the goddess of wealth). This could further develop into a general semantics of ritual plants and, perhaps other ritual objects as well.

6. The goddess of the people into an icon for the nation:

Imaging Bhāratmātā in modern Bengal

This chapter deals with an Indian national symbol of mother goddess as representing India. Bhāratmātā, or Mother India, is an example of traditional religious symbolism being redressed and harnessed for the worldly task of political emancipation. Her creation represents one of the culmination points of stirring cultural activity in the nineteenth century Bengal. In her image a successful projection of indigenous modernity was achieved and a symbol of national identity was painfully sought.

Nineteenth century gave birth to movements for national emancipation in Europe as well as in many parts of Asia. Some nationalisms were more straightforward in articulating their political agendas while others, particularly those of peoples under direct foreign rule, emphasised for long periods cultural aspect of their emancipation. This is the case of both Czech national awakening and Bengali Renaissance. Their development shows some striking parallels.

On the other hand there is a great difference in their outcomes. The former culminated in an ethnically defined state of Czechs and Slovaks and carried along the seed of future conflict with German and Hungarian minorities and eventual dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Bengali Renaissance remained largely a cultural movement but gave strong impetus to wider pan-Indian nationalism which was able to transcend ethnic and language differences, however not the Hindu-Muslim religious divide, turning it eventually into a political one. While Czechs imagined themselves as a community of people who shared common ethnic origin and language, the unifying idea of Indian nationalism was a metaphorical family of Mother India's children who are united in sacred brotherhood. In both cases, however, the pattern of symbolic imagination involved presumes ensuing historical processes.

This chapter revolves around the historical conditions, which lead to the growth of patriotic sentiments in Bengali colonial society and to the literary creation of Bhāratmātā. Her conception represents one of the culmination points of stirring cultural activity in the nineteenth century Bengal. In her image a successful projection of indigenous modernity was achieved and a popular symbol of national

identity found. The discourse on Mother India also poses some challenges to the theory of nationalism, which will be discussed in the conclusion.

We can start with a simple question: How is it ever possible that endlessly diverse peoples of present day India can imagine themselves as a single community? Not taking into account two brief historical periods when most of the Indian subcontinent was united under a more or less centralised rule, it was only at the peak of the British Raj that all South Asians become subjects of single bureaucratic machinery and its subsidiaries. The new pan-Indian identity was painfully carved out both within and against this framework.

In order to make the particularities of Indian nationalism stand out we should revert to the classical theory of nationalism by Benedict Anderson outlined in his famous book " Imagined Communities" . He defines a nation as:

„ … an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. ... The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them ... has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. ... It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. ... Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991:6-7, italics original).

Having thus defined the nation, Anderson goes on to elaborate three modular forms on nationalism, namely the Creole nationalism of Latin America where imposition of a common colonial language combined with the establishment of artificial boundaries created a Creole administrative elite which considered itself Spanish but never had been accepted as such. Second, there is the kind of Blut-und-Boden ruralistic nationalism to which we Czechs do subscribe gladly (Anderson terms it " vernacular nationalism"), and finally the imperial nationalisms of, e.g.,

Romanov Russia or Austro-Hungarian Empire. Anderson considered all nationalisms of the colonised nations as derivative of these three modular forms and gave examples to this effect, mostly from South-Eastern Asia.

The crucial precondition to all three forms was the invention of the printing-press and it was the printing-press capitalism which resulted in the standardisation of languages within a certain territory and the communities of readers of publications in those standardised languages gradually developed into politically aspiring national communities: „ What, in a positive sense, made the new communities imaginable was a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity" (Anderson 1991:42-43). Interestingly, the first novels written a given language played an important role in this process. Usually they portrayed a typical environment (e.g., a typical village and countryside), an imaginary topos the readers could readily identify with.

Increasing availability of modern education combined with official nationalism of colonial empires resulted in the inclusion of European national histories and related symbolic imagery into curricula of indigenous elites (*ibid.*:118). The first generation fully educated according modern European curricula was consequently equipped with the concept of nation and national consciousness. The hierarchical system of education also created new network of " pilgrimage destinations" which directed journeys of new adepts in as much civil servants journeyed between administrative centres and the periphery: „ The interlock between particular educational and administrative pilgrimages provided the territorial base for the new , imagined communities' in which the natives could come to see themselves as , nationals' " (*ibid.*:140).

The historian and theoretician of post-colonialism, Partha Chatterjee, criticised Anderson for equating nationalism with overtly political activity. Because of this fallacy, the third world nationalisms became in Anderson's theory only derivates of the three modular forms. Anderson thus, in Chatterjee's view, underestimates the indigenous creative contribution of non-western nationalisms. As Chatterjee (1993:5) says: „ The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but on a difference with the ' modular' forms of the national society propagated by the

modern West." In India the early nationalists had struggled on the cultural front long before they engaged politically with the British power. They strived first to reform the indigenous society within what they thought was its inner spiritual domain while acknowledging initially British supremacy in the outer material domain. Reform of religion thus became a central issue and a domain of political contest with relatively less interference by the imperial power. The colonial administration's stern control of any overtly political activity thus contributed to the politicisation of religion, a legacy with many disastrous consequences for India's post-independence development.

By the beginning of the 19th century, the new indigenous elites of British India were already sufficiently established and stratified so that a movement of cultural emancipation could successfully take ground. The status and wealth of these nouveau-riches families was based on collaboration with the British for whom they acted as middlemen at different levels of colonial administration. As their position consolidated, they started emancipating themselves from their masters and made first steps towards a new delimitation of their identity. It was around this time when a movement of cultural emancipation called Bengali Renaissance emerged.

This movement, conceived and born entirely by the English-educated upper class Bengali intellectuals in the urban milieu of cosmopolitan Calcutta, aimed in different ways at reinventing indigenous culture in the situation of colonial domination. In particular, this endeavour consisted in reforming native social customs, religious practices, literature and art so that they could withstand the pressure of the overwhelming Western civilisation that proved to be more advanced technologically and claimed to be superior morally and culturally as well. Literature was one of the first battlegrounds for indigenous modernity. The creation of *sā dhubhā ṣ a*, the high-Bengali or literary language, the adoption of Western genres like sonnet, short story or novel, the use of Bengali medium pamphlets and periodicals in native education, these were all steps in the same direction, that is to blend the positive background of Indian tradition with the social and cultural achievements of the coloniser. The early attempts at modern Bengali poetry, drama and prose thus reflected the existential dilemmas and political aspirations of the anglicised (yet never accepted as English) Calcutta elites.

The first wave of religious reformation (e.g., Brahmoist) adopted the orientalist concept of golden age of the Aryans while the second wave (approximately from the 1870's) elaborated on the struggle of Hindu kings against Muslim oppressive rule. Conceptually they distinguished between eternal and unchanging core of the cosmic order (*sanā tana dharma*) and its various historical manifestations. The goal of the reformation was to eliminate the habits and believes, which came into existence at some point of history but which actually only impede progress. They insisted that the core of *dharma* be preserved and cleared of these layers. As Lipner (2005:9) puts it, „ Progress and modernization in terms of scientific discoveries and foreign political and social ideas were to be engaged with in this way, and should not be allowed to imperil this basic distinction. In short, Hindus were affirming a distinct yet somewhat insular sense of identity."

The beginnings of modern Bengali prose in the second half of the nineteenth century were affected by the emerging patriotism, the evidence of which is the popularity of historical subjects, particularly those related to the resistance of Hindu kings against the Muslim invaders. As Duš an Zbavitel (1976:240) points out, the authors were choosing periods " in which the young bourgeoisie might have found support for its feeling of national pride and self-assertion." It is not, therefore, surprising that the first powerful expression of a goddess as a symbol of the nation appeared in a novel.

The first author to popularise the modern incarnation of the Great Goddess of Hindu mythology was at the same time the first full-fledged novelist in the whole Indian subcontinent. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) was a man of great erudition and wide literary exposure. He was well versed both in Classical Indian and English literatures and a keen participant in contemporary debates on writing as well as religion and social reform. He was the leading author of Bengali and Indian literature before Rabindranath Tagore and entered history books as " the father of Indian novel" . As a Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector by profession he was a typical representative of the new elite of Bengali society. Being one of the first two graduates of Calcutta University he imbibed and admired Western education. At the same time he was conditioned by his conservative Brahmin background. His writings, both novels and non-fiction, present from an ethnological point of view an interesting attempt at reconciling this ambiguity.

Bankimchandra's historical novels were influenced by those of Sir Walter Scott and his non-fiction writings by rationalism and humanism of August Comte. In his treatise on religion (*Dharmatattva*) he deems that not only gods, kings, upper castes, elders, teachers, husbands etc. should be the object of devotion (*bhakti*), but also the state and society. In the same work Bankimchandra asserts that „ ...Auguste Comte has recommended the worship of the Goddess of Humanity" (Guha 1997:53). His novels cover historical subjects, social and domestic issues, and patriotism out of which the latter will be of most interest here.[138]

Bankimchandra was appalled by the inactivity of his fellow citizens in the face of the outer domination and (ages before Foucault and Said) held the colonial interpretation of history based on Muslim sources and the British portrayal of Indians in it to be partly responsible for this passivity: " Bengal must have her own history. Otherwise there is no hope for Bengal. Who is to write it? You have to write it. All of us have to write it," he exclaimed on the pages of the Mirror of Bengal (*Baṅ gadarṣ an*) in 1880 (Guha 1997:153). *Baṅ gadarṣ an* was an influential monthly magazine founded by Bankimchandra in 1872. It was there where he published most of his political articles and novels. In the editorial to the first issue Bankimchandra writes: „ We shall endeavour to make this journal suitable for perusal by educated Bengalis. ... May it make known in Bengali society their learning, imaginings, literary skill and heart's desires. ... This journal has not been produced either to support any particular faction or to benefit any particular group. ... We shall approve any measure by which the new community [of educated Bengalis] may become more sympathetic to even the very lowest [of society]" . (cited in Lipner 2005: 8; citation abridged).

The call for indigenous interpretation of history was closely related to the call for nation formation (*jā tipratiṣ thā*). Writing the Hindu history of Bengal is presented as restoring the past glory of forefathers. By this equation Bankimchandra sought that " sentiments, obligations and notions related to the natural family would be transferred increasingly to a larger, ideal family, constructed by political culture

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[138] For this division of Bankimchandra's works and their detailed appreciation see Bandyopadhyay, (1986: 85-95 and 110-114). His novels are described at larger scale and analysed in an older publication by. Dasgupta (1937).

as the nation." [139] The nation was imagined by him as an indigenous population set against the foreign elements, Muslims in the first place and English in the second.

While many of his contemporaries glorified spiritual and cultural achievements of the past, Bankimchadra boldly shifted emphasis to the strength of arms (*bā hubal*) though he never openly suggested it should be used against the British. His position towards their domination was rather complex, which reflected his existential situation of a conservative Hindu with patriotic sentiment who at the same time admired scientific and intellectual achievements of the West and remained a loyal servant of the colonial administration. When he invokes the strength of arms of the past, this strength is applied almost exclusively against Muslims. He even credits the British with getting the Hindus rid of Muslim dominance and with bestowing on Indians the idea of nation formation, which could not arise earlier due to the lack of the sense of unity.

Ranajit Guha (1997: 208-210) argues from a Marxist perspective that Bankimchandra failed to fully realise the subversive potential of his own thoughts and whenever he was close to it he censored himself and pleaded loyalty to the British. Historians of Bengali literature were usually more charitable, acknowledged such concessions as inevitable strategic choices and considered Muslims to be a symbolical substitute for the true oppressors. It may be, however, also plausible to assume that Bankimchandra, given his conservative background, was openly antagonistic to Muslims and at the same time ambivalent to the British. The praise he had for them testifies rather to his capacity of intellectual reflection than to his political defeatism. What he had in mind might well have been the fact that by uniting India politically under their rule they made future Indian nation possible, that the very idea of political nation is of European provenience, and that at present stage of developments it would serve Indians better to be apt apprentices of the British and to conquer their own weaknesses, which is a *conditio sine qua non* of any independent future anyways. In the context of his biography as well as in the context of Bengali Renaissance whose proponents had never expressed their ambivalence more strongly before Bankimchandra, it seems to me more likely that instead of being a failed bourgeois ideologist who made a nice try or a persuaded freedom fighter who had to operate in disguise, he was quite ingenious strategist of

[139] *Ibid.*, p. 203.

his own right who envisaged the future of India in the nation formation on cultural as well as political front under the British until the conditions which caused subordination of India are removed. Later it will become a source of dispute and contestation whether the symbols invented by Bankimchandra for the Nation are inclusive of Muslims or exclusively Hindu. This issue has been recently taken up by Lipner (2005 and 2007) who struggles to defend Bankimchandra against authors who credit him with sowing seed of hatred between Hindus and Muslims.

Though his novels, like those of his contemporaries, are also based on historical subjects his goal, and here lays his greatness, was not just to invoke glorious past but to address directly the present and the future as well. In his vision, Indians/Hindus are part of a single community, which they historically never formed as there was no political or territorial unity, and their actually rather disparate histories are seen as forming a historical movement of a single people. The community as imagined by him is united by the symbol of the goddess Mother India.

Bankimchandra was not the first person to imagine the territory of India as a goddess and Indians as her children. The concept of sacred land is well within the framework of Hinduism. There are thousands of sacred places, rivers, confluences and mountains all over the Indian subcontinent and collectively they form a sort of sacred geography of India. Even the personification of India (Bhā rat) as a goddess was not entirely his idea. Sumanta Banerjee traces its popularity to the lyrics of patriotic songs that were sung in the praise of Motherland at Hindu Fairs since their institution in Calcutta by leading Bengali intellectuals in 1867. There were also several theatre plays with Mother India as a character. In both, " the common theme was based on a trinity of ideas: (i) that Mother India had fallen into bad times; (ii) that her children were lying deep in slumber, indifferent to her sufferings; and (iii) that this was a call to awaken them" (Banerjee: 2002:198). Before Bankimchandra, however, the identity of Mother India was so ambiguous that she was at times even equated with the Empress Victoria.

Though Bhā ratmā tā was not Bankimchandra' s invention, his depiction is probably the most compelling one. He expressed it originally, still in the spirit of his predecessors, in the collection of satirical essays named " *Kamalakanta*" [140]. The

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[140] This collection, inspired by Thomas de Quincy' s " *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*" , was originally published in 1875 and a rewritten edition appeared in 1885. *Cf.* Zbavitel (1976:242).

title of the book is a name of an Indian opium eater who in his delirious trances questions current social reality. One of the essays is entitled " *My Durgotsava*" (My Durgā pū jā Festival) and expresses Kamalakanta' s visions after having opium on the first day of festivities. I shall quote few lines from an English translation:

" Being alone makes me very much afraid – so lonely – motherless – Mother! Mother! – I shout. In this vast ocean of time I have arrived in search of mother? Where is Mother! Where is my Mother? Where is Mother Bengal? […] Then I recognised, this is my Mother, my Motherland – this is Mother Mrinmayi – Mother within the clay image – bedecked with countless gems, currently residing in the depository of Time. […] Come to us, Mother, come into our homes – six crore of us[141], your children, shall worship your lotus feet, bow before you, folding our twelve crore arms. […] Arise, Mother, Golden Bengal! Arise, Mother! We shall be your worthy children, we shall tread the right path – we shall bring you honour. […] Come, let us raise aloft Mother' s image with our twelve crore arms, and, carrying her upon our six crore heads, let us bring her home. […] Come brothers, let us find and carry Mother back, then our pū jā will be festive like never before." (Chatterjee 1992:104-107, citation abridged).

Bankimchandra clearly remains true to the " trinity of ideas" as identified by Banerjee. Mother is lost, " residing in the depository of Time" , and has to be invoked so that she comes back. Kamalakanta' s vision, however, reveals other important contexts. First, the children are only inhabitants of Bengal not the whole India. It reflects initial uncertainty among the patriots about the delimitation of the community they imagined. Secondly, by placing this vision into the period of Durgā pū jā and by a reference to the clay idol, the author equates unequivocally the mother of the nation with the Hindu goddess Durgā . Thirdly, the idea of bringing the glory of the Mother/Nation back is consistent with general belief that Durgā for the time of the pū jā descends from the abode of her husband to the houses of her worshippers who treat her as a married-off daughter returning home. This belief reflects actual custom of married women visiting their parental house during

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[141] Sixty million (one crore = ten million) of then population of Bengal. In Bankimchandra' s times Bengal comprised the territory of present day Bangladesh and Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa.

Durgā pū jā , through which the patrilocality of the kinship system is ballanced. The equation thus brings together three images: the image of one's own mother, the image of the territory of Bengal, and the image of Durgā , the goddess worshipped emotionally by all Bengali Hindus.

In 1875, the same year when *Kamalakanta* was published, Bankimchandra composed a patriotic song *Vande Mā taram* (Hail to the Mother), which later became a battle cry of freedom fighters and its first eight lines were eventually accepted as the national anthem of India.[142] Here the equation of mother, land and Durgā is expressed in a lot more elaborate and compelling way. *Vande mā taram* is a prayer to the Mother(land) and most of the lines are formed of Sanskrit compounds that qualify her nature. The territory of Motherland is never clearly delimited but a reference to seventy million voices and twice seventy million hands suggests that it was not a different conception from that of " *My Durgotsava*" . The first lines describe the Mother as a beautiful country abundant in greenery, crops etc. The next set of qualifiers emphasise her prowess as a divine force and identify her with Hindu virtues, like knowledge (*vidyā*) or righteousness (*dharma*). Eventually, she is equated with Durgā by stating that " your images we set up as idols in all temples" and " you are Durgā wielding ten arms" .[143]

This song gained immense popularity few years later after its composition when Bankimchandra wove its lines as a sort of leitmotif into the novel " Abode of Bliss" (*Ā nandamaṭ h*)[144] published in 1882. The plot is constructed on the historical background of a rebellion of world renouncing mendicants that took place in North Bengal in 1773. Bankimchandra, however, does not use this incident of a revolt by banditti for glorification of the past but purely and with full license to make indirect comments through the characters on current political and social condition of his country.

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[142] In fact the first lines of *Vande Mā taram* appear in „ *My Durgotsava*" . See Banerjee (2002:199).

[143] Quotations in text were translated by the author. For a transcription of *Bande Mā taram* and an artistic translation by Sri Aurobindo see Bandyopadhyay (1986:336-338). For less artistic but more accurate translation see Lipner (2008:31-32).

[144] A translation of the novel with extensive introduction and critical apparatus has been recently undertaken by Julius Lipner under the title " Ā nandamaṭ h, or The Sacred Brotherhood" . Zbavitel in his *History of Bengali Literature* translated the title as " *The Monastery of the Anandas*" .

The story begins with a crude description of famine-stricken Bengal. An impoverished landlord Mahendra Singh, his wife and a little daughter are set to leave their village, already deserted by all other residents. They hope to escape sure death by starvation in a city. After being kidnapped and rescued they end up in a forest ashram of an order of militant holy men who call themselves Children. The Children worship Mother India as their only deity by singing *Vande Mā taram* and had renounced all other worldly commitments except the service to her. The leader of Children called Satyā nanda guides Mahendra through the ashram and introduces him into the cult. The ashram houses an image of Mother India sitting on the lap of Viṣ ṇ u and worshipped by all other important deities (significantly, her iconography is not elaborated upon) and three other well described images of the goddess: one representing her glorious past as bountiful Jagaddhatri, the second her destitute present in the form of terrifying naked Kā lī , and the third is a vision of the Mother to become once she is freed from foreign oppression by her Children. This third image is none else than Durgā in the same form as she is worshipped every year in Bengal. The initial reference to Viṣ ṇ u subscribes the order under *Vaiṣ ṇ avism* though they practice goddess worship. Moreover, their ashram is actually formed by the ruins of an ancient Buddhist monastery. One of the messages that Bankimchandra wanted to instil to his readers was that in order to achieve broader unity, they had to transcend sectarian divisions.

Mahendra is attracted to join the children but cannot overcome the attachment to his wife and child. His wife does not want to be an obstacle in his fulfilling of patriotic duties and prefers to poison their little daughter as well as herself as a supreme sacrifice to the Motherland. Mahendra then joins the Children and a heroic epic of their struggle begins and streams towards the final victory over British troops in the name of Mother India.

The story ends with an unexpected dénouement. Satyā nanda is worried about the scores of the British to come from Calcutta and realises the impossibility of installation of a Hindu kingdom. A mysterious sage appears and explains him that his mission is over and that Children should disband and go back to plough. Their mission is accomplished because by fighting the British, who are primarily interested in business and not in administration, they forced them to take over the reigns of Bengal from the hands of Muslims! The sage further elaborates that the King of

England is a friendly one and that in order to make the internal, spiritual knowledge realise, the external knowledge has to be promoted first. Since the British are experts in the external knowledge, their rule will serve the cause of future installation of Hindu rule.[145] For Bankimchandra, the " ulterior objective was … the incarnation of the Hindu Eternal Code in the emergent nation-state" (Lipner 2005:73).

Bankimchandra immortalised a hitherto only vaguely defined concept of Mother India by creating a modern myth of her worship. Without much license it is possible to conclude that *Ānandamaṭh* was as instrumental for establishing the cult of Bhāratmātā as *Devī-Māhātmya* was for that of Durgā. In both, there is a saintly character who initiates a novice, with whom the reader or listener identifies, into the cult. In both the goddess is revealed in three images that together constitute her whole representation. While in the latter case these are qualities of reality, in the former the division is diachronic. Human heroes of both stories are destitute, homeless and in the initiation process they realise the true reason of their pitiful condition and the means to overcome it. Both are struggling with their individual attachments and in order to achieve higher goals they have to discipline them. Both texts abound in vivid descriptions of battles between the forces of good and evil. Yet while *Devī-Māhātmya* provides a rationale for goddess worship, Ānandamaṭh provides a unifying symbol in the form of a goddess for political action.

Bankimchandra on many levels intelligently redressed popular concept of divinity to suit his nationalist purpose. By identifying Bhāratmātā with Durgā in *Vande Mātaram* and in the image of India to become, he linked his imagined community of Children, an avant-garde of the Nation, to a deity whose worship is intimately connected with the cultural identity of every Bengali Hindu. He literally reinvented Durgā according to the needs of late 19th century modernity in the same manner as literary forms or social customs were being refashioned during the Bengali Renaissance.

The success of his creation was soon proved by massive response from leading Bengali and Indian intellectuals many of whom were inspired to further elaborate on the idea of Bhāratmātā. The discourse he generated, however, affected much lager audiences. Thus a contributor to New India on 4th November

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[145] A review of *Ānandamaṭh* in The Liberal on 8th April 1882 went as follows: „ The author´s dictum we heartily accept as it is one which already forms the creed of English education."

1901 wrote: " To what little profit do they read Chandi[146] who think that there can be anything like an aggregation of the divine powers latent in us, powerful to vanquish the evils of the day, by the way in which Shakti is worshipped now in Bengal! Will not this rather perpetuate the reign and oppression of the asuras?" [147] It is a comment on uselessness of traditional invocation of Durgā with implicit nationalistic undertones in the spirit of *Ā nandamaṭ h*.

Once the concept of Bhā ratmā tā was firmly established as a symbol, connecting in an attractive and compelling way past, present, and future with the land and its native population, differing interpretations of this symbol started to emerge. Such development was only natural as neither the intellectuals nor the freedom fighters shared a single plan of action or a single ideal of how should the future look like. Generally, two modes of representation can be distinguished. One emphasised benign qualities of Mother India, her carefulness, love to her Children, compassion, beauty (in short the traditional virtues of women), the material and spiritual benefits that she will bring, the oppression she has to withstand under colonial domination etc. The other explored the potential of a goddess image to inspire violent resistance. Geeti Sen lucidly differentiates between the two agendas when she notes that the latter glorifies " young men sacrificing their lives to the Mother" while the former promotes " sacrifice by the men and also the women of India" (Sen 2002:34).

Militant nationalism and terrorist movement in India started taking shape in early 20th century. A strong impetus was given by the British who in order to split the unity of Indian political representation divided in 1905 Bengal into Hindu and Muslim part. Resistance against this step was massive and widespread and among the young patriots it was turning increasingly militant. The radicals suggested boycott of all British institutions and recourse to armed struggle. They adopted *Vande Mā taram* as their battle cry and propagated an image of Mother India as the naked bloodthirsty goddess Kā lī embellished by a necklace of human sculls and a skirt of severed human arms.[148] Other posters of radical content show a woman-like

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[146] *i.e.* the myth of Durgā .

[147] *i.e.* demons

[148] In the original myth of *Devi-Mā hā tmya*, Kā lī is one of the important Durgā ' s helpers in the battle with *Mahishasura*. She is along with Durgā one of the most popular goddesses of Bengal. Her annual festival follows three weeks after that of Durgā .

figure of Mother India accepting with gratitude the gift of a martyred freedom fighter's head from his hands. These colour prints were disseminated by explicitly anti-British presses as well those who were making them just for commercial gain (Pinney 2004:106). It is needless to add that the colonial administration tried its best to censor such propaganda.

In 1878, the British imposed the Vernacular Press Act but were forced to abolish it four years later a counterproductive. In 1910 they enforced another Press Act which was this time aimed at censorship of vernacular textual production as well as seditious visual representations. But the religious space of political creativity kept on escaping attempts at regulation. As Pinney (1999:220) concludes, „The colonial state's paranoia about the representational genii it had unleashed was expressed not only through the proscription of complete images but also in a prohibition of individual elements in images in an attempt to mitigate their power. … However … every denial was simultaneously a reinscription of representational potency."

There are later posters from around the time when India won its independence in 1947, showing the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru receiving blessings of Mother India. There is a sacred pot, incense, oil lamp and other ritual objects in front of her as it is proper during the pūjā. There are also plates with heads of martyred revolutionaries. During actual pūjās to goddesses who require blood offerings, head of a goat or a buffalo is chopped off and placed on a tray in front of the goddess. Once again a political message is expressed by subtle changes in religious symbolism.

Besides posters, the very annual celebrations of Durgā pūjā and Kālī pūjā became a medium for dissemination of nationalist ideas. With the beginning of the 20th century, celebrations have gone public with sporting clubs or similar associations organising festivities at public space for spectators who were not limited by affiliation to a family, locality, community or caste. Newspapers used to come out with advertisements like: "We extend our cordial invitation to our Patrons, Well-wishers, Donors as also the general public irrespective of Cast and Creed to join the function." [149] Not only Durgā was reborn in her modern incarnation of Bhāratmātā, but also her worship became a modern institution.

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[149] Liberty 8/11/1931

Leading patriots were often among organisers and competitions in gymnastics or even martial arts used to be part of the social programme. Other activities included hoisting of the national flag, fairs of local industries and ostensive use of locally made clothes or putting up posters with leaders of independence movement. The newspaper Liberty brought under the heading " ' Bharatmata' Image - New Deity Worship at Pabna Village" following report: " The worship of the deity of ' Bharatmata' was celebrated last week under the auspices of the Delua Congress Committee in the Serajganj sub-division. The image was designed according to the description of the Mother in Bankim Chandra' s immortal ' Bandemataram' song. Arrangements have been made for offering ' anjali' [150] to Her by all sections of the Hindus irrespective of caste and creed and ' Daridra Narayans' [151] were sumptuously fed." [152]

Previous year, the same newspaper gave a detailed account from the town of Nabadwip of how the campaign in support of indigenous products was symbolically enacted on the clay statues representing the goddess: " … The time-honoured custom has been to adorn the images with what is called Dak Shaj[153] which is an out and out foreign imported stuff of captivating glitter. The recent Congress movement has been, however, so effective an eye-opener for the ordinary people that the charm of foreign stuff had no attraction for them and they almost automatically clad their God-Mother in Khadder[154] and adorned her with decorations made of earth, cotton and cork. … The colour paint was also of pure indigenous stuff requisitioned from established Indian firms. Economically, again, the cost of decorations has been much lower than in previous years. There was only one instance of an image where Dak Shaj was used but the users had to stick to police help for fear of molestation and immersed the figure in the nearest tank without attempting to join the general procession." [155]

Politicisation of religious festivals was by far not limited to Bengal. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, one of the leaders of nationalist movement in Maharashtra

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[150] *i.e.* an offering of a flower held in between one' s palms while pronouncing mantras.

[151] *i.e.* the poor untouchables

[152] 10/11/1931

[153] *i.e.* tinsel ornaments

[154] *i.e.* hand-woven coarse cotton

[155] 11/11/1930

experimented as early as in 1893 with the annual festival of Gaṇeśa, a festival as important to Marathas as Durgā pūjā is for Bengalis. He considered the religious festival to be a ´powerful engine for imparting instructions to the masses´ and his experiment „ marks the emergence of a new performative space in which the visual, dramaturgical, and the processional, start to work together creating new forms of allegorical political discourse" (Pinney 1998:214).

The appeal of Mother India naturally declined after independence until she was hijacked by the Hindu right for their communal agenda. Political, cultural and social organisations united in what is called the *Sangh Parivar* (Sangh Family) worship her as a supreme deity and present her " as a chaste mother, victimised (by Muslims)" who " needs the protection of their ' virile sons' " (Bacchetta 2004:27; see also Kovacs: 2004). The ambiguous delimitation of the Nation in the early phases of the freedom struggle and adopting symbolic devices of one religion only, which had estranged many Muslims already at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries, eventually gave way to a militant anti-Muslim interpretation of India as a mother-goddess who has been molested by them.

While the particular political messages, boundaries of the imagined community of Bhāratmātā' s Children, or meanings attached to certain ritual actions differ with historical context and goals of social actors, there is an observable relative constancy in terms of implicit structural characteristics of how are these symbols construed and embedded in the ritual practice. It seems that there is something about rituals and the disciplining practice they embody, what makes them fit to be redressed into successful symbolic devices of political ideologies.

If we are to answer the question why one of the central symbols of Indian freedom struggle became an icon of abstract motherland in the form of a goddess, it will be useful to return to Anderson' s reflections on the formation and development of nationalism. Why a nation, unlike political parties and similar organisations, is worth the love of the masses and their readiness to die or to kill? As he shows, belonging to a nation is always construed as something primordial and not chosen which is as natural as the colour of the skin or sex. Nation is a community (in the sense of the German *gemeinschaft*) of individuals connected by " natural" bonds (Anderson 1992:143). What makes this idea plausible and extremely salient is the

primordiality of language: „ What the eye is to the lover – that particular, ordinary eye he or she is born with – language – whatever language history has made his or her mother tongue – is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered at mother' s knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed" (*ibid*.:154).

Any other language is learnable but every individual is limited by his lifetime and other circumstances. The feeling of unity is further strengthened by extensions of the mother tongue in various genres of literature, poetry and songs.

How this emphasis on language applies to multilingual India? Anderson was right to stress the role of religious institutions in propagation of different classificatory frameworks than those imposed by the colonial administration. In as much as the seat arrangement in the Indian train and formal fare-structure are negotiable and negotiated according to different cultural ethos, also more powerful classificatory practices like cense were subverted through cultural creativity. As Anderson says, „ The fiction of the census is that everybody is in it, and that everyone has one – and only one – extremely clear place" (*ibid*.:166).

Anderson was also right to stress the importance of the printing press capitalism, except the fact that in the Indian context, nationalism spread through texts among the elites only. The common language was English but vernacular presses provided more scope for dissemination of subversive ideas and nationalist discourse because they were less easily censored by the colonial administration.[156]

The common folk (largely illiterate), however, were ideologically aroused for the cause by popular colour prints which reinterpreted traditional Hindu iconography. The importance of the visual element in the identity formation of Indian peoples can hardly be overestimated. The emergence of woodcut print, lithography and other printing technologies together with traditional crafts like clay-idol making or scroll-painting became vehicles of a powerful message. Language would not have made India unite but dissolve. Religious symbolism was intelligible across the language divides. The most extensive unifying principle for the future nation was thus found and promoted in the form of a Hindu goddess. The elites could have discussed the inclusiveness of such a symbol and the way how to dress it but in order to mobilise

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[156] For detailed history of Bengali vernacular press see Ghosh (2006).

masses, the colour prints had to resemble what they knew as an embodiment of sacred power and comply with their way of ritual practice.

The narrative of *Ā nandamaṭ h* is also full of redressed religious symbolism. The idea of goddess as a mother to her worshippers, the idea of asceticism as a disciplinary practice leading to supernatural powers as well as attainment of spiritual upliftment, prototypical portrayal of characters as embodied representations of different *dharma*, and finally, the description of the setting. Deep impervious jungle protects the monastery which has a temple in its centre. From there a tunnel leads to the shrine. Bankimchandra compares the darkness of the forest with the darkness in the bowels of the earth where the statue of Kā lī rests and where Mahendra enters during his initiation. „ It is in this underground hollow that the Mother of the santans and the nation-in-the-making is enshrined in one of her forms. The concentric symbolism of enfoldment is telling: the massive forest circumscribing the monastery within its depth, which in turn ensconces the mother shrine at its core. It is like some powerful device being compressed and primed. When released by the right concatenation of forces it bursts with explosive force, spreading the seeds of a new and transforming message“ (Lipner 2005:52). The novel itself then becomes a device which spreads the message into the political and cultural discourse of Bengali intelligentsia. Anderson asserts that printed novels depict the “ solitary hero through a *sociological landscape of fixity* that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside” (Anderson 1992:30). Perhaps one could imagine every copy of the novel as a simulacrum of the fictional world it describes; in as much as individual idols are simulacra of their divine prototype. Bankimchandra creates a fictional locus of sacredness analogically according to the concentric disposition of real temples and by situating the shrine underground in fact combines what Gell called internalist and externalist strategies of idol animation. Thanks to this imagery, the sacred force which calls for direction of collective agency towards a certain political goal becomes salient and works as a “ powerful device” .

7. Conclusion

In this thesis I attempted to present some aspects of the Durgā pū jā festival in Bengal in order to theorise it as a social technology that throughout the history has been establishing the community of worshippers as a political entity. The actual forms and boundaries of the community has been changing and so has been changing the associated events, or paraphernalia of the ritual, and the symbolism of the whole festival. I want to argue that the most productive way of understanding Durgā pū jā is to distinguish three levels on which it operates. The most basic one is the level at which Durgā pū jā as a social technology exploits the sensual and cognitive apparatus, which is common to all humans. By way of what Gell called the strategies of animation of idols, both internalist and externalist, which constitute the deity as an important social other that has the potential to become a collective person, and by way of an orchestrated sensual stimulation, the process of worship leaves an imprint on performers' minds. It can be termed a " phonetic" level of ritual.

At that most basic level, rituals work as cognitive and sensory traps. The concentric arrangement of space around the object that personifies divine agency and seemingly unpenetrable layers of seathes around it motivate abductions of human-like agency. So does the anthropomorphism of visual representations and the importance of eye-contact with the idols. The images are empowered in course of the ritual and at the same time they empower worshippers in return. Well known concept of *darś aṇ* , or vision, epitomises this relation. In fact the term *darś aṇ* has many meanings. It ranges from an eye, to mirror, to seeing, to vision, to visitation, to appearance, to experience, to philosophy. Similarly, " to do *darś aṇ* " (B. *darś aṇ kara*) is to see, to observe, to pay a visit, to experience, to perceive. To " give *darś aṇ* " is to come into view while to " take *darś aṇ* " is to catch the sight of. Gell is quite right to theorise it as a form of agency whereby intersubjectivity

between the devotee and the deity is established: " Eye-contact, mutual looking, is a basic mechanism for intersubjectivity because to look into another's eyes is not just to see the other, but to see the other seeing you (I see you see me see you see me etc.). Eye-contact prompts self-awareness of how one appears to the other, at which point one sees oneself ´from the outside´ as if one were, oneself, an object (or an idol)" (Gell 1998:120).

As we have seen while discussing the use of plants in Durgā pūjā, even minuscule details like the flowers stimulate complex abductions of agency and employ physical and morphological features of plants to that effect in order to gain saliency. Iconicity of butterfly pea and morphological prominence of lotus were examples discussed to some detail. Once the template for personhood, which can be potencially, individual, collective, as well as universal, is established it becomes part of the complex network of social interaction and conforms to a particular cultural construction of personhood.

Next comes the level of operation, which may be called structural or grammatical when we consider ritual actions, or it may be called a style when it regards the unity of visual representations. At this level, individuals submit to horizontal disciplining practices that imprint on their body-minds the sense of belonging to a community. Sitting in a particular way, eating in a particular way, throwing flowers towards the idol in appropriate time and manner, taking shoes off in front of a temple and bending one's body in front of the idol in a motion indistinguishable from others who do the same, these are, besides the commonality of language and visible racial signs, which may also signify strangeness, the crucial points that identify a person as a member of a community. Before the question of the meaning arises, bodies and minds are shaped and formed so as to conform to a particular cultural style. Like the clay-statues of goddesses are shaped to signify conformity to a particular style or to express novel ideas, the bodies and minds of worshippers are moulded by horizontal disciplining practices to conformity with cultural standards. The ability to perform according to those cultural standards and in that cultural style is crucial for establishing a common sense of belonging. The ability to move beyond it and style oneself in a different and extraordinary fashion is a conscious individualist standpoint that makes an individual seemingly stand apart from the mass, which potentially might turn into an advantage or a handicap for the

individual in question. The difference between a stranger and an individualist proves in the fact that the latter, in order to be accepted as such, has to demonstrate that he is still able to bent in a culturally approved manner, that he can style himself in the same way as others, but he deliberately chooses not to in order to convey an alternative message. A stranger is different too, but he is unable to demonstrate that he has undergone the experience of being submitted to the horizontal disciplining practices in question that aim at constituting the sense of belonging.

What makes worshippers a community is the common submission to the prearranged order of the ritual, not the agreement on what does it mean. Indeed, to achieve the commonality of meaning, to imprint a symbolic structure as a guide for action on minds of worshippers is the goal of many rituals. But this is a matter of political contest and symbolic creativity within a culture and different worshippers engaged in the same ritual actions in practice refer to different personal or social symbolic worlds when asked to explain the meaning of what they do. And that is the third, semantic operational level; that is the superstructure of meanings and complex, often competing symbolisms.

At the first level, human senses and mind interact with structured physical environment. At the second level, ritual as a disciplining practice inscribes a particular pattern of behaviour, which does not have necessarily any inherent meaning, into the bodies and minds of participants. At that level, cultural identity is formed. It is relatively stable since the number such practices an individual can submit himself to and and subsequently master is limited by his lifetime. The practices inscribed in the bodies change slowly, like the actual pattern of worshipping Durgā . The systems of meaning ascribed to those practices change with striking rapidity and are subject to political struggle as well as cultural creativity of groups and individuals. Indeed it is a " powerful device being compressed and primed" which is at stake.

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APPENDIX I.

Summary of the attached film document on Durgā pū jā

Attached to this thesis is a short documentary film on CD-ROM. This five minutes long documentary presents an overview of the annual Durgā pū jā festival in Calcutta. It lasts for five days that usually fall to the mid-October of the Christian calendar. The ritual part of the festival takes place in permanent temples, private mansions and makeshift temporary temples called pandals. The celebrations are funded by supporters of permanent temples, traditional aristocratic families and clubs or similar bodies of civic society. The latter contract priest and artisans on behalf a locality based community, collect subscriptions from residents and involve commercial sponsors. It is these community and public pū jā s that are nowadays the most popular in terms of the number of individual celebrations, the number of participants, expenditure and media coverage. In all the places Durgā is represented by a clay image along with images of her children and the buffalo demon she slays. The clay images are traditionally made by a caste based community of artisans. Their centre in Calcutta is a neighbourhood called Kumortuli. There are several styles of clay images but a stiff competition drives creativity beyond all representational boundaries and attracts contemporary artist to enter the business. At the end of the festival clay images are deposed into the Ganges and temporary temples dismantled.