

## CASTE POLITICS, RITUAL PERFORMANCE, AND LOCAL RELIGION IN A BENGALI VILLAGE: A REASSESSMENT OF LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS

Frank J. KOROM

Boston University, Boston, USA

**Abstract:** In this paper, I seek to reevaluate Victor TURNER's related concepts of liminality and communitas in the context of Hindu ritual. The primary data come from an all-Hindu village named Goalpara, which is located in Birbhum District, West Bengal. The specific ritual in question is an annual three-day event performed for the village's main deity, Dharmaraj, the "king of duty". Through ethnographic inquiry I argue that the events during the three days seem to reinforce TURNER's idea of an actual abolishment of social hierarchy, since low-caste devotees of the deity seem to take on the status of high-caste Brahmins through an initiatory transformation. However, upon closer investigation, the transformation only occurs on the symbolic level. Close observation of the ritual in question suggests that hierarchy is never abandoned. In some respects, it is even reinforced through ritual action. Nonetheless, I argue that the question of a change in social status depends largely on the interpretations provided by participants in the ritual. High-caste participants suggest that the rituals reinforce hierarchy, while low-caste devotees insist that they actually become Brahmins in ontological terms, albeit temporarily.

I conclude by drawing attention to those aspects of the ritual that support TURNER's basic hypotheses about liminality and communitas. However, in so doing, I suggest that liminality and communitas are phenomena that are negotiated in ritual. They do not exist as *a priori* universal categories. By stressing the negotiated quality of liminality and communitas, I argue, the analyst is better situated to understand how ritual allows for low-caste members of the village to become empowered, thereby offering them the ability to speak on equal terms with their Brahmin counterparts. Such negotiation during ritual potentially provides a platform for egalitarian action among and within the village's local caste system after the annual ritual period has ended.

**Keywords:** liminality, communitas, ritual, Hinduism, West Bengal, local religion

### THE ROMANCE OF HOME

Shantiniketan, the "abode of peace" where Rabindranath Tagore's Vishva Bharati University<sup>1</sup> is located in Birbhum District, West Bengal, is approximately two hours by train from Calcutta. It is a serene location that has not witnessed a great amount of commercial development in the past. For this reason many urban residents of Calcutta make weekend trips to the town in order to experience the tranquility of nature that Tagore envisioned when he settled in the area. As one walks north on the main road out of Tagore's famous intellectual enclave, a colorful landscape of numerous varieties of flowers and brilliantly green rice paddies opens up before one's eyes at numerous times throughout the year. Tea stalls, vegetable

<sup>1</sup> For a concise account of the development of Shantiniketan and its environs, see DAŚGUPTA 1391B.S.

vendors, and small-scale cottage industries dot the sides of the road, and a constant stream of people from the surrounding villages travel on foot or by bicycle to and from work and the bazaars of nearby Bolpur, the main railway junction to the south.

The area is populated with an abundance of professors and students from the university, villagers, Santal tribesmen, and a handful of unaffiliated urban intellectuals. Retirees from nearby Calcutta are also moving to the area rapidly to spend their remaining years in the serene country environment, while an increasing number of wealthy Bengali businessmen who wish to find a peaceful respite from the trials and tribulations of the “big city” search for new opportunities to build their dream house.<sup>2</sup> The town is expanding: even though land for house construction is limited, the demand increases annually. New residents have begun to purchase land outside of Shantiniketan, ever closer to many of the villages that surround the town. Many locals joke that some of the peripheral villages will eventually become a part of Shantiniketan, a small megalopolis fusing town and village. What results is a growing network of interaction, exchange, and interdependence between the residents of Shantiniketan and the many surrounding villages. Goalpara, the “neighborhood of the cowherds,” is one such village.

The merger of town and village is not seen in a negative light by locals, however, for Tagore himself romantically envisioned an integrated and non-stratified community consisting of people from all walks of life living harmoniously in an area sufficiently removed from Calcutta to enjoy the country life, yet close enough to partake in the cultural delights of a great cosmopolitan city.<sup>3</sup> The irony of the development situation is that while most residents of Shantiniketan have close kin and economic ties with Calcutta, virtually all village residents know of it only through newspapers, radios and televisions. It is thus not surprising that urban folk, inspired by Tagore’s romanticism, fantasize about the countryside while rural folk simultaneously imagine life in the city. Yet while the wealthy urbanite can fulfill the dream of building a home in the country, the poor villager must settle for an imaginary picture of urban culture. The poor know that life beyond Birbhum is most often an impossibility.

The attitude of yearning for the good life of the city is appropriately reflected in a local genre of religious song called *bhādu gān* (Bhadu song), which is sung by low-caste rural men during the Bengali month of Bhadra (*bhādra*) (August–September)<sup>4</sup> in honor of the goddess Bhadu. The following lyrics, for example, are taken from a song composed by a young man named Ahibhushan, a resident of Goalpara:

<sup>2</sup> A number of humorous anecdotes and stories about the horrors and difficulty of living in Calcutta are part of the urban lore of the area. For one such story, see BECK, et al. 1987: 207–208.

<sup>3</sup> Tagore metaphorically wrote about the rift between urban and rural: “The soil in which we are born ... is the soil of our village, the mother earth in whose lap we receive our nourishment from day to day. Our educated élite, abstracted from this primal basis, wander about in the high heaven of ideas like aimless clouds removed from this our home” (KRIPALINI 1980: 155).

<sup>4</sup> For a description of the Bengali method of lunar monthly divisions, see NICHOLAS 1982.

When Bhadu was a baby,  
 she was such a good girl.  
 I don't know why  
 she has changed so much.  
 My Bhadu now wears a clean, crisp sari,  
 and holds her books in her hand.  
 Takes a lady's umbrella  
 and goes to high school.  
 She smiles and talks of romances.  
 She stops speaking in Bengali,  
 and starts in English.<sup>5</sup>

Originally this type of song reflected the love of a male parent for his daughter, but as the genre became more and more dominated by younger bachelors, they began voicing their yearning and desire for the high-caste female students studying in Shantiniketan. Every singer of *bhādu gān* is infatuated with the educated girls of the town (e.g., “If I can meet Bhadu, I shall fulfill my desire.”), but knows that a real relationship would be socially unacceptable.<sup>6</sup> This particular song also reflects a negative value judgement by suggesting that the transformation of rural to urban might not be a constructive one (e.g., “she *was* such a good girl”). Thus, while most villagers do not deny the benefits of living near a relatively big town, they are also aware of the pitfalls inherent in adopting its ways. Prevailing attitudes are ambiguous at best.

Goalpara is situated in this newly emerging milieu. It is located on the southern bend of the Kopai river, only three kilometers from the north end of Shantiniketan. It is the first village one spots emerging from a stand of palm trees in the midst of rice paddies and mustard plant fields travelling north on the main road. Because of its close proximity to Shantiniketan there are strong links between the two places. Indeed, as is suggested in the following poem by a late resident and folk poet Tribhanga Bhaskar, the link goes back to the time of Tagore, who visited the village with his retinue on a number of occasions to relax under the spreading branches of a banyan tree and to throw colors as part of a playful ritual during the annual spring festival of *dol*:

*śāntinīketāner pāśe*  
 Near Shantiniketan  
*grāmer nāmṭi goyālpārā*  
 the village's name Goalpara  
*kopāi nādīr pākere bhāi*  
 at the Kopai river's bend, brother

<sup>5</sup> ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988: 62.

<sup>6</sup> One female student fondly reminisced about how “boys of the village” (*grāmer chele*) would gather outside of the female dormitories in the evenings and sing *bhādu gān* during the month of Bhadra. A certain amount of fantasizing about the village youths also occurs in student circles. On the romantic fantasies of middle-class Bengali women, see ROY 1975.

*dekhbi jadi āi torā*  
 if you all come you'll see  
*anek diner pārātan grām*  
 a very old village  
*brāhmaṇeri bās besi*  
 the homes are mostly of Brahmans  
*sutār kāmār kāj kare je*  
 when the carpenters and potters work  
*dekhle sabāi hay khusi*  
 everyone is happy to watch  
*śāntiniketāner anek*  
 many of Shantiniketan's  
*chele meye āse*  
 boys and girls come  
*pigni kare āmer bane*  
 to picnic in the mango grove  
*grāmṭi bhālobāse*  
 they love the village  
*ei grāmete rabindranāth*  
 into this village, Rabindranath  
*āsto thākur khelte hali*  
 Tagore used to come to play Holi  
*chele meye raṅg mākhāta*  
 girls and boys used to smear color  
*lāl karita pākā dāri*  
 making his white beard red  
*dharmarājer pūjā hethāi*  
 dharmaraj's pūjā happens here  
*cot māser pūrṇimāte*  
 on the full moon of the month of Chaitra  
*ḍhāk ḍholete grām bhare jāi*  
 drums come and fill the village  
*ghum āse nā cokhe rātre*  
 sleep does not come to the eyes at night  
*ghar jāmāyer saṅkhā besi*  
 the host of son-in-laws' number is great  
*dekhle sabe habe khusi*  
 everyone will be happy to see  
*purba dike kaṅkāli mā*  
 to the east is Mother Kankali  
*tirtha jena bāronasi*  
 a pilgrimage site like Varanasi  
*nānā kathā tene ene*  
 drawing in many things

*gān lekhe tribhāṅga khepā*  
 Tribhanga the crazy writes a song  
*dekhle pare lāge tāre*  
 if you see him later, he'll seem  
*ek bāre se nekā bokā*  
 simultaneously pretentious and foolish<sup>7</sup>

Many older residents of the village still speak fondly of this event. Oral histories I recorded contain accounts of other famous visits by Jawaharlal Nehru during a tour to evaluate rural development programs and the famous Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray, who used the village as the sight for one of his well-known films, *Distant Thunder*. Women are happy to boast about Ray's magnanimous gift of saris to all of the families who acted as extras in the film. In addition to kindling a romantic fondness for the village, the poem also evokes the centrality of the Dharmaraj *pūjā* in the lives of its residents. The *pūjā* and its implications for a discourse on caste relationships and the politics of identity is the focus of my inquiry into the sustained usefulness of concepts introduced into the anthropological study of ritual by Arnold VAN GENNEP and Victor TURNER. Before I turn to the ideas underlying their work in the conclusion, I wish to provide a fairly extensive discussion of the place, its people, and their religious world as a context for understanding the dynamics of ritual and caste in the district.

As a result of the media attention the village has received in the past, Goalpara became the locus of ethnographic research decades before my arrival there (BHATTACHARYA 1986; BHATTACHARYA 1967; MITRA 1972; ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988), and its people have adjusted to constant incursions into their lives by outsiders. It is not unusual, for example, to see many art students from the university in the vicinity painting idyllic pictures of country life. Villagers are thus proud that Goalpara is viewed as a symbol of beauty and harmony. In fact, the attention that the village receives has influenced many residents' own acceptance of the many romantic images that are painted by outsiders. Residents thereby participate in the romanticization of Goalpara, for everyone in the community is quick to point out that fame and exposure have not corrupted Goalpara's essentially agrarian way of life. Even though nearly every family in the village has at least one household member working in Shantiniketan or Bolpur, I was constantly reminded that all of these facts have not changed the basic contours of their rural existence, which they characterize in idealized terms as being in harmony with nature. The innate feeling of harmonious living reified by residents to outsiders is certainly tied to other yearnings for a perfect world by village residents, one in which social activities are also in perfect balance with the cosmic forces of *dharma* (duty) and *karma* (action). Unfortunately, the world of lived experience is never so neat, and occasions for sorting out the messier side of social relations are necessary. The *pūjā* to be discussed below pro-

<sup>7</sup> All translations from the Bengali are my own.

vides such an occasion on an annual basis, and serves as an emblematic sign of the village's religious activities to the outside world.

During my first brief visit to the village in 1989, resident carpenter Shashthi Sutradhar, the image-maker son of the poet cited above, mentioned over and over again how Goalpara was a tranquil and happy place (*śānta ār sukhī jāyḡā*). This, of course, was his attempt to impress an outsider on a first visit to his home. But, as I stated above, Goalpara is also seen as a model village by outside visitors who often comment on its beauty, wealth, and cleanliness. Residents, while maintaining economic, political and marital ties with Shantiniketan, Bolpur, and surrounding villages, see their community as a self-contained system. Even though a variety of social conflicts and political disputes do arise, the general attitude in Goalpara suggests a strong sense of internal unity on the community level, and many of the functions arranged on the all-village level (e.g., communal feasts, religious services, marriages, circuses, popular dramas, etc.) strive to reinforce the notion of participation for all in some capacity. I use the word "strive" here to suggest that this ideal is not always actualized in practice, since caste interaction is to some degree controlled by larger superstructures beyond the control of residents.

Caste restrictions are, however, mitigated by Goalpara's geographic closeness to Shantiniketan because a strong sense of romantic and philosophical integration persists in the latter even today. This closeness has also had the added economic benefit of providing wage labor for many people who might otherwise remain confined to subsistence farming on familial landholdings or to traditional agricultural client-patron relationships.<sup>8</sup> The key to the attempted preservation of an idealized rural lifestyle in Goalpara is adaptation and flexibility. Moreover, the current dynamics of the village seem markedly different from the report provided by ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR more than ten years ago, which portrayed it as a village that refused to change or accept outside schemes of development (1988: 12).<sup>9</sup> They may have been slightly misguided by accepting the village ethos at face value, but it is impossible to deny that change is occurring within the community rapidly. In fact, many developmental programs were initiated in Goalpara precisely because it was seen as a model Bengali village willing to embrace new ideas and concepts.

The model image, partly imagined and partly true, pervades local sensibilities even today. Rather than a community obsessed with the traditional system of who can accept water from whom (*jalchalti*), Goalpara seems to be dealing with change in a creative and tolerant way. It is fairly common, for example, to see a Brahman accepting water in a low-caste household. This is especially true among the younger residents of both genders who have been educated outside of the village. A majority of these people see caste interactions in a less rigid fashion, as a system in flux. The fluidity of the village caste system may have partially arisen out of necessity rather than conscious choice. With the exception of the Dalit (formerly Harijan) Ruidas

<sup>8</sup> A number of *jajmānī*-like agrarian systems operate simultaneously in the village. For an overview, see ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988: 16–37.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see my review of their study in KOROM 1992.

community, the spatial arrangement of the village is such that members of various castes are neighbors; that is, a Brahman's domestic compound may be located next to a Lohar home, and so forth. The numerous neighborhood ponds and tube wells also serve as loci of interaction, for they are often used communally as female gathering sites to clean pots and cooking utensils, wash clothes, bathe, and engage in gossip.

In many ways, however, the caste system is alive and well in Goalpara, and attempts are often made in rituals such as the Dharmaraj *pūjā* to abolish it symbolically, albeit temporarily. This is the central issue to be taken up below. Yet daily interactions do seem to be less rule-defined than in other outlying villages in Birbhum. It will be useful to think of Goalpara as a “sometimes egalitarian community” (BRENNEIS 1979), one in which social relationships are defined in context. Relationships are not always rigid, yet they also do not allow for complete equality at all times. Social interaction in Goalpara is, rather, defined by continuous negotiation leading to the accrual of economic power and upward mobility on the local level. One enterprising Dalit, for example, has gained status and prestige in the village after his nomination to be a member of the village's *pañcāyat* (political body).

Table A  
Total Population by Caste in Goalpara<sup>10</sup>

Caste	Pascimpara	Purbapara	Total
Brahman ( <i>brāhmaṇ</i> )	196	163	359
Kayastha ( <i>kāyastha</i> )	0	8	8
Sadgop ( <i>sadgop</i> )	0	21	21
Banik ( <i>banik</i> )	0	26	26
Tambuli ( <i>tāmbulī</i> )	0	39	39
Napit ( <i>nāpīt</i> )	0	4	4
Svarnakar ( <i>svarṇakār</i> )	0	15	15
Suri ( <i>śūrī</i> )	7	10	17
Kaibartya ( <i>kaibartya</i> )	0	4	4
Sutradhar ( <i>sūtradhar</i> )	0	42	42
Kamar ( <i>kāmār</i> )	0	16	16
Lohar ( <i>lohār</i> )	57	127	184
Dom ( <i>dom</i> )	0	16	16
Hari ( <i>hārī</i> )	16	33	49
Ruidās ( <i>ruīdās</i> )	0	115	115
Total	276	639	915

<sup>10</sup> Ranking of castes is always a thorny problem, especially so in Bengal, where a unique philosophy of ranking developed during the middle period (cf. INDEN 1976). Canonical texts, however, do not always reflect local opinion on ranking, as is suggested by the voluminous data in RISLEY 1981. In the following tables, I utilize an indigenous Bengali system of ranking from highest to lowest based on village consensus. Here I follow the list first presented by ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988: 18. While not everyone in Goalpara agrees on this issue, the general opinion seems to be that the list “more-or-less” (*motāmott*) reflects the reality of the situation. I shall not systematically discuss the occupational roles of each caste here, since an overview is already in print. See again ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988: 17–21.

## THE PLACE, ITS PEOPLE, AND THEIR PŪJĀ

Goalpara is a small, all-Hindu, multi-caste community divided into two directional sectors called Purbapara (*pūrbapārā* = eastern neighborhood) and Pashcimpara (*paścimpārā* = western neighborhood). The boundary line between these two sectors is a youth club built in a small clearing marked by a tube well. These two major divisions are recognized by residents who will often refer to them as major points of orientation within the village. In comparison to other villages in Birbhum, Goalpara is quite small, being inhabited by 915 residents living in 166 households. Although the village is numerically and economically dominated by Brahmans, a total of fifteen castes are represented in it. Tables A above and B below reflect the caste composition of the community by showing the breakdown of population and households respectively:

Table B  
Total Number of Households by Caste in Goalpara

Caste	Pascimpara	Purbapara	Total
Brahman	34	29	63
Kayastha	0	1	1
Sadgop	0	5	5
Banik	0	4	4
Tambuli	0	7	7
Napit	0	1	1
Svarnakar	0	2	2
Suri	1	1	2
Kaibartya	0	1	1
Sutradhar	0	7	7
Kamar	0	2	2
Lohar	12	27	39
Dom	0	4	4
Hari	4	8	12
Ruidas	0	16	16
Total	51	115	166

As I mentioned above, Brahmans also dominate the village economy due to their landholdings, and many of the lower caste members in the village are employed as agricultural laborers by them. While a number of non-Brahmans own land (see Table C), their plots tend to be much smaller, functioning mostly as domestic gardens. Brahman tracts are considerably larger and require more labor-intensive care in order to yield cash crops such as rice.<sup>11</sup> A reciprocal interdependence is thus cre-

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting here that Dharmaraj also owns 12 *bīghās* (= app. 4 acres) of land controlled by the *dharma sarkār* (Dharma committee). The profit generated by farming this land is used for partially funding the annual Dharmaraj *pūjā*. According to oral history, a wealthy *jamidār* (landholder) from an adjacent village called Taltor donated the land for this purpose. This point is elaborated below.



ated: Brahmans must rely on the services of the lower castes, while lower castes rely on Brahmans for a portion of their income. Table C describes the number of households owning land in the village:

Table C  
Number of Landowning Families over Total Number of Households in Goalpara

Caste	Pascimpara	Purbapara	Total
Brahman	26/34	22/29	48/63
Kayastha	0	1/1	1/1
Sadgop	0	3/5	3/5
Banik	0	2/4	2/4
Tambuli	0	5/7	5/7
Napit	0	0/1	0/1
Svarnakar	0	1/2	1/2
Suri	1/1	1/1	2/2
Kaibartya	0	1/1	1/1
Sutradhar	0	7/7	7/7
Kamar	0	2/2	2/2
Lohar	11/12	12/27	23/39
Dom	0	2/4	2/4
Hari	3/4	2/8	5/12
Ruidas	0	12/16	12/16
Total	41/51	74/115	115/166

The above census data clearly show Brahmanical dominance, but their power and influence are taken in humorous stride by other castes through jokes. For example, once when I was having my palm read in a tea stall on the main road owned by one of the village Brahman youths, an argument ensued during which a landless laborer got into a dispute over the price of tea with another customer enjoying a midday cup. The argument increased in intensity and pitch until everyone inside and outside of the stall turned their attention to the discussion. Finally, another observer quipped that the laborer was acting as haughty as a Brahman. The laborer's sarcastic response was that since Bengal was now communist (CPM), everyone must be equal by law.

All residents know that official government policies are ideals that are not actualized in practice, but the above example suggests one of the many strategies for alleviating the structures of caste segregation. During this particular occasion, when the laborer "broke through" into performance (HYMES 1981) by combining artistically two sub-genres – namely, Brahman and political jokes – all onlookers partook in the event by responding with laughter. Everyone, including some attendant snickering Brahmans, laughed and slowly returned to their own individual group conversations to discuss local CPM practices. But such humorous lore does not overshadow

the important fact that Brahmans significantly outnumber other castes in Goalpara. Although social dominance itself is sufficient cause for subversive humor, the numerical superiority of Brahmans may, in fact, be one of the reasons why they are often the targets of caste-based jokes and folktales in Goalpara and beyond. For example, the writers of the Buddhist *Jataka* tales often stereotypically cast the Brahman in the role of villain. The image of the “greedy Brahman” in the Indian *apologue* is pervasive, but it is not presented without conveying a memorable moral lesson that addresses excess more universally. Caste stereotypes are propagated and reinforced, but also checked, by the use of folklore. Oral and written evidence from other parts of India also suggests that the majority group monopolizing most of the power and wealth in a given community may fulfill the folkloric role of the Brahman (cf. CLAUS and KOROM 1991: 77–82), and could be analyzed in terms of negotiating caste identity. In the case of Goalpara, however, the numerical superiority of Brahmans places them squarely in the center of narrative discourse.

The Brahmans of Goalpara thus fit into the “classical” stereotype propagated by the *Jatakas*, but they also fulfill the other function of serving as community power brokers because of their high-caste identity and majority status. On the household level, however, Brahmans are fewer in number than some of the smaller castes in the village, as is described in Table D:

Table D  
Average Members per Household in Goalpara

Caste	Pascimpara	Purbapara	Total
Brahman	5.7	5.6	5.6
Kayastha	0	8.0	8.0
Sadgop	0	4.2	4.2
Banik	0	6.5	6.5
Tambuli	0	5.5	5.5
Napit	0	4.0	4.0
Svarnakar	0	7.5	7.5
Suri	7.0	10.0	8.5
Kaibartya	0	4.0	4.0
Sutradhar	0	6.0	6.0
Kamar	0	8.0	8.0
Lohar	4.7	4.7	4.7
Dom	0	4.0	4.0
Hari	4.0	4.1	4.0
Ruidas	0	7.1	7.1

Table D suggests that Brahmans have smaller families than a number of other castes, even though, unlike many of the lower castes, there is a tendency to live in extended family situations (ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRCAR 1988: 153–154). According to Brahman residents, maintaining smaller families allows male offspring to receive

better education, ultimately resulting in the perpetuation of hegemonic control over political, economic, and religious matters.

Brahmanical dominance is not just limited to the agricultural and economic spheres. Brahmins also control, or are at least tangentially involved in, most of the local ritual activities, as will be discussed below. But the type of Brahmanization that has been occurring in Goalpara is not one-sided. A number of influences also pass in the other direction. This seems to be the case in the Dharmaraj *pūjā*, which was, for a long time in the past, a completely low-caste phenomenon. Now, due to increasing Brahmanical participation, the *pūjā* is slowly taking on a number of Sanskritic features without necessarily sacrificing many of the local practices associated with Dharmaraj (e.g., pig sacrifice and liquor consumption).<sup>12</sup> In other nearby villages that celebrate the Dharmaraj *pūjā*, such as Bergram, approximately ten kilometers to the southwest of Goalpara, the degree of Sanskritization has been greater, totally replacing blood sacrifice with the cutting of gourds and replacing the ritual use of alcohol with milk.<sup>13</sup> As with other oral traditions that trace the acquisition of ritual knowledge back to the sacred city of Banaras, residents of Bergram talk of how correspondence and consultations with *paṇḍits* in that city led to the abandonment of non-Sanskritic elements in the rites. The substitution of vegetarian sacrifices for blood offerings does not seem to be an issue in Goalpara. Since Brahmins, who eat portions of the sacrificial flesh, feel that they must officiate at the *balidān* (goat sacrifice) on the third and final evening of the *pūjā*, there is no division of opinion on this issue. My own observations coupled with folk exegesis suggest that two distinct sets of rites – one distinctively low caste and/or tribal, the other Brahmanical – exist simultaneously.<sup>14</sup>

There is a strong sense of caste interdependence in the domain of ritual, but it is also the ritual realm within which social hierarchy is contested. The Dharmaraj *pūjā* is, perhaps, the most compelling example of this in rural Bengal. Dharmaraj's centrality as an integrating factor in Bengal has been interpreted culturally by a number of native writers. With reference to the worship of Dharmaraj, SUKUMAR SEN has stated that "The cult of Dharma is the quintessence of the native [Bengali] culture, both spiritual (religious) and material ... The legend about the origin of the cultivation of rice has insinuated itself into the grand ceremony (i.e., *Gajan*). Other native

<sup>12</sup> Almost two decades ago, it was reported that a Dom woman once remarked in conversation during the *pūjā* that Dharmaraj was their caste deity. Once the Brahmins began noticing the increasing popularity of Dharmaraj, however, they consciously decided to become involved in the *pūjā* by asserting their influence in the ritual domain. This is attested by the following statement: "Dharmapuja belongs to the Dom. It is our *puja*. Because the deity is so great, the Brahmins wanted to worship him" (ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988: 110).

<sup>13</sup> The term "Sanskritization" was first coined by the Indian anthropologist M.N. SRINIVAS in his landmark monograph *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (1952). I use the term here in the sense defined by STAAL to signify "a process by which a lower caste attempts to raise its status and to rise to a higher position in the caste hierarchy. Sanskritization may take place through the adoption of vegetarianism, of teetotalism, of the worship of 'Sanskritic deities,' or by engaging the service of Brahmins for ritual purposes" (1963: 261).

<sup>14</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see KOROM 1999.

industries also, such as production of molasses, smelting of copper and iron etc., have not been overlooked. Thus in the elaborate *Gajan* ceremony we witness the slow emergence of early Bengali culture in its main aspects" (1945: 674). As I have stated elsewhere (KOROM 1997a), SEN was among the pioneering scholars who sought to situate the origin of the Dharma phenomenon at some vague point in the "hoary past." But his cultural statement above should also be interpreted socially because it suggests that numerous occupational groups are involved in the preparation and actualization of the annual worship service. The *pūjā*, sometimes called *gājan* (thundering) in the region, is an occasion that allows for a great deal of interaction between residents from all economic and occupational streams of life.

In Goalpara, even the outcaste leatherworking group known as Ruidas<sup>15</sup> must participate in the *pūjā*, for their drumming is essential to the overall success of the rites for Dharmaraj. As I begin to describe the social structure of ritual specialists, this point will be explored in more depth. For the moment let me just point out that activities on the all-village level, such as the Dharmaraj *pūjā*, display a much stronger sense of Turnerian *communitas* (TURNER 1977: 131–165) than exclusively small-scale caste events. The performance of songs for the rain goddess Bhajo (*bhājo gān*) on the last day of the month of Bhadra by members of the Ruidas caste, for example, is limited to their own demarcated environment. The performances often do not flow beyond the inner, domestic compounds of their homes. Large-scale public display events such as Dharmaraj *pūjā*, Kali *pūjā*, and Durga *pūjā* happen primarily near the sacred spaces dedicated to each of these deities within the village, drawing people from all castes into the worship and spectacle.

#### EMIC GENRES OF DISPLAY

The many *pūjās* in Bengali culture are always sacred events. They are punctuated times for worshipping specific deities; times for humans to reaffirm their relationship with the gods and goddesses who play such a quintessential role in their lives, thereby insuring the well-being (*kalyāṇ*) of the community in question.<sup>16</sup> The

<sup>15</sup> Ruidas is the Bengali variant of Ravidas, the untouchable Chamar (*camār*) holy man of Banaras. This is the name by which they refer to themselves as a distinct community. According to the caste's sacred oral tradition, they were told to stop eating beef by an emissary of the guru and adopt his name as their caste title in an attempt at upward mobility. However, other people in the village refer to them by their caste title of Bayen (*bāyen*), which was probably attributed to them due to one of their caste occupations as drummers and musicians (cf. SEN 1971.1: 621). Ruidas are also called *muṅī* (*cobbler*), another common term for Chamars. On the background of the caste and their customs, see RISLEY 1981.1: 175–182. On Ravidas' life and teachings, see SINGH 1981.

<sup>16</sup> There has been some controversy over the meaning of the term *kalyāṇ*. In her study of prestation in a Hindi-speaking village in Uttar Pradesh, RAHEJA (1988) translates the term as "auspiciousness." ROBINSON (1980: 172) makes a similar assertion regarding the use of the terms *kalyāṇi* and *maṅgal* in Bengali. I find this problematic, however, since she also uses a number of other terms such as *śubh* to mean the same thing. For a comment on the semantic problem in Hindi, see KOROM 1990: 549. While it is true that a major Bengali thesaurus (MUKHOPADHYĀY 1990: 237) lists *kalyāṇ* as a synonym for *śubh*, I feel more comfortable translating the former as "well-being," since this rendering is more common in everyday discourse.

term *pūjā* may be derived from the Sanskrit verbal root  $\sqrt{pūj}$ , which literally means “to make pure,” “to cleanse,” or “to purify” (APTE 1985: 628).<sup>17</sup> The tentative etymology of the word is certainly one aspect of its use in everyday discourse, since there is a cleansing process through worship that rejuvenates the individual and renews the community. To an outsider, this stresses the indigenous emphasis on purity as a core idea in the religion. When combined, personal belief and community praxis auspiciously bring about the well-being of the village in their ability to reinforce the relationship between humanity and god. Concerning *pūjā* in Bengal, Ákos ÖSTÖR has stated that “As an idea *puja* expresses a relationship between the human and the divine, earth and heaven. As an act it signifies the way men approach deities: a symbol of offering as much as an expression of the act of offering itself. A system of classification, a logic of categories and a whole philosophy is expressed through the meanings of *pūjā* symbols” (1982: 21). A philosophy yes, but not one based on printed literature. However, medieval written texts present an interactive view of *pūjā* on the local level that echo ÖSTÖR’s sentiments and corresponds rather closely with modern ethnographic accounts. As William L. SMITH, writing about the presentation of *pūjā* in the overall *māṅgalkābya* (auspicious poetry) corpus, which includes the numerous *Dharmamangals* describing the event with which I am concerned here, writes (1982:75):

One is tempted to see a similar relationship between the *māṅgal* deities and their human worshippers: to the god the worshipper renders *pūjā* – food offerings, including animal sacrifice, given in accordance with a set ritual – and is in return granted protection and favour. *Pūjā* is at least as important for the god as it is for the mortal who offers it for *pūjā* constitutes the food of the gods and moreover the basic concern of the *māṅgal* deities – the maintenance and if possible enhancement of their prestige – is ultimately dependent on the number and welfare of their worshippers. A god has no status if he is given no *pūjā* and he suffers *apayaśa*, “ill-fame,” if he fails to protect those who offer it to him. Just as the *rājā*’s [king’s] status is determined by the extent of his holdings and the number of his subjects (hence his revenue), that of the god is reflected in the number of his worshippers and the amount and quality of his *pūjā* offerings.

The literary accounts of *pūjā* found in the medieval literature discussed by SMITH are realistic in the sense that themes such as bigness, mutual dependence,

<sup>17</sup> The etymology and subsequent meanings of the term *pūjā* have a long history of debate in Indological studies concerning whether or not the term is a Dravidian loanword in Sanskrit (cf. BAILEY 1961; THIEME 1957). Some have even suggested a double origin of the term in both languages. But more recently, RADHAKRISHNAN (1965) has shown linguistically that the word must have been borrowed into Tamil. Whatever the true origin of the word, the meaning still seems clear, and I follow APTE here for conceptual, rather than linguistic, reasons.

and exchange described by him do appear in the ethnographic context of the Goalpara Dharmaraj *pūjā*.

Residents of Goalpara, however, do not often refer to the written or symbolic dimension of Dharmaraj *pūjā*. In fact, not many people in the village are really aware that a canon of texts and manuals for worship exist.<sup>18</sup> During my fieldwork in the village I was not able to elicit many textual references from residents. On the rare occasion when someone – usually an elderly Brahman – referred to the *Dharmamangal* texts, it was evoked in an offhanded manner as an aside. Given my earlier hidden agenda to look at the relationship between text and context, I would pursue such fleeting references, only to be rebuked by residents for chasing after something that was not very important to them. Gurudeb Bhattacharjya, a village resident and teacher at the local primary school, once mentioned that people who studied before national independence had a greater knowledge of the *maṅgalkābyas* because summaries used to be included in textbooks and primers. After independence, according to Bhattacharjya, the mythic heroes of the medieval period were replaced by prominent historical figures in the freedom movement.

Knowledge of *Dharmamangals* thus decreased along with a shift in educational emphasis in rural schools. Even those people in Goalpara who do remember portions of the narrative do not emphasize their importance. They are content to know that these writings are preserved in the scholarly writings of such famous Bengali scholars as SUKUMAR SEN. Whenever I asked a well-read villager for information on the narrative they would repeat the same comment: *sener itihāse dekho* (Look in SEN's *History*). The reference is to SEN's *Bāṅglā Sāhityer Itihās (The History of Bengali Literature)*, a landmark work published in 1965 in which he systematically discusses all of the extant versions of the *Dharmamangal* texts. Because residents are not very interested in the textual versions of the story, they would steer me away from such inquiries and toward what they felt to be important; namely, the study of how Dharmaraj is understood by them. It is not that the people of Goalpara are ignorant of the textual narratives, for they realize that a few other villages maintain traditions of *dharmapūrāṇ gān (Dharma Puran songs)* in the form of key episodes recited in ritual contexts.<sup>19</sup> Rather, residents tend to de-emphasize the centrality of textual narratives in their tradition, favoring instead orally transmitted stories about Dharmaraj's first

<sup>18</sup> I refer here to the *Dharmamangal* corpus, which is often locally referred to as the *Dharmapurāṇ*, and the liturgical text known as the *Dharmapūjā Bidhān*. While some older residents are familiar with the singing of episodes from the *Dharmamangal* texts, their knowledge of the narrative is extremely limited. Sibshankar Chattopadhyay, the Brahman guest officiant during the *pūjā*, does recite passages from the *Dharmapūjā Bidhān*, but this is not really known by participants and audience. Scriptural allusions, in the sense used by BRIGGS (1988), are made in conversation, however. The ambiguity created by a context built on a corpus of virtually unknown texts makes the issue of textuality problematic, but nevertheless important.

<sup>19</sup> For example, during the annual *pūjā* in Kamarpara, located approximately 15 kilometers from Goalpara, a sung version of the *paścim uday pālā* (Western Sunrise Episode) is performed by a local troupe led by a Brahman named Bhujangabhushan Chakrabarti. According to the singer, his version is not based on any particular text. He has created his own rendition based on his overall understanding of the narrative tradition.

appearance in the village. Such a we/they distinction was usually evoked in conversational contexts to point out the regional and local differences within Dharmaraj traditions. This is why I prefer to use the term “local” with reference to the religious worldview of Goalpara.<sup>20</sup>

Residents speak of the event rather in functional terms, reminiscent of older anthropological paradigms of myth and ritual proposed by MALINOWSKI (1954). When asked why the rite is performed they most often give one of two answers. First, people will generally say that “we perform the *pūjā* so that we may get happiness” (*jāte āmrā ānanda pāi*). When pressed on the issue they might give a specific cause and effect answer: “We perform *x* in order to get *y*.” The *pūjā* therefore has a very pragmatic and common sense dimension. Not much time is spent speculating on the nature of Dharmaraj and his worship, yet virtually everyone in Goalpara seems to know something about him, for normative claims about the deity are often expressed in very subtle and sophisticated ways (KOROM 1997b).

In many parts of Bengal, as well as in the *Dharmamangal* texts, the term *gājan* (thundering) is used to refer to the event. This word is only used in a very specific sense in Goalpara today to refer to one performance that occurs during the rites.<sup>21</sup> Instead of *gājan*, which residents will quickly point out is the name of the deity Shiva’s annual worship, the term *melā* is sometimes used interchangeably with the term *pūjā* when talking about the *dharmānuṣṭhān* (Dharma function or event). But most often *melā* is employed alongside the term *pūjā* to discuss the so-called profane (*apabitra*) dimensions of the overall function or event. In other words, similar to Bengalis in other communities (cf. ÖSTÖR 1982: 22–25), people in Goalpara make a distinction between the sacred (*pabitra*) nature of *pūjā* and the profane nature of *melā*. Yet it would be incorrect to separate the two by creating a Durkheimian dichotomy, since both are seen as a set embedded in the larger concept of *dharmānuṣṭhān*, the total performance event. Indeed, the invitations sent out to prominent people in Shantiniketan and Bolpur by the *pūjā* organizing committee (*dharmā sarkār*) include the verbal form of *anuṣṭhān* (*anuṣṭhita haoyā*), suggesting that people should attend not only the performance of the *pūjā*, but also the celebration of the *melā*. Residents discuss the two genres of display events in a holistic fashion; that is, as one participant during the *pūjā* suggested while watching her child ride a small hand-run Ferris wheel, “the *pūjā* would not be correct if the *melā* did not happen” (*melā nā hale pūjā śuddha habe nā*).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Here, I am in agreement with CHRISTIAN (1981: 3), where he states that the study of local religion is based on an inquiry concerning the beliefs and practices woven around the special quality of the place in question: its sacred sites, indigenous conceptions of deity, and idiosyncratic rituals, all of which are grounded in the community’s own sacred history.

<sup>21</sup> SEN 1971.1: 218 translates the term literally as “shouting.” He himself, however, traces the word to *garjana* (thunder), the form in which it is used in Goalpara to distinguish it from Shiva’s *gājan*. It can also be translated as “roar.” In the village, the term is used for the rite known as *megh garjan* (cloud thunder).

<sup>22</sup> This indigenous classification makes a strong case for discussing leisure activities as part and parcel of sacred activities. A similar connection between play and ritual exists in the context of the *pūjā*. All of these elements need to be seen as complementary parts of a whole. For a discussion of the importance of viewing ritual, play, and leisure as interconnected spheres of activity, see KOROM 1999.

*Melā* means “gathering,” “meeting,” or “assembly” (SEN 1971.2: 778). These connotations are embodied in one of the current uses of the word to mean festival.<sup>23</sup> Even before any of the rites begin people assemble in and around the sacred space demarcated for the performance of Dharmaraj *pūjā*. Children play, young girls shop for glass bangles from the non-resident merchants, young men loiter, smoke locally made cigarettes (*bidīs*) and gossip. Adults, both men and women, simultaneously sit casually on the temple veranda to discuss a wide range of topics concerning everything from economics and politics to the forthcoming sacred events. The Dharmaraj *pūjā* is, in other words, a time for celebration and relaxation as well as spiritual dedication and reflection. It could also be said that *pūjā* demonstrates the willpower of ascetic lack and sacrifice, while *melā* simultaneously allows for ludic behavior and the conspicuous display and consumption of goods. It is a time, as Roger ABRAHAMS states about the language of festivals, “for bringing out, passing around, for giving and receiving the most vital emblems of culture in an unashamed display of produce, of the plenitude the community may boast, precisely so that the community may boast” (1982: 161).<sup>24</sup> The Dharmaraj *pūjā* transcends sacred and profane, allowing residents an occasion for religious fulfillment in a congenial and celebratory environment that takes the performance of religious rites out of the temple precincts and into the marketplace. While this economic dimension of the phenomenon is no less significant (cf. KOROM 1999), I wish to focus on the political and spiritual dimension of the *pūjā* here, for it provides us useful insights into how caste tensions can be defused periodically within a socially sanctioned environment of display.

#### THE PŪJĀ IN ITS TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL CONTEXT

Dharmaraj *pūjā* is currently celebrated primarily in the villages of three West Bengal districts (Bankura, Burdwan, Birbhum). In medieval times this area was known as Rarh (*rāṛha*), and served as the historical stage for the events narrated in the *Dharmamangal* literature. Dharma worship flourished along with the epic literature and may have spread into the contiguous areas of Bihar in the west, Assam in the northeast (NEOGI 1951), and as far south as northern Orissa. But due to historical exigencies, the decline in the recitation of the literature, increasing absorption into other modes of worship (especially Shaivite), etc., Dharmaraj’s communities of devotees shrank considerably in size, only maintaining a strong foothold in the core

<sup>23</sup> Etymologically *melā* does not imply the same thing as the Latin *festum* (merriment, revelry), from which the word festival derives. But *melās* are indeed considered to be occasions for public displays of joy. The qualities and characteristics of *melās* fit in well with Falassi’s structural typology of festivals as rites of passage, reversal, conspicuous display, and consumption. See FALASSI 1987: 4–5.

<sup>24</sup> While ABRAHAMS is thinking of festival behavior in a more universalized sense, his ideas tie in nicely with Hindu notions of exchange and transaction as analyzed in MARRIOTT 1976: 109–142. Also, as BOURDIEU (1977, 1989) has suggested, the “size” of the public event and calculating the number of people in attendance should be factors considered when discussing exchange as a display of wealth, but we need not follow his rationale of this to the letter as a “display of symbolic capital.”



area of Rarh. Ethnographic evidence from the 1950s, however, suggests that the ritual performance was once much more widespread (BHATTACHARYYA 1952, 1953; NEOGI 1951) even in the modern period. Today, the most popular *gājans* or *pūjās* are found in Bankura, Burdwan, and Birbhum with, perhaps, the highest concentration to be found in the last. They are celebrated mostly during the months of the hot and rainy seasons (e.g., from Baishakh [*baisākh* = April–May] to Shraban [*śrābaṇ* = July–August]) to ensure the advent of rain and the subsequent rice harvest, although a few minor *pūjās* in honor of Dharmaraj are held during the winter months.

The Dharmaraj *pūjā* carries varying degrees of importance from place to place. In towns such as Beliatore (Bankura District) the ritual is a huge and elaborate affair known throughout Bengal. But in most of the villages that celebrate Dharmaraj's presence, the ceremony is small-scale, attracting only people from the immediate environs. This should not suggest, however, that these smaller observances are any less important. On the contrary, the origin narratives of the deity's appearance in smaller locales force us to consider the deity's quintessential importance in the rural Bengali festival cycle.<sup>25</sup> Still, many places rank their deities' importance in different ways. Dharmaraj is often given a subordinate role to other deities, most notably goddesses, in both urban and rural contexts. Most obvious in this regard is the central role festivals such as Durga *pūjā* or Kali *pūjā* play in the annual cycle.

It is perhaps unusual that Dharmaraj is the paramount deity in Goalpara. This is in keeping with the texts, however, which describe Dharmaraj as the “king of dharma,” the supreme deity in heaven, vying for more power on earth in his manipulative attempts to convert human beings to his worship through the exploits of his ordained hero Lausen. In Goalpara, the textual justification of Dharmaraj's preeminence is not often given as an explanation for his importance. Rather, because he is given the title of *grāmya debatā* (village deity), he is believed to be the guardian of the village, the protector of devotees, and the punisher of wrongdoers. Everyone in Goalpara unquestioningly states that Dharmaraj is the most important deity in the village, and that his *pūjā* is the largest and most important in the annual festival cycle.<sup>26</sup> There is also no question concerning the efficacy of worshipping Dharmaraj: he must be appeased for the individual and collective well-being of the community, as the personal experience narratives that I have discussed elsewhere attest (KOROM 1997c).

Although H. S. Mukhopadhyay, a middle-aged Brahman living in Goalpara, performs a daily *pūjā* at the village temple housing the Dharma *śilā* (tablet or stone) during the late morning hours throughout the year, the focus of community worship

<sup>25</sup> For a number of legends, narratives, and proverbs associated with Dharmaraj and his *pūjā* in Birbhum's villages, see MITRA 1972: 123–133. On the importance of these oral narratives in Goalpara specifically, see KOROM 1997c and 2000.

<sup>26</sup> One of the criteria used by people in Goalpara to judge the importance and success of an event is its “bigness.” The term *bara* (big) and phrase *khub bara* (very big) are used to signify the size and stature of an event or person. Thus the phrase *baralok* (big person) is used in Bengali to signify a rich or influential man. This idea may be part of a larger “folk aesthetic” in Indo-European notions of performance. On “bigness” as a concept in Europe and America, see GOLDSTEIN 1991.

is on the annual celebration. The annual performance of Dharmaraj's worship is seen as the most important ritual observance of the year. It is considered even greater than the *pūjā* for Durga, which is without doubt the largest and most popular religious celebration on the pan-Bengal level. Dharmaraj's centrality is also suggested by statements we find in the origin narratives told in the village to account for the unique timing of the *pūjā* during the month of Chaitra (*caitra* = March–April). I have discussed these narratives at great length elsewhere (e.g., KOROM 1996, 1997c), so I do not wish to dwell on them here. It is necessary, however, to point out two important orienting factors. First, according to the core narrative of the village's oral tradition, Dharmaraj himself appeared in Goalpara and stated that he should be worshipped in the village. In community elder and master storyteller S. P. Chattopadhyay's version of the story, Dharmaraj appears in the guise of a Brahman to a herder boy (*bāgāl*) and proclaims that the *pūjā* should occur on the *pūrṇimā* (full moon) of the month of Chaitra:

*nā āmi ekhāne ābirbhāb haba. tumi jene rākha je ei grāme ei jāyḡāy āmi thākba.*

Well, I will appear here. Keep in mind that I will stay in this spot, in this village.

*āmār pūjā karbe ār grāmer bhītare āmār ek aṅśa prastar khaṅḍa niye giye grāmer*

Worship me and take a piece of rock which is a part of me inside the village

*bhītare sthāpanā karbe. sekhāne pūjā habe. pūjāṭā habe*

and establish it inside the village. There will be *pūjā* there. The *pūjā* will be on

*caitra pūrṇimāy. caitra pūrṇimāy ei pūjā habe. caitra pūrṇimāy ei pūjā habe.*

Chaitra *pūrṇimā*. This *pūjā* will be on Chaitra *pūrṇimā*. On Chaitra *pūrṇimā* this very *pūjā* will happen.

Chaitra is the last month of the Bengali year, and the worship service is held, as the narrative states, on *pūrṇimā*, the full moon. Thus, in reality, the Dharmaraj *pūjā* is the last ritual of the year, falling on the full moon just before the beginning of the new year. But residents of Goalpara see it as the first *pūjā* of the new year because it falls at a time of transition, foreshadowing all other village observances that will follow during the next cycle. In this sense, the ritual itself is situated in a liminal zone. The Dharmaraj *pūjā* thus suggests both opening and closure. It is simultaneously a time to end the festival cycle and a place to begin. It provides, in a paraphrase of Jonathan Z. SMITH's quotation of Archimedes' discussion of the power of situation, "a place upon which to stand," a punctuated period that provides a basic religious orientation for village residents by reaffirming their important and unique status in the area. As SMITH writes, "There is ... the possibility of a real beginning, even of achieving the Beginning, a standpoint from which all things flow, a standpoint from which ... [one] may gain clear vision" (1978: 289). A moment of collective action such as this one is also an appropriate time to reflect on social distinctions and caste hierarchy because everyone in the community is obliged to participate economically and ritually in the event.

Everyone in Goalpara points out that their *pūjā* is the first one to be performed annually. The timing of the festival justifies their place in the world and provides them with a sense of importance that no other village in the area can claim. Moreover, the *pūjā* is a central orientation point around which the community's worldview may formulate and burst forth to influence its belief system in daily life practices. Along with the unique timing of the event, place is the core concept here; it reflects what has been called "the locative strand of Hindu piety" (ECK 1981: 323), described in Goalpara as a downward-pulling attraction (*nimnabhi mukhī ākarṣaṇ*), a special magnetism that anchors residents to the site.

A version of the aetiological narrative told to me by S. P. Mukhopadhyay, the *pūjānī* (ritual specialist) who performs daily services at Dharmaraj's temple, elucidates my second point by confirming that the deity appeared in Goalpara prior to manifesting himself in other locales in the district. For this reason, the people of Goalpara view their *pūjā* as the most important one in the area, the origin of origins. As Mukhopadhyay, drawing on the collective wisdom of the ancestors, states:

*āmi moṭāmoṭi jeṭā pūrbapurūṣer kāch theke śunechi seṭā hacche ei dharmarāj*

That which I have roughly heard from ancestors is this that this very Dharmaraj

*ṭhākur rājā ballāl sener āmal theke haye āsche ār ki māne*

*ṭhākur* has come down from the time of Raja Ballal Sen.<sup>27</sup> And what else? I mean

*aitihāsik je takhankār din theke māne ei pūjāṭā sṭāṭ hayeche ebaṅg*

historic, that from those days. I mean this very *pūjā* has started. And also

*kathita āche je ei dharmarāj ṭhākur māne biṣeṣ kare bīrbhūm ḍiṣṭriker,*

it is said that this very Dharmaraj *ṭhākur*, I mean especially Birbhum District's,

*bīrbhūm ḍiṣṭriker māne pratham sthān māne āmāder ei goyālpārā theke*

Birbhum District's, I mean the first place, I mean this very, I mean from our

*ābirbhāb hayeche*

Goalpara, appeared [himself].

<sup>27</sup> Ballal Sen was the second in the line of the Sen kings, who ruled a great portion of Bengal for over 125 years. He was the son of Bijay Sen, who died in 1158CE, leaving his kingdom in the hands of his son. See MAJUMDAR 1943: 216–218. This suggests a very long period of development for the *pūjā*, but it is necessary to approach the historical reference with caution, since Ballal Sen, for reasons unknown to me, has become a sort of folkloric figure and culture hero in Bengali oral and popular tradition, and many features of Bengali culture are often traced back to his reign. It is highly questionable whether any of the *Dharmamangal* literature in its preserved form dates back to the 12th century (cf SEN 1975: 141), but it is quite possible that the worship of the deity predates any of the texts or their rise in popularity. SEN (1975: 163), however, notes that an obscure early 18th century text titled *Nīranjanmangal* describes a chance encounter between the *Dharmamangal*'s hero Lausen and Ballal Sen. This fact links the mythic, historic, and legendary. On mythological knowledge during Ballal Sen's period of rule, see HAZRA 1985.

The passage suggests a unique position for Dharmaraj in Goalpara, and succinctly voices indigenous concepts about Dharmaraj's primary role in village worship. In other words, it is said that Dharmaraj should be worshipped first and foremost in Goalpara. From the point of view of the residents, Goalpara is the center of Dharmaraj worship, and his *pūjā* is the center of the village's religious and ritual activity. A line from a printed version of Dharmaraj's aetiological narrative (MITRA 1972: 127) clarifies the point to an even greater extent:

*e añcale jata dharmapūjā hay; sabār āge āmār pūjā cāi*

In this region, however many Dharma *pūjās* there may be, I want mine to be before them all.

Such pivoting of the sacred which grounds belief and practice in one distinct location is not a unique feature in Goalpara. The *mahātmyās* or popular panegyric chapbooks that are available at virtually every pilgrimage center in India justify a given place's position in the hierarchy of sacred space by propagating the specific locale's unique qualities and power. But unlike many larger and more popular sites of *kratophany* (manifestation of power), as ELIADE has termed them (1958), Goalpara's locus of power does not have a written tradition associated with it, as I have been stressing. Instead, the importance of the place, time, and performance of the Dharmaraj *pūjā* is maintained and perpetuated by a corpus of oral narratives about his first appearance in the village.<sup>28</sup> Let us now move on to a consideration of how the event is organized and the key actors involved in its production to provide more texture for situating my concluding discussion of liminality and *communitas*.

## ORGANIZING THE EVENT

No event on the grand scale of the Dharmaraj *pūjā* could take place without an administrative group of people to mobilize volunteers involved in making arrangements for the rituals and other activities that occur during the designated period. A governing body alternately called the Dharma *sarkār* (government) or Dharma *samiti* (committee) has been performing this function for as long as anyone in Goalpara can remember. In the past, the *sarkār* functioned more broadly as a village political body made up of Brahmans to settle village conflicts, both social and economic. According to a recent study, "this political body dealt with divorce, land disputes, rape, adultery, and other civil offenses. Only severe offenses such as murder were sent to the urban court. The villagers were summoned to the body by announcements and drumbeat, and they were allowed to witness legal proceedings. The body could fine or ostracize a person from the village, and any fine was taken as a contribution to the Dharmaraj fund. This political body existed at the time of independ-

<sup>28</sup> These themes are the subject of other studies authored by me. See KOROM 1996, 1997a,b,c, 1999.

ence in 1947, but gradually lost its power to a formal governing body that worked under the district and state administration ..." (ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988: 43). Today the activity of the Committee is limited mostly to events associated with the annual *pūjā*.<sup>29</sup>

The Committee is no longer made up only of Brahmans, or even of just high-caste men. Today, men of various low castes are involved in the decision-making process, and as we shall see below, every male member of the community has a potential say in organizational matters during the annual meeting which takes place shortly before the event begins. But in reality, the three main voluntary positions (secretary, cashier, auditor) in the Committee are held by high-caste men: two Brahmans and one Kaibartya.<sup>30</sup> Satyanarayan Mandal, better known as Bipad, is a member of the Kaibartya (fisherman) caste and functions as the Committee's secretary (*sacīb*). Bipad is a middle-aged man who supports his family as a teacher in the village school. His family also owns a small portion of land that adds to the family's income. His duties are primarily concerned with making sure that all of the items needed for the *pūjā* will be purchased prior to the event. These include such things as purchasing food, alcohol, and cigarettes for the visiting *dhākīs* (drummers)<sup>31</sup> and other performers who will arrive at the scene on the first day of the three-day event. His other activities include such things as renting generators to be used as a power source for lighting and loudspeakers, organizing labor, arranging for fees to be paid, purchasing materials needed by ritual specialists, and so forth.

Gurudeb Bhattacharjya, a Brahman teacher in his early forties, is Bipad's friend and colleague at the school. He serves as the Committee's cashier (*koṣādhyaṅṣa*), while his uncle Sampad Narayan Bhattacharjya acts as auditor or accountant (*sampādak*). Gurudeb is in charge of money flow. He keeps the *pūjā* bank account balanced, issues cash to purchase goods and pay for labor related to the *pūjā*. He also oversees the management of the *debottar jami* (divine land) or *debatā sampati* (deity's goods), the twelve *bīghās*<sup>32</sup> of land theoretically owned by Dharmaraj. The land was a gift from a wealthy landowner in the neighboring village of Taltor, the home of Bankura Ray, one of the seven Ray brothers who are identified collectively as Dharmaraj's multiforms (cf. KOROM 1997b: 158). This land is rented out for a payment of rice paddy to low-caste households according to the rules of the *thīkā* system, one of the agricultural models used in Goalpara (cf. ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988: 25). Money (app. Rs. 6000) generated from the rental fee belongs to the Dharmaraj temple trust and is recycled into the *pūjā* fund to be used in any way that is seen fit by

<sup>29</sup> ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988: 64–67.

<sup>30</sup> Kaibartyas are ranked ninth out of the eleven so-called "high castes." See ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988: 18.

<sup>31</sup> I shall have more to say about their important role in the *pūjā* later.

<sup>32</sup> A *bīghā* is made up of twenty *kāthās* (1=750 sq. feet) Thus, three *bīghās* is equivalent to one acre. Older accounts, such as K. BHATTACHARYA (1986: 180) suggest that fourteen *bīghās* were originally donated to the temple, and some people in the village still believe this to be the correct amount. Although no one on the Committee was willing to admit it, it might be the case that two *bīghās* were sold to finance the *pūjā* during an exceedingly difficult year.

the Committee.<sup>33</sup> Sampad Narayan's responsibility as accountant is to keep track of how money is being spent, and to guarantee that the fund is not depleted. The three roles are closely interrelated, since any decisions that are made depend on the expertise of all three Committee members. All three must therefore work together as a team for the good of everyone in the village, and, as Bipad Mandal once remarked, "to keep Dharma *thākur* happy" (*jāte dharma thākur kuṣī thāke*).

All three of the men happily began their positions within the last fifteen years, and were nominated because of their special skills in organization and arithmetic. For example, Sampad Narayan told me that he was selected because he has a good head for numbers. Although Bipad's position as secretary is the most time-consuming, each of these three men bear the responsibility of organizing the *pūjā*. Bipad stores all of the ledgers and records of past *pūjās* dating back roughly two decades in a metal chest in his house. The chest is kept under lock and key for the whole year, and is ceremonially opened approximately one month prior to the *pūjā*, when organization for the next event begins.

A number of other low-caste people such as Narayan Lohar, the village *chaukīdār* (guard), are members of the Committee by right of occupation. In Narayan's case, he is responsible for cleaning the area around the shrine of Chand Ray, one of Dharmaraj's multiforms located in Pashcimpara. His other major duty in connection with the *pūjā* is a mandatory visit to each household on the evening before the annual meeting to inform residents when the discussions will be held. For his services to the Committee, he receives a remuneration of goat heads resulting from the animal sacrifice (*balidān*) on the evening of the last day of the *pūjā*.

Prior to the meeting, the secretary, cashier, and accountant meet together at one of their houses for one last consultation to review the budget and plan an agenda for discussion. Like their other prior meetings, this last one is informal, usually taking place over a cup of tea in the late afternoon. But there is also an air of seriousness, for issues are discussed which could affect the outcome of the *pūjā*. Although the *kol deyāsī* (head devotee), about whom I will say more below, is primarily responsible for making sure that ritual activities are carried out successfully, the Committee members must take responsibility for the success or failure of the *pūjā*'s organizational dimension. If everything is not arranged according to traditional norms, there could be catastrophic results. The Committee must therefore be absolutely certain that all of the required provisions can be supplied. If funds are short – as they often are – budget cuts must be made in such a way as to allow the *pūjā* to happen in its entirety. Modifications to programming must thus be made with care, and this is normally achieved by reducing the quantity of a certain commodity without eliminating the item altogether. For example, one of the largest expenses is the recruitment of a *jātrā* (folk theater) troupe from the nearby town of Bolpur that provides staged per-

<sup>33</sup> This money is supplemented by a house-to-house fund drive organized by the Committee prior to the *pūjā*. People are also seen donating money to the fund during the *pūjā* itself. Bipad Mandal can often be seen sitting on the northern veranda of the temple writing receipts to people, such as myself, who wait until the last minute to contribute to the fund.

performances on two consecutive evenings after the conclusion of the *pūjā*. When funds are short, the *jātrā* is cut to one all-night performance. This assures that residents will get some entertainment after the rituals have concluded, but guards against bankrupting the account.

The budget must be controlled very tightly, for, as Table E showing the complete expenditures for a twenty-one year period suggests, the costs involved can be quite high in relation to average incomes:<sup>34</sup>

Table E  
Total Expenditures in Rupees

Gregorian Year	Bengali Year	Annual Expenses
1968–69	1374	Rs. 1,675.00
1969–70	1375	1,440.57
1970–71	1376	2,159.38
1971–72	1377	1,850.39
1972–73	1378	2,146.57
1973–74	1379	2,103.37
1974–75	1380	1,528.47
1975–76	1381	2,988.50
1976–77	1382	2,682.62
1977–78	1383	4,025.72
1978–79	1384	2,724.95
1979–80	1385	2,582.88
1980–81	1386	3,797.56
1981–82	1387	4,063.88
1982–83	1388	4,459.21
1983–84	1389	5,011.07
1984–85	1390	4,733.05
1985–86	1391	4,223.07
1986–87	1392	3,995.90
1987–88	1393	5,320.50
1988–89	1394	6,863.60
1989–90	1395	7,030.24

Considering that the highest individual income in the village is Rs. 50 000 per annum and the lowest averages approximately Rs. 3000, the above figures suggest that the cost of the *pūjā* is a great communal expense. But people say that this is how it should be, for residents must make personal sacrifices to receive the auspicious

<sup>34</sup> These figures are based on the Committee ledgers in the possession of Bipad Mandal. The ledgers are viewed to be important religious documents, as is evidenced by the fact that they are wrapped in red cloth, as any Hindu sacred text would be. At the time that I was doing my fieldwork, the rupee was valued at twenty-one to the US dollar. But one must keep in mind that the rate of exchange has fluctuated greatly in the past. For example, when I first visited India in 1977, the rate was approximately eight rupees to one US dollar.

(*maṅgal*) benefits of the event. Personal and communal sacrifice, whether monetary or physical, is a theme that runs throughout the observance. Further, the success of the event is most often talked about in terms of size. The larger and noisier the *pūjā* is, the more successful it is perceived to be. Thus residents talk about especially good years when there was a great amount of *dhum-dhām* (pomp and splendor). Since the act of enticing the deity into the assembly through the process of name call (*nām dāk*) and drumming is seen as insuring the success of the event, good years are also spoken of in terms of how many *dhākīs* attend to beat their drums. Dharmaraj must be induced to participate more intensely in the *pūjā*, even though he is locally perceived to be very active (*khub jāgrata*). It seems as though Dharmaraj tests people's faith and belief by demonstrating intentionally his "supreme indifference" (ROBINSON 1980: 112). Thus, the issue of human intentionality is also raised. The correct performance of invocation, drumming, and ritual play (*khelā*) must, therefore, be carried out with a sincere spirit of faith and devotion in order to secure Dharmaraj's own participation in the event, thereby guaranteeing an auspicious and prosperous year to come.

Table F shows a breakdown of the number of drummers in attendance each year, as well as the amount of rupees spent to provide for their needs:<sup>35</sup>

Table F  
Number of Dhākīs and their Fees

Gregorian Year	Bengali Year	Number of Dhākīs	Total Expenses
1968–69	1374	187	Rs. 176.89
1969–70	1375	142	247.94
1970–71	1376	399	482.85
1971–72	1377	227	374.85
1972–73	1378	NA	564.30
1973–74	1379	NA	550.10
1974–75	1380	303	454.25
1975–76	1381	238	356.75
1976–77	1382	NA	211.50
1977–78	1383	274	531.75
1978–79	1384	151	315.00
1979–80	1385	96	162.25
1980–81	1386	137	426.00
1981–82	1387	191	503.25
1982–83	1388	167	578.50
1983–84	1389	250	874.25
1984–85	1390	157	607.00
1985–86	1391	207	733.00
1986–87	1392	163	666.00
1987–88	1393	69	431.00
1988–89	1394	157	809.00
1989–90	1395	122	879.00

<sup>35</sup> Because of their important role as performers, a separate ledger is kept for recording the expenses paid to the *dhākīs*.



The Goalpara narratives about Dharmaraj's first manifestation (*ābirbhāb*) in the village stress the role of the *dhākīs* as a mandatory part of the performance because an order was dictated by Dharmaraj himself. This is reconfirmed in the narrative given below. Without *dhākīs*, the *pūjā* would be incomplete and ineffective. Therefore, they must come. To find out more about the role of the drummers, I rode my bicycle, along with my field assistant Hari, to the village of Shiyān-Sukhbazaar, the fabled home of the *dhākīs* repeatedly mentioned in the Goalpara oral narratives. Shiyān-Sukhbazaar is approximately fifteen kilometers from Goalpara. Prior to my departure, I was told to speak with a milk vendor named Sushil Das, the 39 year-old chief (*sardār*) drummer. We arrived in his village at sunset, and found Sushil busy at work feeding his cows. While doing so, he narrated to us the following account about why the drummers must attend and perform every year. A number of other *dhākīs* had assembled in the shed after they heard about our arrival:

OK then. Now, how my, this, my own caste, is so involved in our Dharmaraj's *pūjā*, [about] that I shall speak a bit. Though, please imagine, [that] I won't be able to speak the words of three generations. Thus, whatever little I have heard from their mouths, that bit I am speaking. That *bābā* Bayaradighi [Baharadihi]. For what reason are there so many *dhāk-ḍhol*, so many musicians at his *pūjā*? He ... now I have heard, what else, that taking the form of a human, he had gone there wherever this, my caste lives. Going, he says, "My *bābā* Bayaradighi is in Goalpara. There, on the full-moon in the month [of] Chaitra – the full moon that will occur – my *bābā*'s *pūjā* will be on that full moon. You all, bringing everything, *dhāk-ḍhol* [and] whatever little else there is, reach there." But in this very way [he] had come to this very Sukhbazaar in the beginning. Then it appeared that an *iūniyan* (union) came into being among my caste. Then all of those people of Goalpara? Now, those very people ... there is one [event] called *megh garjan* (cloud thunder), if you will, over there on the side. [Hari: In Pashcimpāra.] That very *megh garjan* has occurred for *bābā*'s permission. Now, at that very time, in this very Sukhbazaar, my paternal grandfather – I mean Bhupati Das – took [on] the responsibility of the *gājan*. And all of the *pūjā*'s complete responsibilities – whatever, whichever little it takes – that, I mean, [he] went to *mānej* (manage). We have come down [doing it] from then even until now. [Frank: Bhupati Das was the first *dhākī* (drummer)?] Yes, the first *dhākī*. Then [my] respected grandfather died. Then my father managed it. My father managed it. But my father also passed away. After my father's passing ... now I, at present, manage it. But this last time I gave this responsibility to my elder brother. I don't have any offspring, no children. For that, seeing my ... this very old ancestral thing; how could I give it into somebody else's hands? Therefore let my house's thing remain in

[this] very house. Having said that, I have given it to my elder brother, Ratan Das.

In theory, the drummers are supposed to perform at the *pūjā* without complaints or demands. Yet it is often the case that because of their untouchable status as Ruidas (Bayens) caste members, high-caste people in Goalpara take their presence for granted, not showing them the hospitality deserved by a guest. This has led to occasional inter-caste disputes in the village. Such disputes account for the numerical fluctuation of Bayen drummers in Table F. Even though the *upapradhān* (head man) of the Ruidas caste in Goalpara is not a member of the Committee, he often intervenes on behalf of his caste brethren at the annual meeting. If his demands are not met he could send word to the head drummer advising them not to come. ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR (1988: 65–66) report that he was once quoted as saying “When you go as their guests, they serve you in the corner of the courtyard as if you were dogs. You must not go to their homes.”<sup>36</sup> But the Committee is aware that the drummers must come, and so nowadays special arrangements are made to house and feed the visiting drummers at one of the village’s two youth clubs in Pashcimpara. Such issues often emerge at the annual meeting once the official agenda is discussed and negotiated. The drummers can thus wield much power in terms of negotiating fair inter-caste transactions.

General interest and planning for the *pūjā* does not really begin until after the full moon of the month of Phalgun (March–April), the date on which the Hindu spring festival of *dol*, known throughout most of north India as *hoī*, is celebrated.<sup>37</sup> Traditionally, the Committee meeting is supposed to take place on the following new moon (*amābasyā*); that is, the new moon of Chaitra, the month of the Dharmaraj *pūjā*. But in 1990, the ethnographic present of this study, the meeting was delayed for one extra day because Committee members were not able to attend due to prior commitments.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the meeting took place on 13 Chaitra 1396 (March 27, 1990). Because village celebrations and festivities are punctuated, this date marks a transition in village sentiment, as interest in the *pūjā* dramatically increases among residents.

The date for the meeting is usually determined by Bipad Mandal, who consults the annual edition of the *Guptapreś Dāirekṭānī Pañjikā*, a well-known Bengali astrological almanac (*pañjikā*) published in Calcutta by Gupta Press. Once the date is fixed, Bipad contacts Narayan Lohar and informs him of the date set for the meeting. Narayan then goes to the Dharmaraj temple on the day of the meeting to per-

<sup>36</sup> ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR’s tabulation of drummers in attendance during select years is different from the figures recorded in the Committee’s ledgers, which makes me suspect that they have erred. This is not surprising, since a number of other erroneous statements are also to be found in their study. See my review of their book in KOROM 1992.

<sup>37</sup> For a classic account of *hoī* in a Hindi-speaking village in Uttar Pradesh, see MARRIOTT 1966.

<sup>38</sup> In the end, one of the Committee members (Sampad Narayan) was not able to participate in the meeting because he had to attend the annual death obsequies (*śrāddha*) of his brother-in-law in another village.

form obeisance. From there he visits each home in Goalpara a few hours before the scheduled meeting to notify residents formally that the meeting will be held at sunset.

At approximately seven in the evening, Bipad arrives at the Dharmaraj temple in the village carrying the Committee's official ledgers. He spreads a cloth on the northern veranda of the temple and sits down. He is joined there by the other Committee members and prominent men of the village. Although there is no restriction concerning the presence of women at the meeting, only men attend.<sup>39</sup> After a crowd gathers, Bipad, who presides over the meeting, formally opens the proceedings by saying that he is happy to announce the beginning of the *pūjā* preparations on behalf of Dharma *thākur*. A section of my field notes dating from March 27, 1990 (13 Chaitra 1396) provides an overview of the atmosphere at the meeting:

It was set to take place at 7 p.m. at the Dharma temple. An unusually cold wind deterred a lot of people from coming, and many came late. So the meeting didn't start till after 7:30. But before that, many people informally talked about the *pūjā* and looked at Bipad Mandal's ledgers. A blanket was spread out on the northern veranda of the temple, and Bipad *bābu* had the central position. For a while, Gurudeb Bhattacharjya sat on his left, and two elderly people (men – there were no women in attendance) sat on his right. The meeting began rather abruptly when Bipad decided that enough people had shown up. He read out the figures from the last year and then moved into the budget for this year. At certain points arguments erupted and people would start negotiating by yelling. People of all different castes were in attendance, and all had equal share in the decision-making. Thus, Bipad made notes based on community consensus. For example, they decided that they could spend 2000 of the 5000 + rupees budget on the *jātrā*. There was also talk about an organizing committee for the *jātrā*, as well as enlisting some general managers for the *pūjā* ... The entire meeting lasted less than 1/2 an hour, and ended with Bipad thanking everyone for attending on behalf of *bābā* Dharma; that it would surely make him happy. Here ends the meeting. People dispersed rather quickly, but some of the head honchos stood around for a few more minutes talking while others left. There was also a good deal of joking that went on while the meeting was in progress.

The meeting was, as my notes hint, informally formal; formal in the sense that it opened and closed with fixed pronouncements and proceeded according to the secretary's outlined agenda, but informal enough to allow for occasional ruptures based

<sup>39</sup> When I asked women about this later they generally responded by saying that the meeting is men's business. Further, "We have to prepare the evening rice for them. How could we go?"

on spontaneously generated debate and negotiation in the fixed program. The major flow of the meeting was as follows:

- 1) The secretary reads a list of last year's expenditures, followed by an estimate of what will be spent for the present year.
- 2) He mentions how much of the total budget was generated from the deity's own land.
- 3) Based on the Committee's tabulations, the estimated budget for this year's *pūjā* is discussed and decided.
- 4) The issue of nominating two new managers to work during the *pūjā* is raised, but not finalized, in order to give people an opportunity to volunteer for the positions first.<sup>40</sup>
- 5) Some of the low-caste devotees (*bhaktyās*) begin to complain that on the second day of the *pūjā*, when they carry one of the three *bāṇeśvars*<sup>41</sup> to the houses of prominent residents in the neighboring village of Taltor, they are not given any *praṇāmīs* (gifts). This was countered by a Brahman who justified the action by suggesting that a wealthy landowner in Taltor who has been donating *dhān* (paddy) to the *pūjā* fund each year was not being visited by the *bāṇeśvar*. He has threatened to stop donating paddy if the visits do not begin again. This was the cause for great amusement when someone said that the *bhaktyās* were getting lazy, resulting in the loss of their *praṇāmī*. A connection between the two incidents was pointed out, and the secretary promised to look into the matter by writing a letter to all parties concerned in Taltor.
- 6) A Brahman in the audience, citing the authority of the *pañjikā* (almanac), suggested that the *rāj bhārā*<sup>42</sup> must arrive at the Buro Dharam *talā* before seven in the morning because the full moon would technically be gone after that. The secretary made a note to inform the new managers of this point.
- 7) The secretary, feeling hungry and seeing that it was getting late, guided the conversation back to the budget. After some negotiation, it was finally decided that Rs 3500 would be spent for the *pūjā* itself and Rs 2000 would be allotted for the *jātrā* (staged dramas) performances.
- 8) After this, the secretary looks at his watch, stands up on the blanket, and formally closes the meeting by thanking all of the village residents for attending on *bābā* Dharmaraj's behalf.

<sup>40</sup> A few days later it was announced that a Brahman youth, Tutul Cakrabarti, and Prakash Mukhopadhyay, a Brahman lecturer at the university, would serve as managers for the 1990 *pūjā*.

<sup>41</sup> A spiked plank serving as Dharmaraj's *astra* (weapon) and symbol of his omnipotent power.

<sup>42</sup> The *rāj bhārā*, the "royal" pot, is the large clay vessel for storing homemade liquor consumed on the last day of the rite. It is often mentioned in oral narratives circulating in the village, which confirm its importance in the event. For its ritual uses, see KOROM 1999.

The end of the meeting marks the beginning of the *pūjā* preparatory period. Excitement in the village increases from this night onward, as many public and private activities begin in anticipation of the great annual event. For example, the temple is cleaned and painted, special foods are prepared, goats are purchased for the animal sacrifice, clay horses are made to sell to people who are taking special vows, etc. Most notably, there is an audible signal that will be heard each day at sunset called *dhemul*. *Dhemul* is a special drumbeat played on the *dhhol*, a two-sided cylinder drum, at the Dharma temple by a member of the local Ruidas caste (cf. also ROBINSON 1980: 113). The purpose of this ritual, known as *dharam jāgrata* (awakening Dharma), is to keep Dharmaraj awake and alert, or to wake him up if he is asleep. But the ritual also serves as a daily reminder to villagers that the *pūjā* is approaching. For the next ten days this activity will continue. Then, five days before the *pūjā* begins, the secretary designs and writes an invitation card which is sent to VIPs in the area, such as the Vice Chancellor of the University in Shantiniketan, the chief of police in Bolpur, visiting fieldworkers such as myself, etc. Committee members and other residents see this symbolic act of invitation as enhancing the prestige of their *pūjā* because they say that no other Dharmaraj *pūjā* in the area could attract local officials to their activities. Sending invitations, then, is another way in which the people of Goalpara see their observance as unique and foremost. It is also a strategic move to create obligations on the part of officials who may be exploited by the village's *pañcāyat* during future economic transactions and political negotiations to secure favors for the village. Four days after the mailing of the invitations, another major event occurs during which a communal journey by bus is taken to the Ganges river for a purificatory bath and picnic.<sup>43</sup>

## DOWN BY THE RIVER

Bathing and ritual purification play a major role in Hindu rituals, and must be performed prior to worship. As Lawrence BABB has stated, "the principal actor or actors in ritual must themselves be in a purified condition before approaching the deity" (1975: 47). Purity before the deity is a necessary precondition of worship in virtually all Hindu rituals, and purification must be performed if a rite is to be effective. Running waters are the most powerful means of purification because the river "both absorbs pollution and carries it away" (ECK 1981: 217). To accomplish the task of purification in preparation for the *pūjā*, a Brahman youth from the village named Subodh Chattopadhyay, a student of philosophy at the university in Shantiniketan. Subodh makes arrangements for a large bus to transport village residents to a place located on the banks of the Ganges known as Uddharanpur two days before the *pūjā*

<sup>43</sup> This kind of activity is one of the most conspicuous aspects of Hindu religion on the popular level. We are fortunate now to have an excellent study of the phenomenon of bus pilgrimages in North India. See GOLD 1988.

begins. Uddharanpur is located approximately one hour south of Goalpara by road. The scenic spot is a popular local pilgrimage site because the Ganges broadens there into a wide, but gently flowing, river, making bathing comfortable for all.<sup>44</sup> Everyone in the village knows that they must give Subodh fifteen rupees in advance to secure a seat on the bus, but as is quite usual in India, more people fit into the transport vehicle than one would imagine possible. All in all, there were fifty-five adults, along with a number of toddlers and infants, crammed into the bus!

So the bus arrives in Goalpara at 5 a.m. on the 24th of Chaitra (April 7, 1990) and stops in front of the tea stall at the entrance to the village. Pilgrims of all castes, including most of the *bhaktiyās*, for whom this trip is mandatory, are waiting there for it to arrive. Everyone is fasting until after the bath. Subodh had envisioned an orderly seating arrangement, but as soon as the bus parked, there was a mad rush to get seats. People were travelling light, carrying only a change of clothing, food for the breakfast snack to be eaten after the sacred bath, and empty earthen containers to carry back water and clay from the river to use during household rituals in general. But the combined total of goods, people, baskets, pots, etc. made the journey quite uncomfortable. Nevertheless, everyone was in good spirits. People tended to sit with their friends and neighbors. The seating arrangement did not necessarily break down into caste groups, but it was clear that clusters of castes had formed on the bus both to and from the river. The atmosphere on the bus was not, strictly speaking, really one of sacredness. Rather, the trip served the additional purpose of allowing people to take a leisurely break from their daily routines. This was especially true for many of the women on board, who explained that they saw the occasion as an opportunity to gossip with their friends and get away from their husbands. In addition, the journey provided them the benefit of accruing *punya* (merit) by taking a cleansing bath in the Ganges, the mother of all rivers. There was thus ample joking, some singing of devotional songs, and the ever-present blare of film music from a portable tape-recorder. No stops were made along the way, and we arrived at Uddharanpur shortly after the sun had risen.

When we arrived, everyone proceeded past the many food stalls that cater to pilgrims, passed through the village itself, and finally arrived at the river. The first stop for most people was a quick, perfunctory visit to the burning grounds of Uddharanpur because of its local fame. A number of people stood around commenting on the *deḍ bāḍī* (dead body), preferring to use this term for my benefit rather than the common Bengali term *marā*. Two bloated animals were floating by as we stood star-

<sup>44</sup> The Ganges (*gaṅgā*) rose in prominence some time after the decline of the Indus Valley civilization, and eventually became the archetypal sacred waters. Her name means “going” or “motion,” coming from the root *gam* (APTE 1985: 399). Her waters are swift and powerful, for she is *śakti*, female energy in the form of water. Because the Ganges is considered to be a symbol of life and fertility, she incorporates all potentialities in her water. She is the *fons et origo*, the source of all possible existence, for water is without form. From this formlessness springs forth all potentiality. In her all seeds are contained. She is literally the germ of life. Symbolically, she is that void from which all things come, and to which they must return in the end. She gives life in the beginning and accepts death in the end. For more on this line of reasoning, see ELIADE 1958: 188ff. On the mythology of the Ganges, see ECK 1986: 166–183.

ing at the simmering corpse. One Brahman pilgrim commented on the impermanence of life while a number of children began to argue over what sort of animal corpses were floating by. The pilgrims then proceeded back to the bathing *ghāt* (steps), where everyone purchased bananas and white sugar candy (*mol*) to offer to the river during the bath. As people began purchasing their offerings, they gradually dispersed, wandering to different spots along the river, and segmenting into family and caste units. People were commenting on how hot and dusty the trip was, and how nice a dip in the river would be. One by one, people began to move down the steps toward the water. Brahmans were performing the *gāyatrī mantra* in praise of the sun, while other castes simply hailed Ganga, the river goddess. After each person finished their bath, they filled their pots with water and clay, then washed their clothes and spread them on the ground to dry as part of an informal ritual to purify clothing as well as body.<sup>45</sup> While clothes were drying, the Goalpara group moved around the pilgrim complex, purchasing souvenirs such as religious pictures, chapbooks glorifying the site, etc. and shopped for fried snacks (*bhājā*) and sweets to eat along with the *muṛi* (puffed rice) brought from home.

No one ate until after everyone had finished bathing. A scenic, quiet spot a short distance from the river was found by one of the children, and everyone sat in small groups eating large mounds of puffed rice mixed with water, raw chili peppers, fried snacks, and sweets. The meal was simple, but filling. People were quick to point out that one should not overeat after this point, since partial abstinence was an obligatory observance during the *pūjā*. The *bhaktyās* especially are required to follow a set of dietary restrictions among other rules such as celibacy after the bathing rite. Conversation during the meal was mostly about the forthcoming *pūjā*. A main concern among the women was all of the housework and cooking that they would have to do for the guests and relatives who would be arriving from other villages to observe the event. The *bhaktyās* were gathered in their own circle, discussing the activities that would take place during the *pūjā* and why each had taken on the responsibility to become a temporary renunciant. The children played after their meal, while the remainder of the men talked about all of the fine liquor that would be consumed on the last day of the *pūjā*. Conversation went on in this manner for approximately two hours, at which time Subodh signaled to everyone that it was time for the return journey. Some people complained that they wanted to stay longer, but Subodh argued that if they wanted to stop and visit temples along the way, they would have to leave immediately. Negotiations thus ensued to decide whether languishing in the shade to escape the hot sun and sweltering heat was more important than visiting temples. A decision was finally reached, so the women began gathering up their clothes, children, and pots for the return journey. Some men stopped along the path to drink tea in shops dotting the roadside, while the women and children got on the bus. By 11 a.m. all the passengers were seated and ready to go.

<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to note that women do not escape housework by going on such journeys, but creatively incorporate activities such as washing into the leisure-time activity itself. This is phenomenon fairly widespread in North India. For another example, see KUMAR 1988: 83–110, esp. 89.

The first stop on the return journey was an *āśram* (religious community) run by a mendicant named Dulal *bābā*. Many men waited in the bus as all of the women and children went into the courtyard of the site to receive *prasād* (blessed food). The stop was rather short, and we proceeded to a Brahmanand temple, where women joined a lone female singer in chanting the Hare Krishna mantra. *Prasād* was again distributed and we proceeded to the last stop along the way, a Ramakrishna temple. After the temple visitations were over, we began the return journey, heading directly back to Goalpara. By 1 p.m. we were back in the village. Everyone returned home to their respective houses to tell other family members about the journey and to share *prasād* with them. Journeys of this sort are fairly standard practice in the Hindu tradition, for whenever a great religious event is to take place, it is desirable to bathe in the Ganges, especially for those people who have made a special *mānasik* (vow) for the occasion.

What is it, then, that makes water such a powerful symbol? How is it that seemingly dirty water can bring about an ontological change in the pilgrim? Pilgrims simply told me that the bath is performed to clean body and mind prior to the *pūjā*. In order to enter the realm of the sacred one must be pure. Ritual purification offers the pilgrim the opportunity to place himself back into the sacred sphere from whence we came by removing the finite and impure activities of existence. Goalpara residents echoed this by acknowledging that the exigencies of daily life make one impure. Therefore, bathing must be a prerequisite to worship. Historians of religions have taken this idea one step further by interpreting the act as a primal event. As Frederick STRENG has noted: "To purify means to return to a powerless form, the original power, which in itself is pure" (1969: 92).

The bathing process constitutes a "rite of separation" (VAN GENNEP 1960) from the previous life, a symbolic rebirth into a new and pure condition. It is a total regeneration in which that which has form becomes as boundless as the water into which it is immersed. It is a total "reintegration into the formlessness of preexistence," as Mircea ELIADE has stated (1958: 188). By emerging from the water, the pilgrim "becomes a part of the act of creation in which form was first expressed" (*ibid.*). It is an act which is repeated over and over again during the course of the *pūjā*. One reflective Brahman pilgrim explained this symbolic interpretation of scholars as an act of parturition, describing the Ganges as *mā* (mother) and bathers as her children being born from her waters.

By partaking in the sacred repetition of bathing, the pilgrim experiences the whole of time. From the moment one emerges from the water until the moment one again performs the act of immersion, the cycle of time is theoretically experienced. This cycle can be interpreted on two levels: On the human level immersion is equivalent to death, and emergence can be seen as a new birth, for the pilgrim comes out of the waters as a child without any sin (*pāp*). On the cosmic level the immersion could be interpreted as symbolic of *pralāy* (cf. ZIMMER 1974: 3–22), the cataclysmic flood which periodically dissolves existence as we know it into the all-engulfing primeval ocean of milk, the *ksīrsāgar* (milk ocean). The world is once again created anew after this cataclysm, continuing the endless cyclical pattern of time.



Although a phenomenological interpretation such as the one presented above might lend meaning to our symbolic understanding of the event as an essential representation of the cyclical and transient nature of Hindu time reckoning, residents would not see it this way. For them, the separation is only temporary and has no conscious cosmogonic significance. However, one village resident did confirm that the bath washed away sin, while another curious bystander who overheard our conversation chimed in, saying that the bath allows one to go home anew (*natun kare*).

Those who are able to attend the annual outing think of themselves as having achieved something special. They say that they feel *pabitra* (sacred), and are ready to begin their participation as audience and performer in the annual rites. Although I have discussed briefly the process of bathing (*snān*) as an entry into the pure realm of sacred activity, I do not want to over-emphasize the sacred dimension over the profane. Nor do I wish to separate the two realms completely, for as we have seen, the journey also entails a dimension of leisure, a free-time activity. Pilgrims clearly see these two forms of activity as inseparable. This is true of the whole *pūjā* phenomenon as well, as I have attempted to suggest elsewhere (KOROM 1999).

I have hinted above that the bathing rites are structurally similar to rites of passage in the sense defined by Arnold VAN GENNEP (1960) and elaborated by Victor TURNER (1973, 1974, 1977, 1979). While the entire *pūjā* event could be interpreted as a periodical rite of passage for the whole community, the *bhaktyās*, to whom I turn below, go through a more specific transformation of status because of their special role in the rituals.

## BECOMING A DEVOTEE

The *bhaktyās* (or *bhaktas* = devotees) are a special class of people who, for numerous reasons, such as vows (*mānasik*), money, comradeship, happiness (*ānanda*), or the general well-being of family and community, volunteer to perform austerities during the three days of rituals. The greatest number of devotees by far come from the lower castes of the village. Although the total of twenty-seven *bhaktyās* are dominated by Lohars, they come from four castes in Goalpara, including two Brahmans, three Haris, and two Doms. Table G summarizes the data on the devotees.

The Table suggests that most *bhaktyās* perform their austerities not for specific reasons, but for the good of kith and kin as well as “to be happy.” These reasons are generally given by devotees who perform such austerities in other villages as well. My information thus closely corresponds to the statement made by R. M. SARKAR concerning devotees from other places in Birbhum. He writes that while many *bhaktyās* have specific vows in mind when they become devotees “all are centered round the general well-being of the person or of the families” (1985: 266).

Table G  
List of Dharmaraj's Bhaktyās

Name	Caste	Occupation	Years Done	Reason
Shanti Bhattacharjya	Brahman	supervisor	25	to attain blessings
Ananda Bhattacharjya	Brahman	official clerk	30	to attain blessings
Habal Lohar	Lohar	<i>bhāgcāṣī</i> <sup>46</sup>	25	to attain happiness
Haru Lohar	Lohar	day laborer	25	to attain happiness
Bangshidhar Lohar	Lohar	farmer	12	to attain happiness
Ananda Lohar Jr.	Lohar	farmer	5	<i>mānasik</i> (goat)
Kanti Lohar	Lohar	day laborer	20	to attain happiness
Renupada Lohar	Lohar	farmer	25	to attain happiness
Shishir Lohar	Lohar	farmer	10	to attain happiness
Mahadeb Lohar	Lohar	farmer	5	to forget suffering
Svapne Lohar	Lohar	day laborer	25	service to the deity
Bhuban Lohar	Lohar	day laborer	10	to attain happiness
Ananda Lohar Sr.	Lohar	day laborer	15	to attain happiness
Sannyasi Lohar	Lohar	day laborer	20	service to the deity
Bharu Lohar	Lohar	<i>māhindār</i>	12	family tradition
Nibaran Lohar	Lohar	day laborer	5	to get a boon
Phero Lohar	Lohar	day laborer	15	service to the deity
Ranjit Lohar	Lohar	<i>māhindār</i>	10	out of devotion
Ajit Lohar	Lohar	day laborer	15	family tradition
Dhanu Lohar	Lohar	farmer	25	out of devotion
Rabi Lohar	Lohar	farmer	35	to attain happiness
Bhaktipada Hajra	Hari	<i>māhindār</i>	7	service to the deity
Kartik Hajra	Hari	<i>māhindār</i>	20	to stay healthy
Mahadeb Hajra	Hari	<i>māhindār</i>	20	to attain happiness
Dulal Thandar	Dom	day laborer	25	to attain happiness
Ganapati Thandar	Dom	day laborer	30	service to the deity

As suggested elsewhere (KOROM 1997b), the *pūjā* is becoming increasingly dominated by Lohars, as Doms, who originally claimed proprietary rights over the *pūjā*, decrease in population in the village. It is thus very common to hear Lohars refusing to accept the claim of the Doms, stating that Dharmaraj has always been their caste deity. On one level, everyone, even the Lohars, say that Dharmaraj is the village deity (*grāmya debatā*), but on a more subtle level Lohars tend to formulate their own caste identity around the deity. However, even though Ajit Lohar is the *kol deṃsī* (head devotee), every *bhaktyā* is theoretically equal in status. As I hope to demonstrate below, this is an imagined equality more akin to a Weberian ideal type. In reality, distinctions are made, not only during social interaction, but also in the context of the rituals performed. Egalitarianism is an ideal, but cooperation is the

<sup>46</sup> The term roughly translates as sharecropper (e.g., *bhāg* = portion, *cāṣī* = farmer). The landowner receives fifty-five percent of the yield, while the cultivator keeps the remainder. For a discussion, see ROHNER and CHAKI-SIRKAR 1988: 25.

reality for which *pūjā* participants strive. More shall be said about this as I proceed with my description of the *pūjā* in the next section.

The *bhaktyās*' entry into the special ritual status begins with the bathing journey, but as should be clear from the above discussion, this is a phenomenon in which anyone can take part, and as such, does not differentiate the *bhaktyās* from other *pūjā* participants. Another rite takes place after returning from Uddharanpur that marks the beginning phase of their entry into new status.

After returning to Goalpara, everyone goes home to eat the noonday meal. The *bhaktyās* take care of any business, work, or family matters that require attention during the afternoon, and at sunset they begin arriving at the youth club in Pashchimpara. The devotees meet the village barber (*nāpī*) at the club, who performs *bhakta kāmāna* (devotee shaving) by giving each of them a haircut, trimming their mustaches, and shaving their armpits. The act of tonsure parallels the Brahmanical *upanayana* (sacred thread investiture) ceremony which marks a Brahman's entry into twice-born status (ROBINSON 1980: 188). Similarly, the *kāmāna* ceremony begins the process of ritual transformation experienced by the *bhaktyās*. This act is seen as paradigmatic of being a *bhaktyā*, since all of the subsequent ritual acts performed during the *pūjā* are alternatively spoken of as *kāmāna*. Shaving body hairs is therefore understood to be an act of personal sacrifice, like all other forms of austerity (*tapas*) to be practiced during the event. For his labors, the barber receives the shank of a sacrificed goat on the last evening of the *pūjā*. However, the barber did not shave everyone present. While he was shaving devotees of the Lohar caste, the Haris shaved each other. The two devotees of the untouchable Dom caste did not even show up, since they shaved themselves at home. This was true of the Brahman *bhaktyās* as well, who performed the rite in their own courtyards. Thus, both "highest" and "lowest" castes were forced by traditions of relative purity and pollution to do it for themselves. It is interesting to note that during my first conversation with veteran *bhaktyā* Mukti Hajra, he explained to me that everyone is equal (*sabāi samān*) during the *pūjā*.

Recorded statements like Mukti's pronouncement, have led some anthropologists to use TURNER's paradigm of *communitas* without ethnographically verifying the accounts. Although subalterns (mostly low caste) like Mukti assert *communitas* even while continuing to observe difference, there is a distinct sense that the ideal can never be actualized fully, as I would like to suggest in my conclusion. The low-caste yearning for equality is quite different from the pragmatic functions of the ritual interactions described below, and differs considerably from Brahmanical interpretations, which tend to reinforce their hegemonic power over other members of the village. What results is an emic ambiguity concerning exactly what sort of transformation occurs during the performance of rituals; double messages abound. As should become clear below, Brahmans and other high castes maintain that Lohars and Doms never achieve a status change, while low-caste devotees insist that they do indeed become something different, albeit temporarily. General statements such as these should suggest a need to use TURNER's musings with selective caution. While his notion does retain a measure of analytical value and might be useful in some

contexts, it does not have the universal applicability he originally intended. However, the rites of passage model is a useful one for understanding the temporary transformation undergone by devotees prior to and during the rituals, and I shall return to this notion in the concluding section. For the moment, let us return to the devotees.

While the shaving ritual is in progress, the *bhaktyās* sit around on the ground joking, smoking, and talking about all of the events that will take place over the next few days. Much conversation focused on the large quantities of alcohol that would be consumed on the last day of the *pūjā*.<sup>47</sup> Drinking is an activity ubiquitous during the *pūjā*. The consumption of alcohol, however, is not seen as a completely profane act, since it is said that Dharmaraj himself is very fond of drinking, as is confirmed in the statement below. Antinomian religious behavior such as intoxication is justified by linking the act of consuming alcohol with an activity in which the deity also engages. By identifying the deity with human vices such as alcohol consumption and human emotions such as greed, as one resident put it, humanizes Dharmaraj, making him more accessible and comprehensible to the average worshipper. Drinking thus becomes a sacred activity that combines service (*sebā*) for the deity with the pleasure of intoxication (*neśā*). As chief drummer Sushil Das remarked one evening when he was playing the special *pūjā* rhythms on his *dhāk* for me:

*megh garjan šeṣ haye geche. tār pare e bāre āpnār bājīrā khāoyā-deoyā... khāoyā-*  
Megh garjan has finished. After that, this time, your musicians eat ... to say eat ...

*deoyā balte... mad[hāsyā]! bābā mad khete khub bhālabāse. āmār svajāti anek*  
liquor [laughter]! Bābā loves to drink liquor. Many of my caste brethren

*okhāne jān. kintu... alpa alpa mad khāy. tāte neśā kintu pachanda haye jāy.*  
go there. But ... they drink quite a bit of liquor. So there is pleasure in that intoxication.

*ebaṅg āmār svajāti khubi ānanda lābh kare matan ei mad-tad khāoyār par...*  
And it is like my caste brethren attain very much happiness after drinking this liquor ...

*e bār bhāṛāl laṛā. e bār āpnār bhāṛāl laṛā haye gela. bhāṛāl laṛā uṭhe gela e bār*  
now *bhāṛāl laṛā*. Now your *bhāṛāl laṛā* has happened. *bhāṛāl laṛā* occurred. Now

*bhaktyārā ānanda karche bājīrāo ānanda karche. e bār āpnār... oi āge*  
the *bhaktyās* make merry, the musicians also make merry. Now your ... those last

<sup>47</sup> There was much excitement over a new brand of spirit that was brewed especially for the *pūjā* by a local distiller called Country Special Soup, which sold for sixteen rupees per bottle. The devotees were opining that most of their earnings from donations given to them during the *pūjā* would be spent for a taste of this new home brew.

*du din je nāchanā bājanā bejeche, sei bājanā bājīye*

two days that the dance and music has been played, after playing that very music

*bhaktyārā ānanda karla bājīrāo ānanda karla. e bār ānanda karte karte*

the *bhaktyās* made merry, the musicians also made merry. Now, while making merry

*grām berīye haye jāy.*

they go around the village.

Drinking serves an important function during the *pūjā* as a mechanism for attaining happiness (*ānanda*), one of the primary reasons why people engage in this yearly activity. The practice is not random, however, for *bhaktyās* must maintain a strict diet through partial fasting (*upabās*) once they have been shaved. As just mentioned above, villagers also justify drinking by stating that *bābā* (i.e., Dharmaraj) himself loves alcohol. The logic here is that if it is good enough for the deity, it must be good enough for mortals. Drinking makes Dharmaraj happy, and if he is happy, so too is everyone else.

After the shaving is completed, the *bhaktyās* bathe once again in one of the many village ponds and return to their own homes to partake in their last full meal before the *pūjā*. This last big meal, called *bhārer bhāt* (filling rice), simple as it is, is a time for contemplating the seriousness of the forthcoming events, while simultaneously anticipating the joviality and transgressive behavior of the ritual's final day. The meal is already an indicator of the *bhaktyās*' transition into new status, for because they eat only boiled food without raw chilies, they see it as a sacrifice in the form of abstinence. Later in the evening, after the meal, the *bhaktyās* gather together and "talk" (*kathā balā*). The talk is informal and takes many forms. Ajit Lohar, the *kol deyāsī*, reviews the sequence of events for the next three days with his fellow *bhaktyās*, while veteran devotees add their own comments as the instructions proceed. This is a sort of male bonding ritual that further solidifies their relationships as special people set off from participants, adding to an idealized sense of *communitas* imagined by the devotees during the event.<sup>48</sup> After the talk session, everyone returns home to get a good night's rest before the flurry of activity to begin the following day. The next morning, they must get up early to bathe and begin their daily fast. On that evening, the *pūjā* will begin at the Dharmaraj temple, when they receive their *uttarīya*, symbolic of the *paitya* or sacred thread worn by Brahmans. The next section begins with this beginning.

<sup>48</sup> The devotees' status is even more demarcated on the next evening when they say that they enter into *dharma gotra* (Dharma's lineage) as a result of receiving the *uttarīya*, as discussed below. On changing from one's normal lineage in order to raise status during the *pūjā* elsewhere in West Bengal, see also SARKAR 1986: 252; 297–298, footnote 7.

## INTENSE WORSHIP AND FESTIVITY

The first day of the *pūjā* occurs two days before the full moon (25th of Chaitra, 1396 [April 8, 1990]). In the morning, everyone in Goalpara is busy making last minute preparations for the forthcoming events. The *bhaktyās* have already begun their partial fast and have risen at dawn to take their first sacred bath of the day, while the remainder of Goalpara's residents are cooking large quantities of food to feed relatives and guests who will begin arriving during the day. The number of visitors will gradually increase, rising to the greatest amount on the third day. The event thus builds up in both social and ritual intensity, culminating in the animal sacrifices at sunset on the last day.

As all of the above work is commencing in Goalpara, the *dhākīs* in Shiyan are simultaneously preparing for their late afternoon departure for the village. Back home in Goalpara, people are busy cleaning their houses and cooking large quantities of special food. They wash down the dirt paths in front of their dwellings to purify the route Dharmaraj will take when he is led in procession through and around the village. At the same time that parents are tidying up their homes, some of the unmarried young men are putting the finishing touches on the colorful tent cloth temporarily erected over the temple courtyard to shade the crowds from the hot sun during the daytime ritual performances. Children, enchanted by the joyous occasion approaching, play throughout the area, especially near the Dharmaraj temple. In their play, they take on the roles performed by ritual specialists and musicians, and it is fairly common to see children pretending to beat imaginary *dhāks* and *dhoks*, or acting out the various rituals performed by the devotees.<sup>49</sup> While all of this activity is occurring, food vendors and merchants are also busy setting up their stalls on the southeastern side of the temple for the *melā* portion of the event. In short, the atmosphere is one of festivity and gaiety, as people's moods and expectations increasingly become heightened. Essentially, this day is still one of normal activity, for everyone is also finishing up their work schedules and errands so that ample free time will be available from the evening onward.

By sunset all of the preparations are complete. People begin congregating at the temple dressed in new clothes, mingle with friends, and consume fried snacks, while young girls shop for glass bangles and children ride the hand driven Ferris wheel set up on the northern side of the temple grounds. A few village *dhhol* players of the Ruidas caste have started to beat their drums already to the accompaniment of variously sized hand cymbals (*kāṣī*) when the *bhaktyās* gradually enter the temple compound. With the exception of the Brahman *bhaktyās*, who already wear their own sacred threads (*paitya*), the remaining low-caste devotees sit to the sides of the temple entrance talking and winding together the seven strands of white cotton thread to serve as their *uttarīyas* after their consecration. The eventual donning of the *uttarīya* marks

<sup>49</sup> Acting as *bhaktyās* is a kind of informal training for future devotees, for I often overheard *bhaktyās* saying that they too learned about the ritual activities during their childhood play. Indeed, the rituals are indigenously labeled as *khelā* (play). See KOROM 1999.

the second major event that signals the advent of changed status, but it also denotes an expression of subordination or humiliation on the part of the devotee in the powerful presence of Dharmaraj. This practice might be related to the subjugation of a prisoner, as in the proverb (DE 1392 B. S.: 65):

*galāy gāṁchā diye ṭene ānā*

Placing a cloth around [one's] neck [in order to] drag

While they wind their threads, they wait for a new figure, the *mūl deṅāśī* to arrive from the nearby village of Taltor.<sup>50</sup> When he arrives, he sits with the *bhaktyās*, locating himself closest to the door of the temple. By nine at night, Shibu *dā*, the visiting Brahman ritual specialist who officiates the occasion, has arrived from his own village of Kamarpara and takes his position in the midst of the *bhaktyās*. The one large and two small *bāṅśvars*, symbols of Dharmaraj's fecundity and power, have already been placed in full view on the veranda earlier in the day. Shibu *dā* is sitting cross-legged to the left of them as he puts out his hand-rolled cigarette and coughs, making a hand gesture to signal his willingness to begin. The stage is now set for the transformation of the *bhaktyās*. Now completely woven, the threads are put into the custody of the priest by Ajit Lohar, the *kol deṅāśī* mentioned earlier. A few more drummers have already arrived from other villages, but the majority of *dhākīs* from Shiyan will not arrive until the next morning.

The drummers pick up the pace of playing the *pūjā*'s opening beat to let everyone in the vicinity know that the event is about to begin officially. This is the first of many special rhythms or *laus* (waves) played at different times during the next three days. Most people do not know the rhythms by their special names, since even the drummers refer to them loosely. But everyone knows the significance of each beat, and will recognize that the specific ritual performance associated with each rhythm is about to begin. As the opening rhythm sounds, Bipad Mandal, the Committee's secretary, ceremonially brings out a folk-book<sup>51</sup> wrapped in an auspicious red cloth and hands it to Shibu *dā*, who will read out the *dharmā bandanā* (Dharma invocation) to the devotees. The heightened pace of drumming signals to everyone in the area

<sup>50</sup> The term *mūl* means "root," and it is generally accepted that *deṅāśī* comes from *deb* (deity) + *āṅśā* (portion). For a discussion of the latter's etymology, see BHATTACHARYYA 1975: 627–628. This title is given to the main *bhaktyā* who performs many of the key rituals on behalf of the entire group. In Goalpara, the position of *mūl deṅāśī* is hereditary, and was held in the early 1990s by Sudho Krishna Ghosh, an octogenarian member of the Sadgop (milkman) caste. Hierarchically, he is given more spiritual power than the *kol deṅāśī*, who, as I have already mentioned, is nonetheless functionally significant in his role as foreman of the devotees.

<sup>51</sup> On the characteristics, classification, and cultural importance of folk-books, see YASSIF 1987: 20–27. The book is actually an inexpensive primary school notebook containing some hand-written texts used at various times during the ritual. The text was written out in 1956 by the late Gaurishankar Mukhopadhyay, grandfather of Harishankar, currently the village's daily *pūjā*. No one knows whether he wrote the text from memory or copied it from a book. The text does include some scribal errors, but it would be difficult to presume that this is due to a faulty memory or an inaccurate text. This is the only copy, and is securely kept in the secretary's chest along with the *pūjā* ledgers.

that the *pūjā* has started. When the audience is completely silent, Shibu *dā* begins reciting the text's couplets in a lilting, chant-like fashion. After the completion of each couplet, the *bhaktyās*, now standing and holding their threads (*uttarīyā dharan*) with folded hands in front of the seated chanter, repeat the lines while gently swaying from side to side in a manner said to represent the movements of Dharmaraj's horse.<sup>52</sup> When they have completed each repetition, the drummers begin to play very loudly as the *bhaktyās* lead the audience members in *nām ḍāk*, the name call for Dharmaraj. The call is a drone-like shout in the form of an exclamatory interjection similar to the English "oh." It rises in volume until the local name of Dharmaraj (Baharadihi) is vocalized, during which it slowly decreases until completed with the final expletive *go* (e.g. *oooooh bābā baharāḍīhi dharmarāj gooooo*). As ROBINSON has pointed out, the *nām ḍāk* punctuates the *pūjā* "in such a way as to articulate transitions from phase to phase" (1980: 114). In this sense, the name call is a framing device, demarcating smaller sets of ritual acts within the overall *pūjā* event. The name call is also significant as a communal performance because it is the only real ritual action in which audience members fully participate as performers. One must recall here that the level of noise generated is one indicator of a successful *pūjā*. Therefore, every voice is considered to be essential in arousing Dharmaraj.

The words have a performative force, in J. L. AUSTIN's (1962) sense, because of their persuasive function as a method of verbally accomplishing something in the existential present. The call is repeated after every couplet to coerce Dharmaraj to join the assembly.<sup>53</sup> But since he is formless it is useful to think of this central invocation in ontological terms as a verbal making of the deity. As has been suggested with reference to this process, the deity not only "comes," but "becomes" to the response of the calls (ROBINSON 1980: 71).

The *bandanā* is typical of the Hindu genre, in which the heavenly host of deities is supplicated and invited to attend a special occasion. Curiously enough, Dharmaraj himself is referred to only once by a variant of his local name (Lord Bahara Dig) toward the beginning of the text (also addressed as two of his multiforms immediately thereafter), and then throughout only by his textual appellation as *nirañjan* (spotless). The textual features of the *bandanā* lead me to suspect that the contents of the "folk-book" were copied by hand from another source because similar invocations are common features of the written tradition. The type of *bandanā* recited to begin the event is especially prevalent in the *Dharmapuja Bidhan*, a liturgical manual used for seeking guidance in proper procedure for the *pūjā*. Further, the stock

<sup>52</sup> As Shashthi Sutradhar, mentioned earlier, stated to me, Dharmaraj rides on a horse. This is a common belief in Birbhum District, where it is understood that Dharmaraj will often mount a white horse in the dead of night and ride through wooded areas and fields.

<sup>53</sup> On the notion of coercing the deity, see ROBINSON 1980: 110. See also MITRA 1972: 95, 170 and DAS 1983: 682. There is also textual evidence for another reason this practice is performed in Ghannam's version of the *Dharmamangal*. See CAKRABARTI 1962:

*mariyā nā mare tuyā nām jape je*  
He who chants your name, does not die [even] in death.



phrase *koṭi koṭi praṇām* (millions of salutations), which is chanted repeatedly during the recitation, is known from *Dharmamangal* literature such as Ramchandra's eighteenth-century work (cf. SEN 1975: 193).

When the *bandanā* is completed there is a great deal of drumming and general noise-making to insure once more that Dharmaraj has indeed been attracted by the recitation of the invocation, and is willing to enter into the assembly for the duration of the *pūjā*. It also signifies that the opening portion has been completed and the next phase is about to begin. At this point, drumming continues for approximately twenty minutes, while the *kol deyaśī* orders the *bhaktyās* to perform a number of prostrations on the ground facing the temple. Once the devotees are all lying side by side, a lit incense burner is passed over their bodies several times by the *kol deyaśī* to the accompaniment of *nām dāk*. This is to insure that they are all pure before proceeding through the village and rice paddies to the *muktadhar pukur*, the pond of liberation. Elsewhere in Bengal this act is interpreted as a suicide threat (*hatyā*) to reinsure Dharmaraj's active participation (ROBINSON 1980: 154–155). The act is reminiscent of Ranjabati's (the textual hero Lausen's mother) impalement and Lausen's self-dismemberment in the *Dharmamangal* literary tradition to secure boons from the deity. In Goalpara, however, the *kol deyaśī* describes it simply as an act of obeisance. By now, it is approximately 8 p.m., and the crowd has grown considerably. Most audience members do not follow the procession to the pond because they still have not eaten their evening meal. Instead, they return home to have their dinner. Once satiated, they return to the temple in the late evening to witness the fire play that closes the evening's activities.

Before any other ritual activities can occur, the *bhaktyās* must complete their metamorphosis to a higher status in order to be able to perform the feats of austerity that occur throughout the duration of the *pūjā*. To fulfill this function they must perform a procession through the village, ultimately arriving at the *muktadhar pukur*. To this end, the crowd slowly begins to disperse, and the large *bāṇeśvar* as well as an earthen pot called *pūrkalsī* (full pot) are placed on the heads of two *bhaktyās* to the accompaniment of a new drumbeat played solely for this purpose. As the procession begins winding its way westward along the main path of the village, another rhythm, distinctively called *cālān* (moving or processional), is played. During the procession incense burners, which are waved in the faces of the swaying bearers of the *bāṇeśvar* and pot, are being carried by some other devotees. The procession occasionally halts for a few minutes so that people in the houses along the main path can come out and receive the *darśan* (auspicious sight) of the procession. The rhythm played during these halts is called *nācanā bājnā* (dance beat). The halts are said to bring luck and well-being to the individual who does the seeing. At these arresting moments the bearers of the ritual items are changed, so that each *bhaktyā* has the opportunity to carry one of the items before reaching the pond. After each halt, the drummers shift back into the *cālān* beat and continue to move along the road. The party turns left at the Kali worshipping grounds located in the middle of Pashcimpara and proceeds into the open paddy fields. Drumming continues as the pace of movement quickens. Finally, the group arrives at the pond, where the drumming abruptly

ceases as the devotees form a circle around Shibu *dā* on the eastern banks of the pond.

Once everyone is silent and seated, candles are lit and the *ghāt bandanā* (bathing step invocation) is recited. The text is once again read line by line from the folk-book by the officiating priest, Shibu *dā*. Each section is repeated three times by the *kol deyāśī*. The text is short and reads as follows:

*gaṅgā gaṇapati gobare pabitra māṅī*  
Ganga, Ganapati, earth sacred from cowdung.

*ghāṭpāṭ lāṭhī, bandan ādyer tulsī bandan*  
*dakṣiṇe dāmodar bandan bīr hanumān*  
Praise the *ghāṭ*, the *pāṭ*, and staff! Praise the primordial basil!  
In the south, praise the Damodar and the hero Hanuman.

*jale āchen jalkumānī tār caraṇe*  
*kari koṅī koṅī praṇām*  
The water maiden is in the water. At her feet,  
I perform millions and millions of obeisances.

*jal sudhu sthal sudhu sudhu āmār bāṅī*  
*āṅī hāt mṛittikā sudhu sudhu dhāker kāṭhī*  
Only water, only place, only my cup.  
Two and one-half hands, only clay, only the *dhāki*'s drumstick.

*jal sudhu sthal sudhu āmār kūre*  
*āṅī hāt mṛittikā sudhu sudhu candra surjya jure*  
Only water, only place, only my thatched hut.  
Two and one-half hands, only clay, only the sun and moon all together.

After this, *nām ḍāk* is performed by all present, including the small number of audience members who have accompanied the procession to the pond. Then the *bāṇeśvar* is bathed in the pond by the *mūl deyāśī* to the accompaniment of a nameless rhythm that is played only during bathing rituals. At the same time, the pot is filled with pond water – now considered the holy bath water of the *bāṇeśvar* – and some flowers.

ROBINSON (1980: 89 and throughout) interprets the *pūrkalsī* and *bāṇeśvar* as female and male sexual symbols respectively, their conjunction resulting in a union to confer fecundity on barren women. The addition of the flowers to the pot is, in her estimation, an act of impregnation (ibid.: 90). Her perspective is adumbrated in the second and third verse of the *ghāṭ bandanā* with the mention of an unidentified water maiden and the sanctification of the water, which subsequently becomes the “waters of life” (ibid.: 91). The interpretation is viable insofar as fertility is seen as one of the goals of the *pūjā*. However, as conceived in Goalpara, fertility is only one form of

*maṅgal* (auspiciousness) conferred during the *pūjā*. The *pūjā* cannot, therefore, be reduced to one common goal, as suggested in her discussion (ibid.: 161–173). The reasons given by devotees for performing *sebā* (service) in the last section imply that there is another more general and overriding communal concern for blessings (*āśīrbād*) and happiness (*ānanda*). My data is also corroborated by SARKAR's (1985: 253–263) information from another cluster of villages in Birbhum district, where the frequency of fertility mentioned as a motivation for performing *sebā* is quite low in relation to other boons ranging from the alleviation of colic pain and rheumatism to successful court cases and general well-being. Nevertheless, curing barrenness must certainly be seen as one aspect of the *pūjā*'s efficacy.

By now, more drummers have arrived, including Ratan Das, the new leader of the *dhākīs* from Shiyan. They join the others as the devotees gather around Shibu *dā*, the bathed *bāṇeśvar*, and the *pūrkalsī*. The *uttarīyas* are also placed around the spikes of the *bāṇeśvar* at this time. A banana is then impaled on one of the plank's metal spikes, and new green mangos on the others. A betel leaf coated with *sindur* (vermillion paste) and white sweetmeats to be distributed as *prasād* (food offerings) are also placed on the plank. Shibu *dā* then smears *sindur* taken from the *bāṇeśvar* on the foreheads of all the *bhaktyās*. At this point, he begins to recite from memory verses in hybrid Sanskrit from the *Dharmapuja Bidhan*, the liturgical manual mentioned above (BANDYOPĀDHYĀY 1323B. S.: 29).<sup>54</sup> The passage reads:

Om! Worship, worship Dharma, keen on destroying the sins of men polluted by [the] Kali age, the worthless [as well as] the meritorious. Of kind heart and body, of white garment and parasol, seated on a cleansed throne, the revealer of all the gods. Om! Homage to holy Dharma.

After reciting this passage, he distributes the *uttarīyas* to the low-caste *bhaktyās*. Interpretations differ, but most people are of the opinion that the *bhaktyās* enter into Dharmaraj's *gotra* (lineage) at this point, taking on the temporary status of Brahmans. ROBINSON's data from Baruipur, West Bengal reconfirms this point of view, since her field consultants are of the opinion that the devotees and the *bāṇeśvar* become "affiliated in the mingling of the waters" (1980: 85), thereby causing the change in lineage. The water of the *pūrkalsī* therefore represents this mingled water which passes from the ritual items to the ritual actors in due process. As a result, all

<sup>54</sup> The text is in Bengali script, and is, according to my research associate, Abhijit Ghosh, "very bad Sanskrit." Shibu *dā* himself does not know the meaning of what he is reciting, but says that he learned it from a copy of the text housed in the university library at Shantiniketan. He insists that the appropriate passages must be recited, but need not be understood. His option of giving priority of the utterance over the meaning of the text lends credence to STAAL's (1979) argument concerning the "meaninglessness of ritual." The *Dharmamangal* of Ghanaram also mentions the liturgical use of this text. See CAKRABARTTĪ 1962: 90.

become Dharmaraj's agents.<sup>55</sup> Shibu *dā* then recites one more passage in honor of Kamina, the reputed consort of Dharmaraj (BANDYOPĀDHYĀY 1323B.S.: 30):<sup>56</sup>

Homage to thee, oh Kamina-Kunda, honored by the gods, re-  
mover of blindness [and] leprosy. Oh goddess, homage be to thee,  
to Kamina. Come hither, etc.

After this, the *guru mantra*, the 101 names of gods, is recited as the water-filled pot is passed around to each devotee. The recitation is accompanied by *puspāñjali* (throwing flowers) for the *bāṇeśvar*. The consecrated flowers are then placed in the pot. After the consecration, the water in the pot is considered to be *pabitra* (holy) and is thereafter referred to as *śānti jal* (peace water). It is said to undergo a transubstantiation during the preceding ritual because it becomes a metonymic replacement (cf. TAMBIAH 1968) for Ganges water. The *śānti jal* is hereafter used in all of the *pūjā* rituals for general anointing, curing, etc. Unlike Dharmaraj *pūjās* elsewhere in Bengal (cf. ROBINSON 1980: 90), there does not seem to be any distinction made in Goalpara between the sacred bath water (*snān jal*) of the deity and the *śānti jal* just described, since the latter is used for both anointing and consuming.

The rituals of the first day seem to suggest that the *bhaktyās* acquire an elevated status far superior to their everyday caste positions in the local hierarchy. Although I cannot go into specific detail here (but cf. KOROM 1999) to describe all of the ritual activities performed after the above initiatory events, there is one ritual performance in particular that is pertinent to my concluding discussion of ritual status and caste politics. The performance occurs on the evening of the second day, and is known as *mukta snān* (bath of liberation). The *mukta snān* ritual begins at approximately 10 p.m., after hours of secular performances by brass bands in the vicinity of the temple precincts. How the ritual begins is relevant to my earlier statements concerning the hypothetical equality of all *bhaktyās* during the *pūjā* and Victor TURNER's related notions of liminality and *communitas*.

When the time comes to bring the deity out of the temple, the *kol deyaśī* organizes all of the low-caste *bhaktyās* in a straight line leading from the door of the tem-

<sup>55</sup> A minority of others believe that the transformation of status occurs during the reciting of the Dharma *bandanā*. It is interesting to point out here that the Brahman *bhaktyās* insist the lower caste devotees do not *become* Brahmans through this process, but only *like* Brahmans. Their opinion recapitulates hierarchy, rather than abolishing it or relieving it. Another more visible method of demonstrating Brahmanical dominance occurs the following night, and will be discussed in greater detail below.

<sup>56</sup> In Goalpara, the power to heal blindness and leprosy is attributed to Dharmaraj himself. The fact that Dharmaraj has a consort for this purpose is only known to the priest himself, due to his knowledge of the text. Most people in Goalpara are not aware that Dharmaraj has a consort, even though Shibu *dā* claims that there is a small stone in the temple used to represent her. Others say that the stone represents Manasa, the snake goddess, who is worshipped in the village during the rainy season, but does not have a temple of her own. Some scholars and pandits have speculated that Manasa could be the consort of Dharmaraj. On the relationship between Dharmaraj and Manasa, see SEN 1986. The name Kāminā is very close to the Bengali word *kāminyā*, which means consort. Although the text does not mention the name, in villages where Dharmaraj's married status is well-known, the consort's name is *Kālībuṛī* (the old Kali). See RĀY 1971: 207. For a more extended discussion of this goddess, see BHATTACHARYYA 1975: 654f.

ple to the end of the courtyard. Then he orders the *bhaktyās* to kneel down with their heads touching the ground, so that a human bridge is created. When this is done, Shanti Bhattacharjya, one of the Brahman *bhaktyās*, walks barefoot over the backs of the other devotees into the temple to the sound of drumming. There are two indigenous interpretations of this act. When asked later, Shanti said that it must be done to show that Brahmans are superior to other castes. But the other devotees all claimed that this must be done because the Brahman's feet cannot touch the ground when he is entering the temple to bring *bābā* out. Thus, from the Brahmanical point of view, the ceremony reinforces caste hierarchy, whereas low-caste people see it as a sacred act, and still claim that equality reigns during the *pūjā*. While TURNER's point of view concerning the "betwixt and between" status of the people going through a rite of passage is well-taken, it is clear from this act that *communitas* is present in only a qualified sense, as suggested in the last section. Rites such as these do not eliminate caste restrictions, but simply alleviate some of the tension generated by social rules. They allow low-caste members of the community a more open forum for negotiations concerning rank and village affairs that may (or may not) be implemented when the village returns to mundane time. But because Brahmans never view the devotees as equal to themselves during the *pūjā*, we must understand the notion of *communitas* as a potential ideal that is never fully actualized and subject to multiple interpretations dependent upon the various social positions of the actors involved. However, this observation raises the question of what, if any, usefulness the concept has in the study of caste-based society in India. In the final section, I should like to review the theories of TURNER and Arnold VAN GENNEP, his original source of inspiration, to draw some conclusions on the data presented in this essay.

## ASPECTS OF LIMINALITY

In this concluding section I wish to explore two prominent theories used in the anthropological study of rituals that have been found to be useful for understanding the ways in which an individual undergoes status change during special periods of time. The first is that hypothesized by the folklorist Arnold VAN GENNEP in his 1909 book *Rites of Passage*, and the second, being liminality, a more recent theory constructed by the anthropologist Victor TURNER.<sup>57</sup> TURNER was obviously influenced by VAN GENNEP's book, but built upon it by adding new ideas to the *rites de passage* paradigm. Both VAN GENNEP and TURNER attempt to make their theories universally applicable. As many critics have pointed out (e.g., BYNUM 1984; SALLNOW 1981), their conclusions may be somewhat broad and difficult to substantiate as uni-

<sup>57</sup> I am aware of LINCOLN's 1991 critique of VAN GENNEP's spatial model of ritualized social passage based on his analysis of women's initiation rites in which he suggests enclosure-metamorphosis-emergence as an alternative to separation-liminality-reincorporation. Lincoln's alternative may apply to his own gender-specific data, but for the purposes of my discussion here, I focus solely on VAN GENNEP's work as a precursor to TURNER's concerns discussed immediately thereafter.

versals, but their ideas do coincide with my data concerning the devotees of Dharmaraj in Goalpara to a certain extent. I do not intend to draw universal conclusions here, but rather attempt to show how the particular series of rites described above fits into the paradigm.

VAN GENNEP starts off with the basic premise that life consists of a series of passages or transitions. Life, according to him, is a “succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings” (1960: 3). Each of these transitions is marked by “ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another” (ibid.). He then goes on to subdivide each of these passages into three distinct phases.

The first phase involves rites of separation (preliminal rites) in which the individual or group is ceremonially set apart from the rest of society. Phase two consists of rites of transition (liminal rites). This is the middle phase of the process during which the participant, having been removed from his or her everyday surroundings, becomes part of a smaller group for the duration of the transition. It is a new and awesome experience for the initiate in this paradoxical position. First of all, he has been removed from the larger body of society and becomes a part of a smaller one, itself set off from society. It is during this phase that many of the changes affecting the liminars occur. Finally, after the completion of the rituals, the third phase, known as rites of reincorporation (post-liminal rites), are put into play. The rite of reincorporation is the period when the liminal group is taken back into society to be part of the integrated whole once again (VAN GENNEP 1960: 11). This, then, is the threefold model proposed by VAN GENNEP at the turn of the previous century. I should point out here that rites of passage are usually construed as permanent changes, such as Hindu life cycle rites (*samskāras*). However, the transformation undertaken by devotees during the Dharmaraj *pūjā* is a temporary and recurrent one, lasting only as long as the annual *pūjā* itself, which in the Hindu idiom would be classified as a *nitya* (constantly practiced or recurrent) ritual. It is important to keep this distinction in mind when attempting to understand the passage of the *bhakti* from this point of view, for a basic distinction is made between permanent changes and temporary ones in the Hindu context. However, a “rite of passage,” as explicated by VAN GENNEP, can refer to any spatial or temporal process, whether permanent or recurrent, during which a change of status, behavior, or character takes place.

TURNER took up where VAN GENNEP left off, but he focused most of his writing on the liminal phase of the temporal or spatial passage. He also added the notion of symbolic death at the beginning of the rites, followed by rebirth during the final phase when the initiate is reincorporated into the larger body of society (TURNER 1974: 273).

Liminality is a transient phase. It is a state in which the liminar is, as TURNER says, “betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (1974: 232). It is an ambiguous state in the sense that its attributes are not like those of the past or the future. In liminality, the ritual initiate is passing through a symbolic domain in which many of the rules and regulations of his previous existence no longer apply, for he is

in a strangely familiar, yet new world. This symbolic new world is a kind of “eternal now,” for the initiate is in transit between two mental realms. In the case of the Dharmaraj *pūjā*, the *bhaktyās* are intermediaries between the community and the deity, so their centrality as ritual conduits of the deity’s power places them in this paradoxical position of marginal centrality.

I have mentioned earlier that the Dharmaraj *pūjā* occurs during the month of Chaitra, a time when other auspicious rituals such as marriage are not performed in Goalpara. Although this is generally true in other Bengali communities where Dharmaraj *pūjā* is not scheduled during the month of Chaitra, it is said that the curtailment of many other rituals during this special time makes the efficacy of the *pūjā* for Dharmaraj all the more potent. Certainly there is some concept of time during liminality, for, as we noticed, the punctual timing of ritual events is one of the major duties of the *kol deyāsī*. But there is a distinct sense of the abatement of profane time in which “the structural view of time is not applicable” (TURNER 1974: 238) because the normal duties of life are postponed for the *bhaktyās* during the days of the *pūjā* event. The ritual specialists participate in a sort of eternal present, a mythical time during which an archetypal action of the god or ancestor is being repeated in the course of performing rites and significant actions (ELIADE 1958: 390 ff). In the case of the Dharmaraj *pūjā*, such significant actions are based on the village’s core narrative mentioned earlier and, as I have suggested elsewhere (KOROM 2000), implicitly replicate some of the events that occur in the *Dharmamangal* literature. This paradoxical time that is no time becomes a threshold allowing direct experience with the sacred to become more accessible. The experience may be in the form of possession, an externally visible phenomenon rare in the Goalpara context, or an inward, intuitive one of which only the person undergoing the experience is acutely aware.

In liminality a clearer sense of understanding mankind’s relationship to the cosmos is possible, for the initiate learns of his own culture through the narratives, symbols, and rituals involved in the *pūjā*. The meaning of life is experienced directly by the *bhaktyās* through the symbols visualized and the actions performed during the event. Sometimes this knowledge is transmitted to younger *bhaktyās* by their senior counterparts through discourses orated during the early morning baths of purification each day during the *pūjā*. New knowledge, unlike that learned during the pre-liminal phase, is gained through narrative acts. It is a deeper knowledge, a direct experiential awareness embodied by the individual, a point often made by new *bhaktyās* performing the austerities for the first time. For veteran devotees, the process is one of progressive insight as well as a renewed altered state. Newly acquired knowledge leads to the acquisition of power. It is a spiritual power available only to those who partake in the austere practices that must be performed during the *pūjā*.

The new power is then applied by the *bhaktyā* after his reincorporation into his society at the end of the rites. However, in the case of Goalpara, the acquisition and use of power gained during the rituals is very subtle. In one sense, the older ideals of the society are preserved by the symbols, for they are a storehouse of that which can be conceptualized and known. Through the rituals performed, the stories heard, and the things envisioned in liminality, one becomes more aware of one’s own traditions.

In his ritualized alienation, the *bhaktyā* is able to see things more clearly, for he becomes increasingly sensitive to the cultural issues that he may take for granted during his day-to-day life. In this way, the traditional values of Hindu society in its localized context are preserved and passed on. As A. K. RAMANUJAN has stated: "Alienation from the immediate environment can mean continuity with an older ideal" (1973: 38). There is another slight paradox in this statement in the sense that the liminal phase offers a radical new knowing, but adheres to an older traditional ideal. Thus it seems that the *pūjā* is, in part, a maintaining force in Goalpara society in that it preserves through replication the prescriptions given by the deity in the village's master narrative. At the same time, however, it can also reinforce social rules and the strictures of caste hierarchy.

Even those rules that are carried over into the liminal phase from the earlier one are relaxed by not being overemphasized during ritual practices performed while being a liminar. The best example of this is the caste interaction during the *pūjā*. As we have seen, caste restrictions are not completely abolished during the bathing and shaving rituals, but notions of purity and pollution are certainly attenuated in many ways. The structural divisions of caste cannot be eliminated totally, but they can be confronted in various creative ways during the period of license provided to the devotees during their liminal period. The ideals of the *pūjā* support an anti-hierarchical stance on the ideological level, at least from the low-caste perspective. Yet they do not do away with them completely, for the problem of social stratification cannot be eliminated altogether through ritual practice. After all, the liminal phase will eventually end, and afterward everyone will once again have to work from within their own respective caste identities to negotiate the existential reality of status on an ongoing and daily basis. Thus, caste distinctions are not abolished, but rather negotiated by stressing cooperation, even though the Brahmanical interpretation reifies hierarchy within the context of the *mukta snān* performance. During the liminal phase of the rituals, a stronger sense of community consciousness emerges. It is what TURNER calls *communitas*. *Communitas* stresses reciprocity and comradeship during this phase. And through this mutual help, a stronger sense of ritual equality based on the recognition of identity differentiation emerges. The Goalpara scenario suggests that counter-status is subtly shaded and highly nuanced even during ritual functions because participants understand the leveling of hierarchy in numerous contested ways. In other words, perception of status change depends on the original status of the interpreter or actor.

The visual emblems displayed by the *bhaktyās* during the rituals are relatively the same, regardless of rank or status. With the exception of the *paitya*, the sacred thread worn by Brahman *bhaktyās*, every devotee wears the same clothes and abstains from the same foods, thereby forging common experiences. As the *bhaktyās* perform the shaving rites and pass into the liminal phase on the first evening of the *pūjā*, they theoretically surrender all their possessions. The differences in property and wealth mark the status of the individual, which in turn makes *communitas* a difficult principle to which one must adhere. But during the rituals, all material possessions are left behind in the home. This symbolic act implies the *bhaktyās*' willing-



ness to become part of a cooperative whole. By removing possessions, enhanced opportunity for *communitas* is nurtured.

During the rituals performed as part of the *pūjā* egalitarianism is also present to a certain degree. The performance of rites for Dharmaraj's various manifestations amounts to potential symbolic reduction because there is a tendency of movement from diversity to unity. This movement is quite considerable if one takes into account the fact that low castes and Dalits are also included within the scope of this reduction. Quoting BABB again: "Worldly hierarchy is therefore momentarily eclipsed – reduced to relative insignificance by the overwhelming inclusiveness of the hierarchical opposition between the mundane and the divine" (1975: 60). In this way also, the group of *bhaktyās* can achieve a sense of unity. But because the sacred/profane realms of life contain blurred boundaries in Goalpara, the dichotomy is not always as clear-cut as BABB suggests. Quite often the potential for unity is not actualized due to divisive factors that emerge during the context of the event. For example, drunken brawls on the last day of the *pūjā* have been known to occur among devotees, leading to factionalism within the ritual group.

The annual initiation of the *bhaktyās* is clearly a rite of passage. Their bathing and shaving rituals on the day before the *pūjā* begins mark their separation from the society of which they are a part, even though they are never isolated physically from their community in the sense of a pilgrim. The movement leads them into a liminal phase on the first evening of the *pūjā* when they receive their *uttarīyas*. This is the second stage of their passage, and they remain in this position until the conclusion of the rites three days later, when they unceremoniously toss their threads in the *muk-tadhar pukur* to signal both the end of the annual *pūjā* and their return to normalcy. Upon throwing their *uttarīyas* into the pond on the day after the *pūjā* is over, they become reincorporated into the larger whole.

There is also another level on which this passage can be interpreted. Rather than to see it as one passage, the *pūjā* can be seen as a successive series of transitional movements, ultimately ending up with a final reincorporation. Each day in and of itself is a rite of passage, for daily bathing and new austerities are performed in a highly ritualized manner to punctuate the experiences of devotees within even smaller frames of reference. What I am arguing is that we notice shorter rites of passage within the larger all-engulfing one. If, as I have suggested above, each bath is a symbolic death and rebirth, and each rite of separation also a rite of death ending with rebirth during the third phase, then the *pūjā* must be seen as smaller successive passages within the larger whole. I realize that this line of reasoning could be argued *ad infinitum* (e.g., each moment being a symbolic death and rebirth), but it is not my aim to carry the analogy beyond this point. I do feel, however, that understanding rites of passage in specific ethnographic contexts offers the potential to employ the ideas of VAN GENNEP and TURNER more accurately. The rites performed in honor of Dharmaraj suggest an infinite regress into continuously smaller units of time, invoking a sense of time within time more reminiscent of TURNER's phrase "betwixt and between" than his notion of "time out of time." Temporal consciousness, then, in relation to ritual sequence could be seen from this point of view.

By allowing for the punctuation of smaller units of time within a larger temporal framework we can understand that the *bhaktyās* share a sense of *durée*, as Henri Bergson once called it, an “inner time” which does not correspond to clock time. This form of *durée* belongs to an experience of time that is shared by the devotees as a result of constant interaction generated by activities performed during the ritual sequence.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, time as a distinctively shared experience among the devotees lends more credence to the idea that these temporary renunciants are liminars. It is while playing the role of liminar that the *bhaktyā* is most empowered to speak on equal terms to his Brahman counterparts, potentially creating the circumstances to negotiate more egalitarian action among and within the village’s local caste system.

## LITERATURE

- ABRAHAMS, Roger D.  
1982: The Language of Festivals: Celebrating the Economy. In *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, ed. Victor TURNER, pp. 201–219. Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- APTE, Vaman Shivram  
1985: *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- AUSTIN, J. L.  
1962: *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- BABB, Lawrence A.  
1975: *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- BAILEY, H. W.  
1961: Cognates of Pūjā. *Adyar Library Bulletin* 25/1: 1–12.
- BANDYOPĀDHYĀY, Haricaran  
1988: *Baṅgīya Śabdakoṣ* Kalikātā: Sahitya Akāḍemi.
- BANDYOPĀDHYĀY, Nanigopāl, ed.  
n. d. 1323B.S. *Dharmmapūjā Bidhān*. Kalikātā: Baṅgīya Sāhitya-pariṣat.
- BECK, Brenda E. F.–CLAUS, Peter J.–GOSWAMI, Praphulladatta–HANDOO, Jawaharlal (eds)  
1987: *Folktales of India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- BHATTACHARYA, Kumkum  
1986: Bridge Across Castes–Dharmaraj. *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society* 21: 177–188.
- BHATTACHARYA, Ranjit Kumar  
1967: Mukta Snan: Notes on Methods and Interpretation of Field Data. *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society* 2: 27–32.
- BHATTACHARYYA, Asutosh (Bhaṭṭācārja)  
1952: The Dharma-cult. *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology. Calcutta University* 1/1: 117–151.  
1953: Dharma Worship in West Bengal. In *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*, ed. A. MITRA, pp. 351–360. Calcutta: Government of West Bengal.  
1975: *Bāṅglā Maṅgal Kābyer Itihās* Kalikātā: Mukharji eṅḍ koṅ.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre  
1977: *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
1989: Social Space and Symbolic Power. *Sociological Theory* 7/1: 14–17.
- BRENNEIS, Donald  
1979: Conflict in Bhatgaon: The Search for a Third Party. In *The Indo-Fijian Experience*, ed. SUBRAMANI, pp. 57–64. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

<sup>58</sup> This is, of course, the crux of Alfred SCHUTZ’s mutual tuning-in relationship, which he defines as a “living together simultaneously in specific dimensions of time.” See SCHUTZ 1951.

- BRIGGS, Charles L.  
1988: *Competence in Performance: The Creativity of Tradition in Mexicano Verbal Art*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- BYNUM, Caroline Walker  
1984: Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality. In *Anthropology and the Study of Religion*, eds. Robert L. MOORE and Frank E. REYNOLDS, pp. 105–125. Chicago: Center for the Scientific Study of Religion.
- CAKRABARTĪ, Ghanarām  
1962: *Śīdharmamamaṅgal*. Pīyūṣ Kānti MAHĀPATRĀ, ed. Kalikātā: Kalikātā Bīśvabidyālay.
- CHRISTIAN Jr. William  
1981: *Local Religion in Sixteenth Century Spain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- CLAUS, Peter J. and KOROM, Frank J.  
1991: *Folkloristics and Indian Folklore*. Udupi, India: Regional Resources for the Folk Performing Arts.
- DĀSGUPTA, Umā  
n.d.: 1391B. S. *Śāntiniketan o Śīniketan*. Kalikātā: Bīśvabhāratī.
- DAS, Rahul Peter  
1983: Some Remarks on the Bengali Deity Dharma: Its Cult and Study. *Anthropos* 78: 661–700.
- DE, Suśīlkumār  
n.d.: 1392B. S. *Bāṅglā Prabād*. Kalikātā: E. Mukhārjī āyṅḍ koṅḡ.
- ECK, Diana  
1981a: India's Tirthas: 'Crossings' in Sacred Geography. *History of Religions* 20/4: 323–344.  
1986: Gaṅgā: The Goddess in Hindu Mythology. In *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, eds. John S. HAWLEY and Donna WULFF, pp. 166–183. Boston: Beacon Press.
- ELIADE, Mircea  
1958: *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc.
- FALASSI, Alessandro  
1987: Festival: Definition and Morphology. In *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival*, Alessandro FALASSI, ed. pp. 1–10. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- GOLD, Ann G.  
1988: *Fruitful Journeys: The Ways of Rajasthani Pilgrims*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- GOLDSTEIN, Kenneth S.  
1991: Notes toward a European-American Folk Aesthetic: Lessons Learned from Singers and Story-tellers. *Journal of American Folklore* 104/412: 164–178.
- HAZRA, R. C.  
1985: Purana Literature as known to Ballālsena. *Purana* 27/1: 41–59.
- HYMES, Dell  
1981: Breakthrough Into Performance. In *In Vain I Tried to Tell You: Essays in Native American Poetics*, pp. 79–141. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- INDEN, Ronald B.  
1976: *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- KOROM, Frank J.  
1990: Review of *The Poison in the Gift*. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110/3: 548–549.  
1992: Review of *Women and Children in a Bengali Village*. *American Ethnologist* 19/1: 181–182.  
1996: Oral Canon Formation in a Bengali Religious Community. *Suomen Antropologi* 21/2: 12–22.  
1997a: 'Editing' Dharmaraj: Academic Genealogies of a Bengali Folk Deity. *Western Folklore* 56/1: 51–77.  
1997b: Oral Exegesis: Local Interpretations of a Bengali Folk Deity. *Western Folklore* 56/2: 153–173.  
1997c: Language, Belief, and Experience in Bengali Folk Religion. In *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, eds. Eli FRANCO and Karin PREISENDANZ, pp. 567–586. Amsterdam: Poznan Rodopi B.V.  
1999: 'To Be Happy': Ritual, Play, and Leisure in the Bengali Dharmaraj *Pījā*. *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3/1: 113–164.  
2000: Close Encounters of the Numinous Kind: Personal Experience Narratives and Memorates in Goalpara, West Bengal. *South Asia Review* 20/1: 19–45.
- KRIPALINI, Krishna  
1980: *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Publishing Department.

- KUMAR, Nita  
1988: *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity, 1880–1986*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- LINCOLN, Bruce  
1991: *Emerging from the Chrysalis: Rituals of Women's Initiations*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- MAJUMDAR, R. C., ed.  
1943: *The History of Bengal* 1. Dacca: The University of Dacca.
- MALINOWSKI, Bronislaw  
1954: *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- MARRIOTT, McKim  
1966: The Feast of Love. In *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, ed. Milton SINGER, pp. 200–212. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.  
1976: Hindu Transactions: Diversity Without Dualism. In *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior*, ed. Bruce KAPFERER, pp. 109–142. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
- MITRA, Amalendu  
1972: *Rārher Saṅskṛiti o Dharmathākur*. Kalikātā: Pharmā Ke. El. Mukhopādhyāy.
- MUKHOPADHYĀY, Āśok  
1990: *Saṅgsad Samārthaśabdakoṣ*. Kalikātā: Sāhitya Saṅgsad.
- NEOGI, Maheswar  
1951: The Worship of Dharma in Assam. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Letters* 17: 219–224.
- NICHOLAS, Ralph  
1982: The Bengali Calendar and the Hindu Religious Year in Bengal. In *The Study of Bengal: New Contributions to the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Peter BERTOCCI, pp. 17–29. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University.
- ÖSTÖR, Ákos  
1980: *The Play of the Gods: Locality, Ideology, Structure, and Time in the Festivals of a Bengali Town*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.  
1982: *Puja in Society*. Lucknow, India: Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society.
- RADHAKRISHNAN, R.  
1965: On Pūjā. *Indian Linguistics* 26: 225–228.
- RAHEJA, Gloria Goodwin  
1988: *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- RAMANUJAN, A. K.  
1973: *Speaking of Śiva*. London: Penguin Books, Ltd.
- RĀY, Kāminīkumār  
1971: *Laukik Śabdakoṣ*. Kalikātā: Lokbhāratī.
- RAYCHAUDHURY, Tarak and RAYCHAUDHURY, Bilash  
1981: *The Brahmans of Bengal: A Textual Study in Social History*. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India.
- RISLEY, H. H.  
1981 [1891]: *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (2 volumes). Calcutta: Firma Mukhopadhyay.
- ROBINSON, Sandra P.  
1980: *The Dharmapuja: A Study of Rites and Symbols Associated with the Bengali Deity Dharmaraj*. Ph. D. Dissertation. Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. University of Chicago.
- ROHNER, Ronald P. and CHAKI-SIRKAR, Manjusri  
1988: *Women and Children in a Bengali Village*. Hanover, Connecticut: University Press of New England.
- ROY, Manisha  
1975: *Bengali Women*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- SALLNOW, M. J.  
1981: "Communitas Reconsidered: The Sociology of Andean Pilgrimage." *Man* (NS) 16: 163–182.
- SARKAR, R. M.  
1985: *Regional Cults and Rural Traditions: An Interacting Pattern of Divinity and Humanity in Rural Bengal*. New Delhi: Inter-India Publications.
- SCHUTZ, Alfred  
1951: Making Music Together. *Social Research* 18/1: 76–97.

- SEN, Sukumar  
 1945: Is the Cult of Dharma a Living Relic of Buddhism in Bengal? In *B. C. Law Volume*. ed. D. R. BHANDARKAR, pp. 669–674. Calcutta: The Indian Research Institute.  
 1971: *An Etymological Dictionary of Bengali: c. 1000–1800 A. D.* Calcutta: Eastern Publishers.  
 1975[1963]: *Bāṅglā Sāhityer Itihās* 1. Bardhamān: Sāhitya Sabhā.  
 1986: Dharmathākura o Manasā. In *Pāścimbaṅger Saṅskṛiti* 4, ed. Binoḃ GHOSH, pp. 136–141. Kalikātā: Prakāś Bhaban.
- SINGH, Darshan  
 n.d.: *A Study of Bhakta Ravidāsa*. Patiala, India: Punjabi University.
- SMITH, Jonathan Z.  
 1978: *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*. Leiden: I. J. Brill.
- SMITH, William L.  
 1982: The Celestial Village. The Divine Order in Bengali Myth. *Temenos* 18: 69–81.
- STAAL, J. F.  
 1963: Sanskrit and Sanskritization. *Journal of Asian Studies* 22/3: 261–275.  
 1979: The Meaninglessness of Ritual. *Numen* 26: 2–19.
- STRENG, Frederick  
 1969: *Understanding Religious Life*. Encino, California: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc.
- TAMBIAH, Stanley J.  
 1968: The Magical Power of Words. *Man* (NS) 3/2: 375–208.
- THIEME, Paul  
 1957: Pūjā. *The Journal of Oriental Research* 27/1: 1–16.
- TURNER, Victor  
 1973: The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal. *History of Religions* 12/3: 191–230.  
 1974: *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.  
 1977: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.  
 1979: *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*. Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- VAN GENNEP, Arnold  
 1960 [1909]: *Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- YASSIF, Eli  
 1987: What is a Folk-Book? *International Folklore Review* 5: 20–27.
- ZIMMER, Heinrich  
 1974: *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.