

2 Family Moral Systems

The most common Bengali term used to refer to what we in English might call a "family" is *samsār*. It literally means "that which flows together," from the roots *saṃ*, "together, with," and *sr*, "to flow, move." In its most comprehensive sense, *samsār* refers to the whole material world (*prthibī* or *ja-gat*) and to the flux of births and deaths that all living beings and things go through together. More commonly, the term designates one's own family or household (which is in some ways viewed as a microcosm of the wider world's processes). Thus *samsār* not only refers to the people of a family or household, but also includes any household animals, such as cows, goats, or ducks; any family deities; the space of the house itself; and the material goods of a household—cooking utensils, bedding, wall hangings, and the like. All of this collectively makes up what Bengalis call their *samsār*, the assembly of people and things that "flow with" persons as they move through their lives. The *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary*, like some of my human informants, also lists "the bindings of maya" (*māyābandhan*) as one of the overlapping meanings of *samsār*—that is, the bodily and emotional attachments or "bindings" that connect people with the persons and things that make up their households and wider inhabited worlds. It was within *samsārs*, or families, in Mangaldihi that much of what constituted age and gender relations was played out. In this and the following chapter, I focus on people's visions of the workings of families.

These visions entailed both consensus—what were often presented to me as shared "Bengali" values—and dissension or conflicting perspectives (for instance, between generations or genders). In today's theoretical climate, it is often dissension or contestation that is highlighted (as I discussed in the introduction). Indeed, contestation—or the absolute heterogeneity of culture—has somehow become an overpowering trope, almost silencing

what it was meant to allow for: that is, a heeding of the full range of diverse perspectives, visions, and experiences of those we are seeking to understand.¹ For it is not only anthropologists who have often (perhaps more often in the past) sought generalized or essentialized features of "cultures"; very often people essentialize *themselves*. For instance, those I knew in Mangaldihi commonly spoke to me of "Bengali culture," or "Bengali people"—especially when describing to me (admittedly an outsider, for whom this kind of language might have been thought particularly appropriate) how families work and how aging is constituted within families. Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Pradip Kumar Bose (1995) have examined elite middle-class discourses on the family in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Bengal, in which the family was often presented as the inner domain of a national culture, a refuge from external colonial society. Such an awareness of cultural difference also underlay many Mangaldihi villagers' discourses of Bengali family values (a point I discuss further in chapter 3). The workings of intergenerational family relations were presented as key parts of a Bengali local morality, a Bengali world.

The material in this chapter, as the label "family moral systems" would suggest, concentrates on such discourses of a shared project. Some readers may be uncomfortable with the level of apparent agreement or systematicity they find. But I have stayed close to the visions and language of many of my informants; and if I had omitted this material, I would not have done justice to the ways they often wished to represent themselves. I will then turn in chapter 3, "Conflicting Generations," to other, equally vital perspectives on age and gender relations within family life. Both chapters explore crucial components of the ways those I knew in Mangaldihi experienced and envisioned processes of aging, gender, and personhood within the arena of family life, an arena informed by specific politics and history.

DEFINING AGE

When I began research in India, I did not decide in advance whom I would consider "old" (although my advisor in Calcutta, troubled by the lack of specificity in my research proposal, advised me to do so: "But whom will you be calling 'old' in your study? Will it be people above age fifty-five? or age sixty-five?"). Instead, I wished to find out how the people I lived with defined aging. Once in Mangaldihi, when I searched for ways to speak about what I would call "old age," I necessarily had to begin by using Bengali words that approximated the topic. I asked what it is to be "grown" or "increased" (*briddha*) or relatively "senior" or "advanced" (*buṛo*) in life and social im-

portance.² I soon also heard the term *bayas*, referring to life's "prime stage," or an advanced "age" or "phase" of life.

I was virtually never told directly about age in absolute measures. Most people in Mangaldihi, in fact, did not know their age in years and placed little importance on such information. Although people of course sensed the repetitive cycles of seasons and celestial events as well as the accumulation of changes in their bodies, families, communities, and nation, few counted the particular number of years passed in their lives as markers of identity or of life stage, or kept track of and celebrated their birthdays.

Some of the more elite and literate families, especially among the Brahmans, did keep accounts of birth dates and such in record books, particularly so that they might cast horoscopes when arranging marriages. Some of those in Mangaldihi with salaried jobs also noted their seniority in years for bureaucratic purposes. But such knowledge was generally considered to be elite or technical information, a kind of "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1977:171-83) that demonstrated the possession of education, record books, salaried jobs, and the wealth that these goods entailed. One elderly Kora widow answered sharply when I asked her age, "How would I know that kind of thing? That's a matter of paper and pencils. Where would we get things like that? Knowing your age (*bayas*) is for *boro* ('big' or 'rich') people like you or Brahmans."

Much as Sylvia Vatuk (1990) had observed in Delhi, in Mangaldihi family criteria, and particularly the marriages of children, were held above all to constitute the beginnings of the senior phase (*buṛo bayas*). The family heads initiated their transition to being "senior" by gradually—often with years of ambivalence, arguing, and competition—handing over their duties of reproduction, cooking, and feeding to "junior" successors, usually sons and sons' wives. When their children married, women would also start to wear white saris, which signified their increasing seniority and asexuality.³ Since such successions and retirements might occur when members of the ascendant generation were of any age between about thirty-five and sixty, the Bengali senior stage corresponded roughly to the second halves of most villagers' lives and to what today's Americans might call "middle" and "old" age.

People defined aging physically as well, describing the old body as "weak" (*durbal*), "cool" (*thāṇḍā*), "dry" (*śukna*), and sometimes "decrepit" (*jārā*). Lawrence Cohen (1998) scrutinizes the "hot" and "weak" minds of the senile whom he searched out amid the neighborhoods of Varanasi, but in Mangaldihi such changes in the mind—though noted at times—were not commonly stressed as constitutive of old age.

Well-educated Brahmans in Mangaldihi would also sometimes discuss aging in terms of the *āśrama dharma* schema: the idealized four-stage life cycle of the *dharmaśāstras*, the classical Hindu ethical-legal texts.⁴ In this schema, men move through a series of four life stages or "shelters" (*āśramas*)—as a student, a married householder, a disengaged forest dweller (*vānaprastha*), and finally a wandering renouncer (*sannyāsi*).⁵ When a man sees the sons of his sons and white hair on his head he knows it is time to enter the forest-dweller phase—departing from his home to live as a hermit, or remaining in the household but with a mind focused on God. The final life stage is conceptualized as a time of complete abnegation of the phenomenal world and its pleasures and ties. Some in Mangaldihi compared spiritually minded elders (especially Brahman men) to the forest dwellers or renunciants of the *āśrama dharma* schema, a comparison I scrutinize further in chapter 4.

The people I knew in Mangaldihi often explained the workings, meanings of, and values behind the transitions of aging by referring to transactions—who gives what to whom, and when, and why. In the previous chapter, I described how substantial-emotional connections of *maya* were created between kin and close companions through sharing and exchanging substances, such as food, material goods, a house's space, breast milk, body particles, words, and the like. But people did more than *share* goods with one another (a relationship I will call "mutuality," following Raheja 1988, esp. p. 243). They also defined and created relatedness in terms of three other distinct modes of transacting, which I will call long-term (deferred) reciprocity (e.g., a parent provides food for a child, expecting the grown child to provide food for the parent years later in return), centrality and peripherality (e.g., an adult is positioned in the donative center of a household, distributing goods and services to peripheral children and elders), and hierarchy (seniors, the "increased" and "grown" folk, give out blessings and guidance to, and receive services and respect from, juniors and little ones).

Gloria Raheja (1988), in her analysis of the prestations or gifts given and received by people in the northern Indian village of Pahansu, has also found it useful to think of configurations of castes and kinsmen in Pahansu in a tripartite set of transactional dimensions—"mutuality," "centrality," and "hierarchy." Her study focuses on the prestations that move *between* households of different castes and kinsmen. In this chapter and the next, I focus on the kinds of givings and receivings that went on *within* households in Mangaldihi. And though an important part of Raheja's study of inter-household prestations surrounds the dispersal of "inauspiciousness," I encountered no similar transfers within Mangaldihi households. By examin-

ing household transactions, I shed light on the internal dynamics of families and on how relations of aging and gender were constituted, thought about, and valued.

LONG-TERM RELATIONS: RECIPROCITY AND INDEBTEDNESS

People in Mangaldihi described Bengali family relations as entailing long-term bonds of reciprocal indebtedness extending throughout life and even after death; focusing on this transactional relationship provided one of their main ways of speaking about the connections binding the generations. Juniors provided care for their elderly parents, reconstructed relations with parents as ancestors after death, and ritually nourished these ancestors as a means of repaying the tremendous debts (*ṛṇ*) owed for producing and caring for them in infancy and childhood. According to my informants, this—the moral obligation to repay the vast debts incurred—was the primary reason adult children cared for their aged parents and nurtured their parents as ancestors after death.⁶

The process of producing and raising children was described by Mangaldihians as a series of givings. Parents give their newborn children a body, made up of their own blood—from the father's seed or semen (*śukra*, a distilled form of blood) and the mother's uterine blood (*rakta*, *ārtab*), which nourishes the fetus in the womb (*garbha*).⁷ Parents then nourish their children with food: a mother's breast milk (*buker dudh*), rice, and treats of sweets and fruit. They also provide their children with material necessities—clothing, bedding, money, and the like. They clean up their infants' urine and feces. They are responsible for their children's having the whole series of life or family cycle rituals (*samskārs*), from birth through marriage. And finally, through all of these givings, they endure tremendous suffering (*kaṣṭa*). In the end, after giving to and constructing their children, the parents have largely depleted their own resources and thus they advance to a "senior" (*buṛo*) life phase.

But this series of givings from adult parents to younger children is only one phase of a much longer story. According to Mangaldihians, by giving to and raising their children, parents create in their offspring a tremendous moral debt, or *ṛṇ*, that can never be entirely repaid. Yet children are obligated to *strive* as best they can to pay it off by returning in kind the gifts once given to them, principally by providing for their parents when they become old and by ritually nourishing their parents as ancestors after death. As Gurusaday Mukherjee, Khudi Thakrun's eldest son, explained:

Looking after parents is the children's (*cheleder*)⁸ duty (*kartabya*). Sons pay back (*śodh kare*) the debt (*ṛṇ*) to their parents of childbirth and being raised by them. The mother and father suffer so much (*khubi kaṣṭa kare*) to raise their children. They can't sleep; they wake up in the middle of the night. They clean up their [children's] bowel movements. They worry terribly when the children are sick. And the mother especially suffers (*māyer beśi kaṣṭa hae*). She carries the child in her womb for ten [lunar] months, and she raises him from the blood and milk from her breasts. So if you don't care for your parents, then great sin (*khubi pāp*) and injustice (*anyāe*) happens.

Another Brahman man and family ritual priest serving Mangaldihi, Ni-mai Bhattacharj, provided a similar explanation:

Caring for parents is the children's duty (*kartabya*); it is *dharma*. As parents raised their children, children will also care for their parents during their sick years, when they get old (*bṛiddha*). For example, if I am old and I have a bowel movement, my son will clean it and he won't ask, "Why did you do it there?" This is what we did for him when he was young. When I am old and dying, who will take me to go pee and defecate? My children will have to do it.

Women also spoke to me of the long-term relations of reciprocal interdependence and indebtedness they had as daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law. As I will describe below, daughters largely cleared their debts toward their own parents when they married, inheriting at the same time new obligations toward their husbands' parents. These new relations between daughters-in-law and parents-in-law were in part conceived of as reciprocal—for daughters-in-law were often married as young girls. This was especially true of the older women of Mangaldihi, whose marriages took place before child marriage regulations were implemented in India, when brides often were girls as young as eight, five, or even two. Many of these women described how they were cared for, raised, and nurtured by their mothers-in-law as new brides, sleeping with their mothers-in-law at night, and even— one woman told me—nursing from a mother-in-law's breasts. Choto Ma explained the relations of reciprocal interdependence that she, as an older woman, now had with her daughters-in-law: "If our [daughters-in-law] didn't care for us, then who would? At this age? We took these daughters-in-law in. And in our time, our mothers-in-law took us in and cared for us. . . . Now we are dependent on our sons and on our daughters-in-law. It has to be done this way."

The attempt to pay back parents (or parents-in-law) the debts of birth and rearing does not end with care in old age, people said, but continues af-

ter death—as children suffer a period of death-separation impurity (*aśauc*) for their parents, perform funeral rites, reconstruct their parents as ancestors, and ritually nourish them. As Subal Gorai put it as he approached the end of the rigorous month of death-separation impurity for his deceased mother: “We must do the observances [of death-separation impurity] for our parents. In doing observances for our mother, we pay her back (*śodh karā hae*) for raising us. She suffered very much for us, so we will now suffer for her also. . . . But our suffering cannot equal hers. We are trying to pay [her] back but we cannot ever do it.” When villagers reasoned about such issues with me—about what children give to and owe their aged and deceased parents—I was struck by the near-identity of what parents once gave to their children and what children are later obligated to return. These reciprocated gifts included the gift of a body (after death), food, material necessities, the cleaning of urine and excrement, the final *samskāra* or funeral rites, and the suffering and toil (*kaṣṭa*) that all of these acts of giving and supporting entailed (table 4).

Some of these forms of reciprocal transaction have already been illustrated by villagers quoted above. For instance, villagers often described their own and others’ relations with aged parents by relating how they as adult children clean up the urine and excrement of their parents without complaining, just as their parents once tended to them when they were infants. As we have seen, Nimai Bhattacharj reasoned, “For example, if I am old and I have a bowel movement, my son will clean it and he won’t ask, ‘Why did you do it there?’ This is what we did for him when he was young.” Mangaldihi villagers frequently praised the way one Brahman man, Syam Thakur, cared for his very aged father with unflinching devotion until the day he died; Syam Thakur, I was told repeatedly, would himself take the excrement-covered sheets from his father’s bed to the pond to be washed, three or four times a day if necessary, never complaining and never (several remarked) tempted to feed his father less so that there would be less waste produced. Although not all old people become incontinent, dealing with a parent’s urine and feces was often held up as a paradigmatic component of the relation between an adult child and an elderly parent.

Moreover, people said, just as parents construct their children’s bodies by giving birth to them and nourishing them with food, so children (particularly sons) must provide new bodies for their parents after death. I will later explain in detail (chapter 5) the elaborate series of Hindu funeral rituals by which juniors construct new subtle, ancestral bodies for their deceased seniors, and then carefully nourish these bodies through ongoing ritual feedings. In fact, the ten-day (or sometimes longer) period of death-separation

Table 4. Relations of Long-term, Deferred Reciprocity

Phase 1: Initial giving (<i>dāoyā</i>)		Phase 2: Reciprocated giving, or the deferred repaying of debts (<i>ṛn</i>)	
Medium of Transaction	Transactors, Senior → Junior	Medium of Transaction	Transactors, Junior → Senior
Body	Parent → child	Body	Son (junior → parent of male line) (<i>pret</i> , <i>pitṛ</i>)
Food		Food	
Breast milk	Mother → child	(Cow’s) milk	Junior → elder, <i>pret</i> , <i>pitṛ</i>
Rice	Parent → child	Rice	Junior → elder, <i>pret</i> , <i>pitṛ</i>
Treats (fruit, sweets, etc.)	Senior → junior	Treats	Junior → elder, <i>pret</i> , <i>pitṛ</i>
Material goods		Material goods	
Clothing, money, etc.	Parent → child	Clothing, money, etc.	Junior → elder, <i>pret</i>
Services		Services	
Clean up urine and excrement, daily care, etc.	Parent → child	Clean up urine and excrement, daily care, etc.	Junior → Elder
<i>Samskāra</i>		<i>Samskāra</i>	
First feeding of rice, marriage, etc.	Parent → child	Funeral rites	Juniors → <i>pret</i> , <i>pitṛ</i> (of male line)

KEY: →	Direction of transaction.
Junior	May include a child, child’s spouse, grandchild, niece, nephew, etc., and especially sons and daughters-in-law.
Senior	May include a parent, parent-in-law, grandparent, aunt, uncle, departed spirit (<i>pret</i>), ancestor (<i>pitṛ</i>), especially those within one’s own family line.
Elder	A senior when old.
<i>Pret</i>	Departed spirit (see chapter 5).
<i>Pitṛ</i>	Ancestor (see chapter 5).

impurity that survivors endure when an elder dies was sometimes compared by villagers to the ten-month period of gestation during which an infant is produced in the womb (cf. Parry 1982:85). And several of my informants stated that by giving birth to their own children, they are also fulfilling a debt (*ṛṇ*) to their parents to produce children to carry on the family line, just as their parents had produced them.⁹ By performing the last funeral rites for their parents, children also reciprocate the gift of a *samskāra* to them. Parents construct their children by giving them the series of *samskāras* from birth through marriage, and in turn children give their parents the final *samskāra*, the "last rites" (*antyeṣṭi*) and "faithful offerings" (*śrāddha*), after death.

Providing parents with food in late life and after death was regarded by villagers as perhaps the most fundamental of all filial obligations. People providing care for their parents in old age often spoke of "giving [them] rice" (*bhāt dāoyā*). They especially stressed the effort mothers expend in nourishing their children, feeding them milk from their own breasts, and the children's obligation to reciprocate this nurturing. Subal Gorai said with emotion as he ministered to his mother during her last days, "[My mother] fed me with milk from her own breasts; how could I not feed her now?" If families could afford it, they often tried to provide their elders, as they do young children, special treats such as fruit and sweets made from milk. Villagers explained that as people grow older, their desire (*lobh*) for special kinds of food increases; if possible this desire should be indulged a bit. After a death occurred, too, junior survivors spent a great deal of effort feeding rice, water, and treats (milk, honey, yogurt, fruit, sweets) to the departed spirit and the ancestors.

Finally, villagers said that adult children have an obligation to provide their aged and deceased parents with the material goods needed to live comfortably. Living parents should receive clothing, a place to sleep, perhaps a little spending money, their medications, and the like; once deceased, in the funeral rites they receive clothing, shoes, a bed, eating utensils, an umbrella, money, and so forth. In this way, just as parents once provided their children with the substance of household life, the children years later reciprocate with these same kinds of goods.

All of these "gifts" to aged and deceased parents—performing the final *samskāra*, constructing new bodies for them, cleaning them of urine and feces, feeding them, and providing them with material necessities—were spoken of as acts entailing considerable effort (*jatna*) and suffering (*kaṣṭa*). But no matter how much effort the children exert, I was told, they can never equal their parents in suffering and expense.

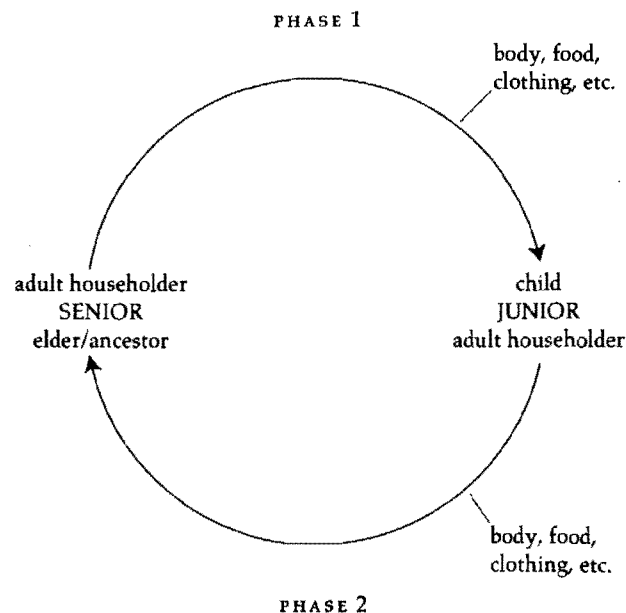
By engaging in this series of reciprocal transactions, people in Mangaldihi

worked to construct long-term bonds of interdependence that connected people across the fluctuations of family life. Crucial to these reciprocations was the dimension of time. Those who engaged in a transaction (of food, a body, material goods) at one particular time (as a gift from parent to child) potentially gained something beyond that time—in future material returns and desired acts provided by their children much later, when they were old. Other anthropologists, such as Marcel Mauss (1967 [1925]) and Nancy Munn (1986), have looked at the kinds of transactions or gift exchanges practiced by people in various parts of the world that similarly aim to create debts in the receiver and thereby possibly win later benefits for the giver. In Mangaldihi, the dynamic applied within intergenerational transactions. The reciprocated transaction was *deferred* to a later family phase, when the parents had become old and the children were adult householders (figure 1). Thus, a major concern here was the *durability* of family relations over time, and not simply the equivalence of reciprocated exchanges.

This kind of thinking—investing now for future family phases and reciprocated returns—was explicit in villagers' reasoning about why they provided care for their elders. At the same time that adult householders were providing for their elders, they were also raising their own children—and looking ahead to the time when *they* would be in the position of the elder receivers, and their own children would (they hoped) be doing the providing. As one woman told me: "If we don't serve and respect our elders, then . . . my own sons and daughters-in-law will not serve me when I get old. If I don't serve my *śāsurī* (mother-in-law) now, when I get old, my son will ask me, 'Did you serve your *śāsurī*? Why should I serve you?'"

Such long-term reciprocal transactions also served in large part to maintain the "bindings" of a *samsāra*, or family. A child may cry out in hunger, causing a "pull" (*tān*) in his mother—and the mother will give him or her a breast to nurse, or supply a plate of food. So an aging mother can also "pull" in hunger on the bindings that tie her to her child when her breasts are empty of milk in late life—and expect her grown child to provide food in return. These gifts of food, material goods, and bodies back and forth over several family phases and even in death played a major role in sustaining households and family lines, as well as the people who made them up.

Sylvia Vatuk (1990:66 and *passim*) also writes of relations of "long-term intergenerational reciprocity" within Indian families living near Delhi. She suggests that this conception of parent-child reciprocity as a "life-span relationship" sharply distinguishes Indian from American views of dependence in old age. Studies such as those by Margaret Clark (1972), Margaret Clark and Barbara Anderson (1967), and Maria Vesperi (1985) reveal that many



- In phase 1 Seniors as adult householders are the givers, juniors as children are the recipients, and a debt (*rit*) is created in the juniors to reciprocate what is given.
- In phase 2 Juniors as adult householders reciprocate gifts to seniors as elders and ancestors; the debts are partially (although never fully) repaid.
- In both phases: The media of transaction are the same; the givers and receivers are simply reversed.

Figure 1. Relations of long-term, deferred reciprocity.

Americans find the need to depend on younger relatives for support in old age destructive to their sense of self-esteem and value as a responsible person. They are distressed primarily because the relationship between an aged parent and younger caregiver is generally *not* perceived by these Americans—either the older person or the caregiver—as reciprocal, but rather as a one-way flow of benefits from the caretaker to the “dependent” (S. Vatuk 1990:65). Furthermore, most Americans expect the benefits in parent-child transactions to flow “down,” not “up” from children to parents. It is proper

for parents to give to children (even, through gifts of money or inheritances, when their children are adults); but if an adult child gives to an aged parent, then the parent is seen as childlike. Vesperi studied growing old in a Florida city, where these old people “find themselves in life situations where they are defined *a priori* as dependent and child-like. They exist as supplicants, not as partners in reciprocal exchange. The supplicant is a shadowy form, an empty coffer; he or she receives but is not expected to give in return” (1985:71).

Of course, the degree of dependence in old age varies according to class and ethnicity; the problem is particularly acute for poorer people, who late in their lives have no accrued estate to draw from and potentially pass on to children. In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Michel Foucault raises issues that pertain to this negative construction of dependence in old age. In a modern industrial society, he points out, people have been defined in terms of their ability to produce wealth and the means of their own subsistence; anything less is disciplined or despised.

As I will explore in greater depth in the following chapter, many people in and around Mangaldihi did indeed wonder and worry whether their children would feed them rice in old age; others lived in such poverty that they were unable to support aged family members, however much they might wish to; and still others were left with no children even to hope to depend on. Nonetheless, most continued to think of parent-child relations as long-term reciprocal ones, and those who knew something of the United States reflected on the care, or what they had heard to be the *noncare*, of the American elderly with horror. In Mangaldihi, even as many perceived faults and flaws in their relationships, the majority of “senior” people were cared for by sons and their wives in households crowded with cooking fires and descendants (table 5, page 54).

The Marriage of Daughters: Repaying Parental Debts with Mouse's Earth

It was at the marriages of their children that parents instigated the new phase in which the direction of giving would be reversed and begin to flow from children to parents. Specific portions of the marriage rituals performed for both sons and daughters dealt with the issue of repaying debts to parents, though to quite different effect. Women and men in Mangaldihi told me how daughters, like sons, incur vast debts toward their parents by virtue of being produced and raised by them; but unlike a son, a daughter ritually clears away these debts when she marries by performing a ritual of “giving

Table 5. Mangaldihi's Seniors: Sources of Support, 1990

Source of Support	Number of Seniors
Lived with sons and <i>bous</i>	64
Lived with daughter or other close relatives	5
Supported self through labor (maidservant, cow tender, maker of cow dung patties, etc.)	17
Supported self through independent income (property, savings, etc.)	4
Beggar	3
Total	93

NOTE: "Senior" here was defined as anyone whom my research assistant Dipu (who conducted most of the house-to-house village census) and the household members he spoke with considered to be "senior," "increased," or "old" (*briddha*, *buṛo*). These were generally those whose children were all married, who had gray or graying hair, who wore mostly white, and so on. All those listed as self-supporting lived adjacent to junior kin.

mouse's earth" (*īdurer māti dāoyā*) as she leaves her father's home for her father-in-law's home. The morning after the nightlong marriage ceremonies have been performed at the bride's father's home, the bride, groom, and the bride's mother perform a ritual of parting (*bidāe*), one of whose functions is to enable the departing daughter to "pay back" (*śodh karā*) her parents, and especially her mother, for the debts (*m*) she has incurred growing up. The mother, daughter, and groom come together next to the vehicle that will carry the daughter and her husband away—usually a rented car ("taxi") if the family is fairly wealthy, a cycle rickshaw or oxcart if poor. Neighbors and relatives crowd around to watch the poignant event, often with tears streaming.

The mother blesses the bride and groom, imbuing them with auspicious substances by first washing their feet with turmeric paste and milk, and then touching their feet with whole rice grains (*dhān*) and sacred grass (*kuśa*). Next she wipes their feet with her unbound hair. Villagers explained that by this act a mother maintains connections with her daughter, even as she sends her away. Hair, especially in its unbound or "open" (*kholā*) condition (i.e., not braided or tied up in a knot), is thought to have properties very conducive to mixing or connecting. A mother also wipes the navel of her newborn child with unbound hair after the umbilical cord has been cut, to mitigate the separative effects of severing this physical bond. So, villagers explained, a mother wipes her departing daughter with her

unbound hair to keep the mother and daughter "one" (*ek*). If she were to wipe her daughter's feet (or her newborn child's navel) with her hand, which is colder and more contained, the child would become "other" (*par*).¹⁰ Finally, the mother wipes dry the feet of the bride and groom with a cotton towel, or *gārchā*.

The critical point of the ritual comes next: the bride's mother stands, opens the blouse under her sari, and has her daughter gesture toward nursing at her breast. Up until now, villagers explained, the mother has nurtured her daughter, and she offers her daughter her breast for the last time, before she turns her over to be fed and supported by her husband and his family. The daughter then takes from a handkerchief a handful of earth dug from a mouse hole (*īdurer māti*, "the earth of a mouse") and places it into a fold in her mother's sari; she repeats the act three times, as her mother hands the earth back to her. With each offering, the daughter repeats, "Ma, all that I have eaten from you for so many days, I pay back today with this mouse's earth" (*Mā, eto din tomār jā kheyechilām, āj ei īdurer māti diye tā śodh karlām*). Mother and daughter usually weep as they perform this final act. The mother hands the bride a brass tray or cup filled with rice and sweets that the bride is to give to her mother-in-law when she arrives at her new home. The mother then turns away in tears and usually does not watch her daughter depart.

I heard several theories on the ritual significance of mouse's earth. Some thought that because mice live in the house and eat rice grains, the staple food of a household, they are in some ways like the goddess Laksmī, the goddess of wealth and prosperity who is associated with rice. Mouse's earth can therefore be regarded as a form of wealth, like rice, and can be given to a mother in compensation for her considerable expenditures. Alternatively, Lina Fruzzetti (1982:55–56), who describes a similar ritual among other Bengali women, suggests that the earth of a mouse represents the life of a married woman, who shifts wealth from house to house as the mouse shifts earth. The explanation that seemed most convincing to me, however, derived from the ritual's triviality. Several village women told me emphatically that of course a daughter's debts to her parents can never be truly repaid. That is why the daughter gives such a worthless item to her mother before she leaves, making it plain that she has not matched the value of the debt. One mother of four as yet unmarried daughters said to me, "Can the debt [to one's parents] be paid back with the earth of a mouse? No! That debt will not be repaid."

Nonetheless, because she had gone through the ritual motions of paying back her mother with mouse's earth, a married daughter's debts toward

her parents were regarded as formally erased. With the clearing of this debt, the bride also weakened her bonds with her parents, for indebtedness entails a connection between two parties. Not understanding the positive local function of indebtedness, I unwittingly insulted several neighborhood women early on in my stay in Mangaldihi by attempting to pay off debts, returning a borrowed cup of sugar, or paying a few rupees in exchange for having a sari's hem sewn. They would say to me, hurt, "What are you trying to do? Pay back [the debt] and cut off all ties?" For this reason, many mothers told me that they found the ritual of being paid back by their daughters almost impossible to endure. "To hear a daughter say, 'I have paid off my debts to you' (*tomār ṛṇ śodh karlām*)," one woman said, "gives so much pain." Some mused that they would try to find others to perform the ritual in their stead, a husband's brother's wife or the like, but I never saw this happen.

By clearing her parental debts and moving on to her husband's and father-in-law's home, a daughter thus removes herself from the cycle of long-term reciprocal transactions that tie her natal family together. A daughter receives from her parents for years but repays these debts in a ritual instant only, which ends her most vital transactions with them. On rare occasions, especially if there were no sons in the family, a daughter would support her aged parents (see table 5); but doing so was not regarded as her obligation (*dāy-itva*). Married daughters also usually continued to visit their natal homes, several times a year and even for weeks at a time, especially over the first few years of marriage. On such visits, they often secretly gave their mothers gifts of money, sari blouses, petticoats, and the like, especially if their husbands' households were better off than their parents'. However, people believed that it did not look good if a married daughter gave too much to her natal parents. Married daughters are transformed from *nijer lok*, "own people," to *kuṭumb*s, relatives by marriage,¹¹ and thus no longer rightfully had the role of looking after and providing for their parents.

A married daughter does, however, inherit new debts toward her parents-in-law, just as her husband and parents-in-law take on the responsibility of supporting her. The newly married bride brings to her father-in-law's home a brass tray of rice and sweets that she gives to her mother-in-law upon arrival, and this initial gift demonstrates that she has now taken on the obligation to serve and give to them (see also Fruzzetti 1982:55). A daughter-in-law (*bou*) not only provides much of the labor of serving her husband's parents while they are alive, she also must join her husband in observing death-separation impurity, performing funeral rites, and ritually nourish-

ing her parents-in-law as ancestors after their deaths. The daughter-in-law's position as caretaker and server of her husband's parents will become clearer as we examine the marriage rituals of a son.

The Marriage of Sons, the Bringing of Daughters-in-Law, and the Repaying of Parental Debts

Before a son leaves to be married, he performs a ritual that in some respects parallels the daughter's ritual of giving mouse's earth to her mother. As this marriage constitutes the beginning of the parents' "senior" or "increased" age and the end in many ways of the son's childhood dependence on them, the son must mark the shift in direction of the reciprocal relationship with his parents, instigating a new family phase in which he (and his wife) will begin to give to and pay back his parents in exchange for all that they have given to him.

The groom is accompanied on his journey to the bride's home, where the marriage ceremonies will take place, by a group of relatives and friends known as the *bar jātrī*, or "groom's procession," but he leaves his parents behind at home. Immediately before the groom departs, his mother performs a series of ritual acts similar to those for a departing bride-daughter. She washes her son's feet with turmeric paste, milk, and water and wipes them first with her unbound hair and then with a cotton towel. She next stands and is supposed to have her son symbolically nurse at her breast one last time. In practice, many mothers and sons skip this part of the ritual, out of "embarrassment" (*lajjā*). But everyone I spoke with agreed that the offering of the breast or the "feeding of milk" (*dudh khāoyāno*) should be done. It signifies, I was told, that the mother's "work" (*kāj*) toward her son is now finished. For his whole life, the mother has fed and cared for her son through offerings of breast milk, food, and love; but from now on his wife will look after him instead.

At this point, the ritual diverges significantly from that performed for a departing daughter-bride. The mother asks her son three times, "Oh, son, where are you going?" And the son responds three times, "Ma, I'm going to bring you a servant" (*Mā, tomār dāsī ānte jābo*). Instead of clearing his debts to his mother by giving her mouse's earth, he announces—with the same number of repetitions as in the bride's ritual—that he will be bringing home a wife, who will be a "servant," or *dāsī*, to her. This daughter-in-law or servant is thus in some ways equivalent to the mouse's earth that a daughter gives her mother—both are offered to a mother in exchange for

what she has previously given her child. The son brings home a wife and daughter-in-law to take on with him the obligation of serving his parents and bearing sons to continue the family line. In this way, a son begins the phase of reciprocating his tremendous debts toward his parents, and a daughter-in-law inherits the burden of providing much of the labor that goes into this reciprocation.

CENTRALITY AND PERIPHERALITY

The shift to a new phase in family relations of deferred reciprocity, as sons and their wives begin to give to their aging parents, also brings about a repositioning of family members. The principal married couple of a house whose sons were not yet married were felt to be at the warm, reproductive, and redistributive human "center" (*mājkhāne*) of life in a Bengali household: they gave food, knowledge, and services to and made decisions for all the others around them, including retirees and the young children who were located on the household's peripheries (figure 2).

Their removal to the outer peripheries of a household brought significant changes for the elders. Although peripherality granted senior men and especially women increased freedoms—to give up burdensome work, wander outside of the household, visit friends or married daughters—it also usually entailed forfeitures of power. Indeed, becoming peripheral within a household was accompanied by losses along many of the same dimensions—of space, transactions, and power—involved in being low caste in Mangaldihi. Much as Brahmans were regarded as being at the "center of the village" (*grāmer mājkhāne*), with the other, lower castes on "all four sides" (*cārdike*), married adults were viewed as occupying the spatial centers of their households. Brahmans also had more control than any other group over transactions and distributions concerning village resources, such as land, rice, and money, for they owned the largest amount of land, held by far the greatest number of salaried jobs, and hired many of the lower castes as employees and sharecroppers. The lower castes were thus largely supported—albeit often inadequately, many asserted—by the Brahmans, just as the old (and young) were supported by the adults in their families. As a result, Brahmans tended to have the most political and economic power within the village (although the lower *jātis* in Mangaldihi were increasingly gaining local powers, in part because of land reforms and in part because of the *panchāyat* system of local self-government, which now ensured that there would always be a Bagdi representative). Likewise, it was adult householders who tended to have the most domestic power or authority. Although

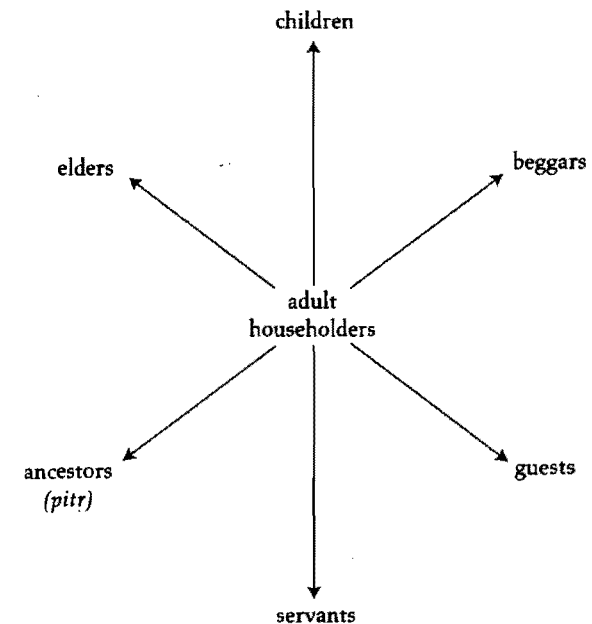


Figure 2. Relations of centrality.

some wealthier, stronger-willed, or more revered seniors, like Khudi Thakrun, often retained quite a lot of domestic authority and centrality until their deaths, their voices were also frequently dismissed by juniors as empty *bak bak* words—just so much hot air and chatter.

HIERARCHIES: SERVING AND BLESSING

At the same time that elders moved out to the relatively powerless peripheries of their households, they also moved "up" on a hierarchical scale of junior-senior relations. Juniors in Mangaldihi gave to and served their elders not only because they were morally obligated to reciprocate their parents' earlier gifts but also because an elder person had a superior position in this hierarchy. Old people were considered to be "big" (*boro*), "increased" (*briddha*), "venerable people" (*gurujan*), "over others" (*laker apar*), and even "similar to gods" (*thākurer moto*). Villagers frequently commented that the relationship older parents have with their children is like that of a god and devotee (see also Inden and Nicholas 1977:27).

My landlord's sister Saraswati expounded their society's attitudes toward

the aged: "We think of our elders like God (*bhagavān*). . . . We call our grandparents *thākur-mā* (literally, 'god-mother') and *thākur-dādā* (literally, 'god-elder brother') because they are like *thākurs* (visible gods) to us."¹² People in Mangaldihi also often compared Khudi Thakrun to a *thākur* or god. My companion Hena said, "We respect Khudi Thakrun very much, because of her age (*bayas*). Once they get to be that increased (*briddha*), they are *thākurs* (visible gods)." Another young girl exclaimed to me as we roamed through the village lanes past Khudi Thakrun's house: "Khudi Thakrun is the biggest [or 'oldest,' *sab ceye boro*] of the whole village. And such a large village as Mangaldihi! That means that she is equal to a god (*thākurer samān*)!" In this hierarchical sense, old persons could be compared to the higher castes and classes in Mangaldihi. "Big" (*boro*) is a multivalent term with overlapping meanings: a person could be "big" as an elder by having increased his or her seniority, knowledge, and connections over a long life; "big" as a rich person who has accumulated much material wealth; or "big" as a person of a high (*ucca*) caste.

Providing *sevā*, or "service," was one of the major ways that juniors in Mangaldihi brought the hierarchical dimension of their relations with their elders to the fore. This term, like *sevā karā*, "to serve," has implications of rank in Bengali, just as it does in English. In Mangaldihi, *sevā* was something performed for temple deities as well as for elders, and also sometimes for employers.¹³ When performed for deities, *sevā* included keeping the temple clean, providing the deity (*thākur*) with daily food and water, offering the deity respectful devotion or *bhakti*, and often giving the deity daily baths, fanning it in the summer to provide cool relief, and laying it down to sleep for an afternoon rest and at night.

Providing *sevā* for an elder involved similar practices. First, it entailed satisfying the elder's bodily needs and comforts. Aged men and women who praised the service they received from their adult sons and daughters-in-law detailed their ministrations with great specificity: they were fed several times a day, with care and before all others; their legs and feet were massaged; their backs were oiled; their hair was combed and braided; their bodies were fanned in the summer heat; their clothes were washed and their bedrolls were laid out at night. Rendering service to elders also included providing medical care if needed, and the dark-rimmed eyeglasses displayed prominently on the faces of many of Mangaldihi's better-off elders signified the *sevā* of their sons.

Within the first few days of marriage, a daughter-in-law (*bou* or *boumā*) was also expected to begin to perform acts of *sevā* toward her parents-in-law. A new *bou* may shyly and submissively approach her father-in-law to

begin massaging his feet as he rests, or she may go to her mother-in-law to pluck out her gray hairs. If a *bou* did not herself initiate such service, a mother-in-law or other senior relative would often gently direct the new *bou* to do so, as serving her in-laws was regarded as one of her most important duties as a wife.

Within the first several weeks following a wedding, it was common for a mother-in-law to travel with her new *bou*, with or without the son, to the homes of relatives to show her off and introduce her to the wider family. One such mother-in-law, my landlord's older sister Saraswati, arrived one day in Mangaldihi with her first daughter-in-law just a week or so after the wedding. Saraswati spent several hours in my home with her *bou*, talking to me about how young people care for their elders in Bengali society. As she spoke, she seemed to gloat with pleasure and pride as she had her gray hairs plucked and her feet massaged by her *bou*. Receiving this service as a mother-in-law was new to her, just as providing it was new to her daughter-in-law, who was about seventeen. This young woman, quiet and submissive, also appeared proud of her novel role of dutifully serving her mother-in-law. Not all *bous* were so eager to serve, but her demeanor was not uncommon. She blushed with pride and embarrassment as the neighbors and relatives praised her service, and as her mother-in-law proclaimed, "Our *bou* is very good. She knows how to work. She rubs oil on our feet. She respects and serves us (*bhakti-sevā kare*)."

Sevā also included acts of deference. Elders expected their juniors to comply with (*mānā*) their requests, to refrain from talking back and arguing, and to ask their advice (*upadeś*) when making decisions. The young people were also expected to feel "respectful devotion" or *bhakti* for their elders, a hierarchical form of love also felt for a deity. To display this devotion, as well as inferior status, a junior would often bow down before an elder and would place the dust from the elder's feet on his or her head; this act, called *pranām*, is performed by devotees for a deity and by servants at times for their employers. To show deference, Bengalis also generally avoid using any senior person's personal name, using instead an appropriate kin term, such as grandmother (*thākurmā*, *didimā*), father's sister (*pisi*), elder brother (*dādā*), and so forth. Taken together, these acts of deference and respectful devotion manifested *sevā*; if they were not performed, an elder would feel that he or she was not being served well.

Many, however, felt that the obligations of *sevā* could never be satisfied. According to many elders, juniors can never give enough, in the right way, at the right times. According to many juniors, elders make impossible, unjust, unreasonable demands—insisting on a mango months past mango sea-

son, demanding a cup of tea after the cooking fire has already been put out, urinating and defecating in bed so many times that no other household work can be done except keep them clean.

Providing *sevā* is ironically also a form of power. At the same time that *sevā* overtly signifies the superiority of the elder being served, more covertly it reveals the elder's declining domestic power and bodily strength. Many of the acts that constitute *sevā* embody this double meaning. As a new, young daughter-in-law submissively plucks the gray hairs from her mother-in-law's head, she displays at the same time the weakening and aging of her mother-in-law's body. The massage also has a double signification: the subservience and inferiority of the junior who provides it, and the worn limbs and weakened body of the senior being massaged. The act of cleaning up an elder's urine and excrement marks a junior's hierarchically inferior position, as someone who will accept even the impure (*asuddha*) feces of a superior; but it points sharply as well to the elder's incontinence, loss of control over even basic bodily functions, and infantility. Similarly, sons often asked their aged fathers for advice about decisions that both knew the elder really had no control over. As *sevā* demonstrates the aged moving "up" in a hierarchy of older and superior over younger and inferior, it is also part of their movement "out" to the peripheries of household life, where domestic power and bodily strength have diminished.

Blessings, Curses, and Affection: Hierarchical Gifts from Seniors to Juniors

Sevā does not constitute simply a one-way transaction, a flow of services, goods, and benefits from junior to senior. According to Mangaldihi villagers, elders also provided a series of what I call "hierarchical gifts" to their juniors—blessings in exchange for *sevā* and *praṇām*, affection in exchange for respectful devotion, but also curses and complaints to retaliate against neglect. These kinds of gifts were not the same as what parents gave to children as adults and then ceased to give in late life (food, bodies, material goods, etc.); rather parents, as seniors and superiors to their children, provided them *throughout* their lives. These transactions, we will see, were crucial in constituting relations of junior-senior hierarchy within Mangaldihi families (see table 6 and figure 3).

First, it is important to note that although elders may lose much of their previous physical power—for example, control over acquiring and distributing material goods; centrality amid the material exchanges (of food, money, goods, and the like) within households—they were thought to gain

Table 6. Relations of Hierarchy

Media of Transaction	Transactors	
	Senior ↓ Junior	Senior ↑ Junior
POSITIVE		
Actions and words	Blessings Blessings Requests, commands, advice	<i>Praṇām</i> <i>Sevā</i> Compliance, deference, listening
Sentiments (forms of love, <i>bhālobāsā</i>)	<i>Sneha</i> (affection)	<i>Bhakti</i> (respectful devotion)
NEGATIVE		
Actions and words	Curses Complaints	Withholding <i>praṇām</i> <i>Sevā</i>
Sentiments	Dissatisfaction	Disrespect (<i>asammān</i>)

other kinds of powers, particularly verbal ones of cursing and blessing, and also of requesting, demanding, and complaining. According to Mangaldihi-ans, old people could use these verbal powers (often subtly) to exert leverage over their juniors—providing a stream of blessings in exchange for acts of *sevā* and *praṇām*, and meting out curses when *sevā* was flagrantly withheld. Mangaldihi villagers said that the blessings (*āśīrbād*) of old people bring great rewards, and that their curses (*abhiśāp*) always "stick" (*lege jāe*). Fear of these curses and anticipation of blessings motivated many villagers, on their own account, to serve their elders well.

One twelve-year-old Mangaldihi girl, Chaitali, told me a story about these powers of old people; she spoke in hushed tones as she hung on my chair while I typed:

Did you know that old people (*buṛo lok*) can give out curses and blessings, and that they always come to be? My grandfather gave my *jeṭhā* (father's older brother) a curse before he died. He said that my *jeṭhā's* daughter would die. This was because my *jeṭhā* did not

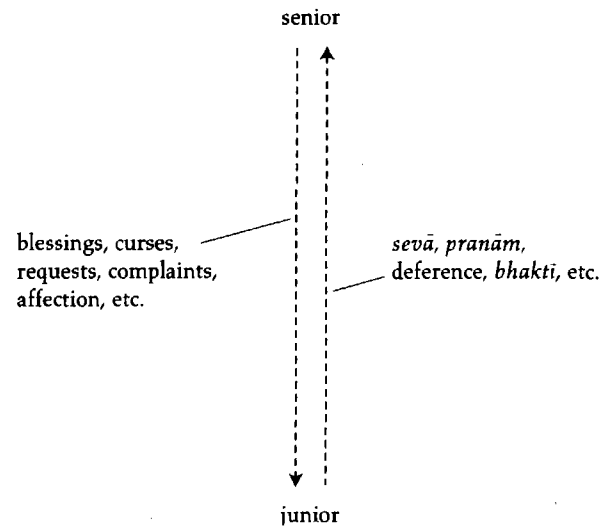


Figure 3. Relations of hierarchy.

look after him. He didn't clean up his urine and excrement, and he didn't even send him money home from where he worked in Bihar. The curse came to pass [her tone was low and serious]. My *jeṭhā's* daughter did die a few years ago. She was burned to death in a fire. But my grandfather gave *my* father [the younger son] blessings. My father cared for my grandfather until his death. He fed him and gave him a special chair to sit in, and he cleaned up all of his urine and excrement. So my grandfather gave my father a blessing that he would become rich. And he did.

Indeed, Chaitali's father had become one of the richest men in the village over the past decade or two, thanks to all sorts of profitable business deals involving his land and crops. I heard many other stories like this one in Mangaldihi—stories in which an old person heaps curses on a negligent son, or even in which a whole family line becomes extinct because of the angry curses of a vengeful, neglected elder. The damaging power of old people's curses was often invoked, sometimes after the fact, in explaining the extreme misfortunes befalling a family, such as the early death of a child or the extinction of a lineage.

Even more pervasive were the blessings (*āśīrbād*) that old people bestowed, often in generously flowing streams, in exchange for service, *pranām*, and loving respect offered to them by their juniors. The most common way that

juniors sought blessings and that elders gave them out was through acts of *pranām*. *Pranām* does not merely entail a junior's demonstration of respectful devotion to a superior but involves a two-way exchange: the junior or inferior bows down before an elder, and the elder places his or her hands on the junior's bowed head and offers blessings. Especially during ritual gatherings, when relatives assembled from near and far, older people tended to sit and receive endless acts of *pranām* as they continuously gave gentle blessings: "May you be happy, may you live long, may you have a son, may you get a job, may your health be good, may you have well-being."

It was common to do *pranām* to household elders each morning on rising, to demonstrate respect and receive blessings; and juniors in Mangaldihi almost always did *pranām* to their elders before embarking on any sort of journey, to receive blessings to help them on their way. Many families also saved photographs or prints of their deceased elders' feet for the purpose of doing *pranām* and receiving ancestral blessings. Elders also gave blessings when their juniors offered them acts of *sevā* by massaging their feet, plucking their gray hairs, providing them food or special treats, and the like. If the service or favor was particularly large and appreciated, such as a gift of a sweet ripe mango, then the string of blessings was longer and more enthusiastic.

We might well wonder how old people, who were in many ways thought to be "dry" (*śukna*) and depleted, had the ability to bless and curse. Villagers most frequently explained these verbal powers by pointing out the similarity of old people to gods or *ṭhākurs*, as "above" (*apar*) others, "big" (*boṛo*), "increased" (*briddha*), and "venerable" (*gurujan*). Just as gods have the power to bestow blessings and curses, so do old people with their godlike qualities.

Older people were also thought to be like ascetics in lifestyle and in their largely white clothing; and some noted that both matched the final, *sannyāsa* stage of the *āśrama dharma* schema. Peter van der Veer (1989) states that ascetics gain powers to curse and bless largely through practicing austerities that transform sexual heat into stored creative heat, or *tāpas*, which can in turn be transformed into potent blessings and curses. Like ascetics, senior people in Mangaldihi were largely celibate and removed from many of the heat-producing exchanges at the center of household life. And many told me that as the bodies of old people cooled (as sexual heat cooled), their heads or minds (*māthā*) could remain hot, which often led to anger or excesses of words. Curses and blessings may be a manifestation of such mental or verbal heat, one remaining source of potency that enabled elders to gift their juniors, for good or ill. Some described old people as also having increased quantities of "wind" (*vāta*) in their bodies, a humor that is often

associated with troublesome speech. So it may be a combination of factors that gave the verbal emissions of the elderly such destructive or beneficial potency.

In addition to the ability to curse and bless, old people possessed other verbal capacities: they could demand loudly that they be served, and they could complain publicly—causing much embarrassment for their families—that they are not being served well. Through case studies of several older people and their families in chapter 3, I provide illustrations of these kinds of verbal powers, wielded very effectively. As Sylvia Vatuk (1990:73) notes, however, many old people choose not to complain too publicly about the inadequate treatment they receive from juniors, for such complaints make themselves and their entire families, not only the negligent juniors, look bad.

Finally, Bengalis commonly view "affection" (*sneha*) as another gift that flows down from seniors to juniors, moving parallel to the "respectful devotion" (*bhakti*) that their juniors offer up to them. Affection and respectful devotion are both considered to be forms of "love" (*bhālobāsā*) of the type given and received in hierarchical relationships, as between parents and children and between older and younger siblings (see also Inden and Nicholas 1977:25–29).

Thus, many of the daily transactions practiced by juniors and seniors within Mangaldihi families enforced hierarchical relations of the superior and older over the inferior and younger. What juniors gave to seniors (e.g., *sevā*, *pranām*, *bhakti*) and what seniors gave to juniors (e.g., blessings, curses, affection) were necessarily different—not equivalent, as in transactions of long-term or deferred reciprocity discussed above—because of each party's different statuses and capacities within the hierarchy. Even as the givers and receivers within relations of deferred reciprocity reversed when elders moved to the peripheries of the household and gave up many of their domestic powers, elders maintained their hierarchical position as superiors. This status would never be reversed and in fact only seemed to increase, as persons grew older and older (and thus more "increased" and godlike), and were then transformed into even more godlike ancestors.

Reciprocity, Centrality, Hierarchy, and Mutuality: Aspects of Family Relations in Mangaldihi

I have been describing the ways in which family relations were ordered and sustained by parents and children, parents-in-law and daughters-in-law, or seniors and juniors in Mangaldihi by means of different transactions—

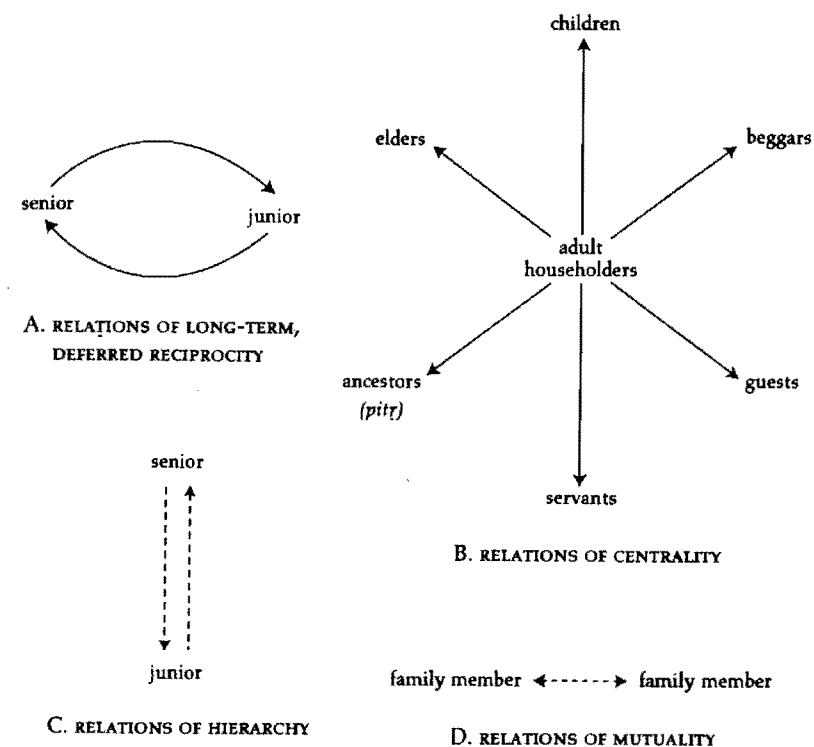


Figure 4. Aspects of family relations in Mangaldihi. These diagrams were inspired by Raheja's "Ordering of castes and kinsmen in Pahansu" (1988:243, fig. 14).

of bodies, blood, breast milk, food, material goods, services, blessings, complaints—that in various contexts helped establish reciprocity, centrality, and hierarchy (see diagrams A, B, and C of figure 4). These three forms of ordering intergenerational relations were crucial, I have argued, to how Bengalis in Mangaldihi conceived of the nature of families, family moral systems, gender differences, and what it is to be old.

I began the chapter with another important dimension of family relations, however, which I called "mutuality" (see diagram D of figure 4). Relations of mutuality were also basic to constituting and sustaining families in Mangaldihi. They included acts that were repeated daily, were completed immediately, were nonhierarchical, and involved a mutual exchange of goods and substances—food, a house, love, touching, words—so that members of a household or family came to be mutual parts of each other. Such mutual

Table 7. Relations of Mutuality

Medium of Transaction	Transactors: Family Member ↔ Family Member
Food	Sharing rice: eating rice from the same pot (<i>eki hārite khāoyā</i>), being part of a "one rice household" (<i>ekānabartī paribār</i>)
House	Living in the same house, being the same "house's people" (<i>gharer lok, bāṛir lok</i>)
Love	Giving and receiving <i>bhālobāsā</i> , mutual egalitarian love
Touching	Mutual touching, sitting and sleeping side by side, embracing, etc.
Words	Conversation, gossip, storytelling pleasantries, etc.

NOTE: Transactions of mutuality are participated in by all members of a household, not only (or primarily) by juniors and seniors.

transactions included "eating rice from the same pot" (*eki hārite khāoyā*); being part of a "one rice household" (*ekānabartī paribār*); living in the same house (*bāri* or *ghar*) and mutually partaking in its air, soil, wealth, and spaces; giving and receiving a mutual, egalitarian form of "love" (*bhālobāsā*); touching; and exchanging words (see table 7).

Seniors and juniors within households—even while engaging in any of the other transactions not considered directly mutual—also participated in mutual givings and receivings. Parents, especially mothers, were thought to exchange mutual egalitarian love (*bhālobāsā*) with their children, just as they gave and received forms of hierarchical love, *sneha* (affection) and *bhaktī* (respectful devotion). Likewise, seniors did not merely give their juniors blessings, curses, requests, commands, and complaints but engaged them in verbal exchanges of a mutual nature, such as conversation, gossip and storytelling, pleasantries, and the like. Children's touch of their aged parents was not limited to acts of *praṇām* and the taking of dust from their feet, nor aged parents' touch of their children to placing their hands on their children's heads to bless them; but aged parents and younger children and grandchildren also touched one another as equals, by sitting side by side, embracing, and often (especially grandparents and grandchildren) sleeping together.

Furthermore, the giving and receiving of food and material goods within families was not perceived only in terms of relations of deferred reciprocity and centrality, with adult householders (as those in the "center") the givers and all others (elders, children, guests) the peripheral receivers. The food and wealth of a family or household was also thought to be shared. Even if one set of people acquired, cooked, and served the food and others received it, *both* the givers and receivers were "eating food from the same pot." Such mutual exchanges of love, words, body contact, food, and so on played a significant role in how people in Mangaldihi defined what it was to be a family or *samsār*.

But these kinds of relations of mutuality were irrelevant to the positioning of older people within families. All household members, regardless of their phase within a family cycle or degree of centrality or hierarchy, were thought to participate equally in them. To understand how relations between the older and the younger were constructed, perceived, and valued within Mangaldihi families, we must look beyond synchronic relations of mutuality to the kinds of diachronic orderings on which I have focused in this chapter: those of deferred or long-term reciprocity, of centrality, and of hierarchy. These were the orderings that people in Mangaldihi stressed when they spoke of intergenerational relations and when they practiced, in their everyday and ritual lives, transactions that bound together persons across generations within their families.