

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

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

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

GANGA MA

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

Sangita had previously bathed in the *kund* and she claimed to have good results. Her son to bathe for an undisclosed "personal" reason. Her son summarized the situation as a "burden" of [these] problems on Baba. He described the *ḍālnā*, meaning "to pour" or "to cast," a purification that frequently arose in the *kund* at the ashram and elsewhere. The healing in general, and Krim Kund in particular, are models of purification, for which the Ganga could therefore learn a great deal about the medicine by examining models of pollution in this holy river.

The Ganga is the foremost of India's rivers, over a thousand miles from the glaciers of the Himalayas to the nine cities and seventy towns of the delta that empty into the Indian Ocean through the Ganges estuary in Bengal on the eastern coast. The river is the source of the alluvial deposits for the agrarian civilization of the Ganges banks. For many centuries, the Ganga was used for transportation. In recent decades, she has been polluted by untreated sewage, industrial waste, and other pollutants—in addition to an increasing number of dams (Kumra 1995). The Ganga is also a source of suffering: hundreds of millions who bathe in her waters to work off their karma of many lifetimes, make offerings, and offer themselves as the ultimate sacrifice. For all these latter reasons especially, the Ganga is revered as the Holy Mother. She is Ganga Ma.

The story of the Holy Mother's fall is told in numerous oral traditions, as well as in the Puranas. Through the single-minded austerities of the sage Lord Brahma granted a boon that the earth be destroyed so she might carry sixty thousand years in the netherworld. Her fall was broken by the god Vishnu who prevented the earth from being destroyed. Ganga Ma sought out King Bhagiratha, who carried the remains of his ancestors in Bengal to the *kund* in the other world (Darian 2001; Eck 1997).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ghats reveal a more complex and ambivalent set of two models of contamination. Despite local variation, I found mixed interpretations of its purity. In countless opinions and anecdotes, I decided to ask a dozen people on the riverbank on the subject. A group of looking young men told me (in Hindi) after a while that it is certainly pure. Mother Ganga is giving us life. Be it cattle, be it sparrows, be it dogs, be it humans, they said, "Certainly [the Ganga] is polluted, but what do you? You have the proof." On another day, a man with a mouthful of *pān* into the river so that he could drink the opposite answer in similar terms: "Certainly it is polluted, but do you not see it?"⁸ I replied on both occasions with a smile: "Certainly, I see."

These statements reveal the range of models used to understand the purity of the Ganga. Their use of different models is a common example of situational variation among local speakers of *Banarsī bolī* (Simon 1999). In such societies, such as in Samoa, which use multiple models or deny categories of cultural behavior (Simon 1999), the same language, the nearly simultaneous use of different models is not unusual in Indian metaphysics, which views it as a suspension of opposites (1976).

At the same time, one should consider the relationship people have with the river and how these relationships influence the use of one model over another. For example, in Banaras, the same dialect and nearly identical sentences are used by men, cited the same empirical evidence to support their adamant denial of pollution in the Ganga. Some, by many who earned their living from the river, such as washing laundry, or watering their animals, would even if only in a physical sense, then no one would drink from it nor eat anything dirty from it. The fish and herders, would therefore have to choose between the two models. In contrast, those who used the Ganga for drinking could afford to be more philosophical about the relationship between pollution with spiritual purity.

There may be nearly as many cultural models as there are people along her banks. Yet these models fall into at least two generalized patterns, or sch

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

tizing. Dirt and sin are inseparable entities. The further down the transport chain that the polluter's handlers become, not because they passed it on but because they received it in the first place. Likewise, the Ganga maintains her purity simply by "passing the buck" to the next and last recipient of pollution and sin in all of India.

One explanation reinforces the idea that the Ganga is pure as sin and dirt are immutably polluted. In a situation in which one of his American students had written a paper for a professor at Banaras Hindu University that the Ganga is ever pure and therefore can never be polluted, she subsequently revised her argument to state that the Ganga is most pure . . . but what is put *into* her is polluted. She understandably accepted this revision. Transportive purification (i.e., the indestructibility) of pollution itself never becomes purified; it only transfers its attribution to another. This model also entails the possibility that a solvent can never become contaminated but only dissolved or displaced by the polluted solute. Within this schema, the Ganga is immutably inauspicious with the immutability of pollution in a suspension of opposites, in line with Cohn's argument (1976). Pollution in the Ganga is like oil in water.

Another explanation for the Ganga's purification schema is one in which pollution and purification are but interchangeable states dependent on the direction of the transformative schema emphasizes the re-creative power of polluted substances as agents of change, which either transform other substances into those with neutral or positive attributions or transform substances altogether. In contrast to the transportive schema, the vector of purification is externally oriented. Transformative purification involves the internalization of pollution from outside to within (figure 6).

An interesting application of this schema is the belief that the Ganga is purified by the pious just as the Ganga purifies the immersion of sinners in her waters. A Brahmin who sat under an umbrella beside the river told me that "this faith in the Ganga is in Gangaji—not just from today, from a long time ago. When sadhus/mahatmas die then they are immersed in the Ganga. Their water does not become polluted." An outspo-

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

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

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

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

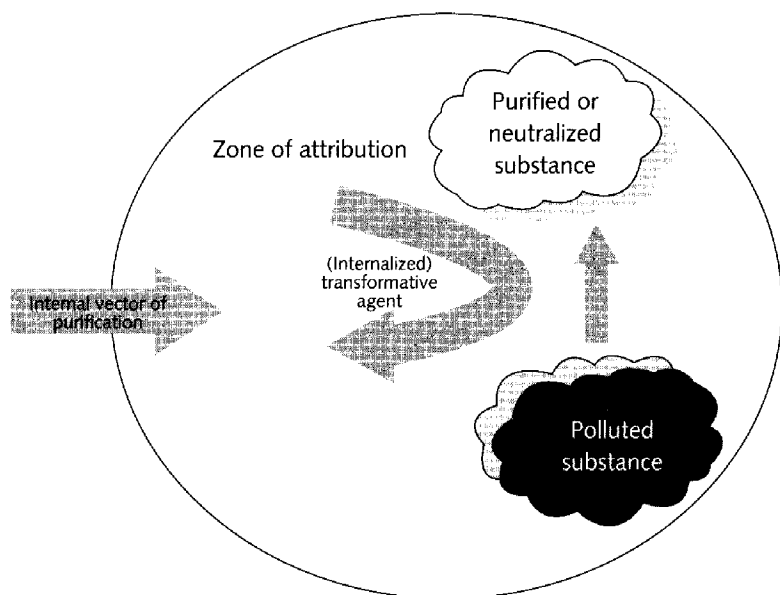


Figure 6. The transformative schema of purification.

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

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

A popular story in Banaras tells of a “drop of water from the Ganga” purifies (usually Western) scientists scratching their heads. Informants in the ghats told me that one informant observed that if you store Ganga water in containers and compare it with ordinary water in containers, the Ganga water will not give off a bad smell,” said a informant. “If you store ordinary water in a bottle, the water will give off a bad smell.” There is a common belief that a droplet of Ganges water carried one’s sins of many lifetimes in an instant” (Eckhart Tolle). From this perspective, some resident bathers carry Ganga water in brass pots to purify their family altars, and idols but also by combining the water with other substances in the household. Likewise, nonresident pilgrims use sealed containers to take back to their friends and family communities. According to the *pandā* and *achmāni*, water in a bottle [and] suppose you go to a place where you do *pūjā-path* [ritual worship] [and] drink the water then you have already kept [Ganga water] in a bottle and then it becomes Ganga water. Ganga water in sealed pots and packages.

Unlike the transportively informed, excretion, in which polluted substances (or solutes) are washed away, transformative models usually involve the use of a purifying substance (often singular). When the purification entails purification by excretion, transformative models involve acts of ingestion or digestion. For example, a pilgrim sips a small portion of water to purify himself by performing a sacred rite, such as a *pūjā* or *achmāni*, the participant cradles water in her hands in a particular posture (*mudrā*) and sips the water while recitation of a simple mantra such as *Aum Ganga Ma* infuses the water with sacred power before ingestion. While it is common in Banaras, I have been told that the benefit of the recipient than for the substance itself. Ganga Ma, because that water comes preloaded with the preloaded quality of the Ganga, the independent power, consciousness, to her intrinsic creative power, c

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

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

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

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

MAHĀSHMASHĀN

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



Figure 7. Kamleshwar Baba worshipping. Photograph by Victor Balaban.

But whereas the *shmathāns* carry the hope that the diminutive pyre holds the promise of liberation within one’s own lifetime, and the profound liberation entails.

The *akhand dhuni* burns within an enclosure in the courtyard flanking Krim Kund, just outside the Ashram. Every day, scores of Aghor devotees pay homage to this sacred fire. Hundreds of nondevotees come to see or find solutions to socioeconomic problems through the sacred fire through its *darshan* (a visual blessing) of its ash, which they use for various purposes.¹⁶

In a general sense, the *dhuni* is not unique. Many common features among guru-based traditions will often use them to establish their authority, whether temporarily or permanently (Eck 1983). One can see millions of these fires burning during the Kumbha Mela, a great religious festival held along the Ganga every four years (Rai 1983).