

Folk Hinduism in West Bengal

In the rural areas of India, we see a variety of notions about the nature of gods and goddesses. They are not “high gods,” as we see in the pan-Indian brahmanical forms of Hinduism, but rather regional deities, intimately associated with villages and towns. Indeed, some would not be characterized as gods and goddesses by most people, for those supernatural entities given offerings and worship include ghosts, ancestors, water and plant essences, guardian spirits, and disease controllers. We see some overlap of tribal deities, the deities of non-Hindu or semi-Hindu villagers, with the village gods or *gramadevatas* of village Hinduism. These may be field or mountain spirits, or angry ghosts of women who died violent deaths. All of these may be seen in the large area of folk Hinduism. There is no sharp differentiation between the tribal deities, village deities, and gods and goddesses of brahmanical Hinduism. Rather than a polarity, we see a continuum, for these traditions worship many deities in common. Some themes that may be noted in the worship of folk gods and goddesses:

Regionalism: These deities are associated with specific places, temples, fields, and streams. The Kali of one village is not the same as the next village’s Kali. One Chandi gives good hunting, another Chandi cures disease. Goddesses are not pan-Indian; they are specific to a person’s tribal or caste group, extended family, neighborhood, or village.

Pragmatism: These deities are rarely worshiped in a spirit of pure and abstract devotion. Worship is for a specific end: fertility, good harvest, good weather, cures for diseases. If gods and goddesses are not worshiped, it is well known that they may get irritable, especially when they get hungry.

Human personality: Deities are like human beings, including both their negative and positive sides. They may be impatient, ill-tempered, impulsive, lustful, greedy, and angry, as well as being merciful and benevolent to their worshippers. Sometimes they are jealous gods, who get angry if they are neglected or if their devotees show more attention to other deities.

Variation of form: Gods and goddesses can be shape-shifters, appearing as natural objects at one time and as human beings at another. One’s grandmother may be who she claims to be, or she may be some sort of goddess in

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disguise. Supernatural power appears in various figures: nature spirits, ghosts, ancestors, regional deities. Gods and goddesses are not limited to disincarnate entities incarnated in statues or particular places. Some gods and goddesses were once people, or are even now transformed people.

Lack of concern for caste: Local gods and goddesses are frequently worshiped by village headmen or non-brahmin priests, as well as priestesses. While the pan-Indian, brahmanical deities require obedience to ritual purity and caste rules, folk deities may be satisfied with worship by people of any ritual or social status.

Some of the most important aspects of folk religion involve the worship of deities (especially goddesses) in natural objects, worship in festivals and by songs, and individual or small-group worship by means of *bratas*, in which people follow a vow and perform ritual action, and listen to a story about the deity. This book will give some examples of the first two aspects, and then focus on the third one.

In folk Hinduism, goddesses are particularly important. Goddesses tend to be aniconic—the goddess might manifest in a stone, in a lake, an unusual tree, or a pile of earth or cowdung. They dwell within nature, without a sculpted human form. This opposes the mainstream Hindu tendency to craft the goddess into statues and images that are recognizably human and are offered incense and flowers and sweets. Folk goddesses are generally believed to appear of their own accord in natural objects and sacred places rather than responding to ritual calls. Goddesses may desire worship, but they are ultimately independent of human wishes and follow their own inclinations.

Folk goddesses may be upwardly mobile, dwelling in a rock in a field, having that rock moved to a sacred grove, and then to an altar in its own hut. With Hindu influence it may move into a small temple, then a larger temple, and then get a statue who is its alter ego. In some rural temples, goddess statues can be seen in classic Hindu form—but at the goddess' feet is the stone from which she arose, and where some aspect of her remains. In other temples, the goddess who showed herself in the great banyan tree is still worshiped at the base of the tree—but also in the temple with the statue. The rock is often a stone slab painted with vermilion and surrounded by offerings. Such rocks are often found as a result of a revelatory dream, or by the request of the goddess, who often appears in the form of an old woman. It is important to respond to such calls, as a family may be punished with disease and death if the goddess calls but is ignored. However, they may be rewarded with wealth and happiness for treating the goddess well, especially feeding and worshiping her.

The worship of goddesses who are believed to dwell within stones and other natural objects is widespread. Many rural goddess temples in West Bengal have been built because of a call from the goddess. A stone, bas-relief, or statue is found in which the goddess is understood by her devotees to dwell, and it is moved to the

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base of a tree for outside worship, then to a small thatched enclosure (*than*), then to a small building with plaster or cement walls, and then to a full-fledged temple. There are goddesses (and gods) in all of these stages of worship in West Bengal, and the movement from the water to the land is usually understood to be a sort of upward mobility for the goddess. This is because a goddess with a temple and devotees is higher in status than an unknown goddess beneath a pond, whom nobody worships.

There is a common origin story for the stone in which the goddess dwells. A person (usually male) will be asleep at night, and receive a divine call or command in a dream (the Bengali term for this dream command is *svapnadeśā*). It is from a goddess who is generally dissatisfied with her current situation. She is in a lake, pond, or river, or sometimes underground, and she is tired of staying there. She wants to be in a place where she will get more attention, more offerings from devotees, and have more influence on the world. Frequently she complains of being hungry, and not having eaten in several hundred years. Deities without offerings are understood to be starving; as the snake-goddess Manasa tells her worshiper Behula in one of her epic *Manasamangala* poems: “These twelve years, my child, I have been without food. I have spent these twelve years eating the wind.”¹

While the goddess’ power may be found in temples, burning grounds, and other places sacred to the goddess, very frequently it is found in black, rounded stones. Stories along this theme are heard all through rural West Bengal: a person dreams at night of a call from the goddess, who is located in a rock at the bottom of a pond, river or lake. She wishes to get out of the water, and come onto dry land and be worshiped. The person finds the petrified goddess the next morning, sets her up in a shrine, and offers her ritual worship. She is then satisfied, and shows her appreciation by giving miraculous healings and bringing luck.

This set of events is so well known that there is even a “rock scam” described by several urban informants. The goal is wealth, for in India, sanctity can be wealth producing. People offer money to deities hoping for a large return on this relatively small investment, and the person who takes the money is usually the owner or priest of the deity. He is the one who offers access to her.

According to this strategy, a person (or persons) conspires to become the caretaker/owner of a deity in a rock, as a hopefully lucrative career. The person buries a rock with special markings (often a rough figure of a multiarmed Kali or Chandi incised into the stone) near a body of water. After a few weeks or months, he announces a dream to the village, which calls him to dig up a rock in that very place. It was revealed to him in the dream that there is a goddess underground who wishes to be recognized and worshiped. He goes over with a few villagers who later can act as witnesses, digs the rock up, and brings it home. If a confederate from his own or a nearby village can be cured of some chronic health problem (of which he has been visibly complaining for the past few weeks), the caretaker of the deity is employed “in the god business.”

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There is no further validation needed, because deities are elusive and do not appreciate being tested. Doubters need to be careful—what if the goddess really is in the rock and one is speaking against her? It is a bad idea to get a goddess angry. The goddess in the rock has automatic status. Additionally, temples can become major businesses in towns where there is a scarcity of resources. To doubt a neighbor's vision may also prevent the growth of a major business opportunity and do a disservice to the community.

Most traditional informants said that this simulation must be rare, for the goddess is known to have a quick temper and gets angry at people who try to use her. Thus, even if the village liar were to claim a dream call, it would be likely to be believed, for chancing the goddess' anger is dangerous and the man would have to be mad to do it. Doubting the goddess' call might make her angry, so people should hesitate to be skeptical. Now that Western ideas have penetrated into the most rural of areas, however, we do see a growing skepticism and even denial of the truth of the dream commands. Nevertheless, people still go to the temples, deciding to be on the safe side.

I asked people how the goddess got into the rock in the first place, but was generally met with blank stares: "How are we supposed to know how goddesses do that sort of thing?" Informants willing to deal with this question generally had two speculations; either she was in the rock since the beginning of time, or she entered the rock later on. Those of the eternal school had the goddess in the rock forever, sleeping or dreaming or semicomatose, until one day she awakens and decides that she doesn't like the environment. Either she broadcasts a general call at that point to be taken out and worshiped (and whoever is suitably receptive hears her and comes to rescue her) or she waits for decades or centuries until just the right person comes along (her criteria for the right person are known only to herself). For the more particular goddesses, this may mean years in a quite undignified position. Some rocks are used as laundry stones, where washermen and women come to beat dirty clothes against rocks, some are trod on by low-caste and out-caste people, some are thrown by children and kicked by animals. However, the goddess stoically bears years of pounding by the laundryman's saris and kurta shirts, waiting for her rescuer and her new status as village goddess.

Sometimes goddesses are said to be incarnate in rocks as a result of a curse. An early example of this is the *Ramayana* story of the sage Gautama's wife, Ahalya. The god Indra lusted after the beautiful Ahalya. He took on the illusory form of her husband and slept with her. Despite the fact that she thought she was with her husband, Gautama was nevertheless quite angry, and cursed her to be transformed into a rock until she would be liberated by the god Rama during his incarnation on earth. As the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, a version of the *Ramayana* popular in West Bengal, describes the situation:

After thus cursing Indra, the chief of celestials, he entered his hermitage, and there saw Ahalya standing, trembling in fear and with palms joined in salu-

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tation. Gautama said to her: “O degenerate one! You will be converted into a rock in this Ashrama. Without any food and drink day and night, and subjected to all the inclemencies of weather like rain, sun, wind, etc. you will be stationed here in the practice of severe austerity, meditating on the Supreme Being Rama dwelling in the hearts of all. This place, which has been my hermitage, will hereafter be without any living creature. After you have spent several thousand years in this condition, Sri Rama, the son of Dasaratha, along with his brother Lakshmana will be coming to this place. When he places his feet on the rock, with which you will now gain identity by my curse, you will be freed from sin. You will then adore Rama with great devotion, circumambulating him and prostrating before him. Liberated from the effects of the curse, you will again have opportunity to serve me.”²

Some informants mentioned a myth of a primordial dismemberment of the goddess at the beginning of the world, a cross between the Purusa Sukta story in the *Rig Veda* and the myth of Sati. The earth was made from the body of the goddess, and some of her body parts were more conscious than others (these became the sacred rocks). Other informants said that the consciousness of the goddess Prakriti (the goddess of matter) is scattered throughout all the world, though more visible in some places than in others.³

Those who believed that the goddess’ entrance into the rock was a later event had a variety of theories as to why this might have occurred. Some informants speculated that perhaps the rock was originally a statue, enlivened by a brahmin priest through the ritual of *prāna-pratishthā* (when a deity is called down by mantra to dwell in a statue), but the statue was worn away over time, with the goddess somehow trapped inside. Others stated that there were many invasions throughout Indian history, and the deities fled the invaders just as the town or village inhabitants did, somehow ending up in a rock or tree, or placed to rest by others in Mother Earth. Sometimes she was taken away from a temple in a war zone or area of famine by a fleeing priest; or her caretaker followed her instructions to move her elsewhere and died on the way to her desired locale, and the presence of her statue was unknown or forgotten by others. On occasion, the statue might be buried and a false or “decoy” statue set up to fool the invaders. But if the invasion lasts for a long time, people may take the decoy to be the true deity, and the original statue is left forgotten.

Such statues are believed to be alive and have responses to the situation. Sometimes a statue was taken by the priest and sometimes it left on its own, floating through the air or animating its stone legs to run. The statue’s running away was not viewed as cowardice on the statue’s part, but rather as its faithfulness to its priest, caretaker, or village population—it did not want to be worshiped by foreigners. Sometimes the statue or rock could be convinced to return if the invaders promised to worship it and give large amounts of offerings, but usually it refused to return and roamed the forests and jungles until it found a suitable lake in which to rest.

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The stone or statue may end up in the lake or ground in a variety of ways. Sometimes the stone is considered to be spontaneously alive, *svayambhu*, and the goddess has chosen to dwell there for her own reasons. She has been sleeping there for centuries, and she has suddenly awakened (or she has been waiting for the right person to finally call). Sometimes the statue is deliberately kept hidden in the water, especially to escape “torture by Muslim rulers.”⁴ A statue understood to be conscious would not enjoy having its nose or limbs knocked off, which often happened during Muslim attacks. This is locally understood by informants as deity torture. When the dream command comes to the sleeping person, the goddess has generally decided that it is time to move.

The person who has the dream, according to the origin stories, usually goes out and finds the rock or statue and arranges for its worship. Sometimes people ignore the dream, and then it recurs over and over until the person finally agrees to get the goddess. If the person is stubborn and will not get her, the goddess may curse him with all sorts of disasters until he feels compelled to get her rock or statue. After the rock is recognized as a goddess and given offerings, the dreams stop and the person can either be the special caretaker of the goddess or leave her to a priest. It is rare that she chooses to return to the lake or river, but it does occasionally happen.⁵

Goddess stones are occasionally said to change size, becoming larger or smaller over time. For instance, at Makardah village in Howrah, the stone of the goddess Makar Chandi was said to have gotten smaller over time. According to the story, the stone was once large enough to require the priest to climb a ladder to perform the daily worship. But when a priest came to resent the size of the stone and the extra work that was entailed for its worship, the goddess was upset, and sank into the earth and disappeared. The priest was then sorry for his resentment of the oversized goddess and begged her to return. She did so, but only in her current, diminished form.⁶

Stones and statues of gods and goddesses are loosely called “thakurs,” or lords, by many village people. “*Āmār thākūr*,” my lord, does not generally refer to a deity in heaven, but rather to a deity on earth: the stone or statue in the house worship room (*thākūr ghar*). Thakurs have both upward and downward mobility. A rock or other object may be determined to be the dwelling place of a deity, placed in a house to be worshiped, and gain the respect of the family. If that family is blessed with luck, especially cures of disease, the family deity may start to be worshiped by the village. For instance, the Manasa stone of Tantipara was originally the household deity of a man named Nityananda Dhibar, and it gradually became known as the village deity.⁷ The Uluichandi stone in the family house of one informant became popular as a living deity. It then was named as the village deity, and the informant’s grandfather became its priest.⁸

As a village deity, the goddess stone may get its own temple and a full-time priest, who can accept offerings from the villagers and ritually offer them to her. People from other villages may come with offerings. It can get a reputation as a

deity that is alive (*jagrata*), and its temple can become a place of pilgrimage. Sometimes it may be taken in procession to other villages, which keep an empty seat (*asana*) for its visit. The Manasa stone of Agar village in Birbhum visits many other villages in the area. Agar has three stones that represent the goddess Manasa; in large, medium, and small sizes (called Barama, Mejama, and Chotama). The small one is sent to other villages, or sometimes her place is taken by a clay or wooden horse (as her representative). When the clay horse is sent to Metela village, it is worshiped with devotion for a day on its small wooden throne with a red cloth, and then it is returned to its original shrine.⁹ All castes worship the goddesses. In the town of Shibpur, there is joint worship of Kali by all villagers. Whenever a marriage party comes into the village, the couple must first bow down to the goddess, or trouble may occur. Once a couple did not bow to Kali and as soon as they passed her shrine, the handles of the wedding palanquin broke.¹⁰

In the case of goddess stones, if the temple is built where the stone was found, it may get the reputation of being a hidden Sati *pīṭha*, or place blessed by some body part of the goddess Sati. Or it may be a new Shakta site blessed by a goddess, not a historical one, blessed by the goddess' choice to dwell there. Relatively new *pīṭhas* have been claimed in West Bengal; probably the most famous of the newer ones are Tarapitha and Adyapitha.

There is also downward mobility among thakurs. When a stone or statue has not been doing its job, and the town or family has been unlucky, the statue may be understood as weak (however, if there are real disasters, the statue may also be viewed as strong but angry, and needing propitiation). If the statue is determined to be weak, or its worshippers leave and nobody else wishes to take on the responsibility of caring for it, it loses status. It may be consigned to the Ganges River or some other body of water, or it may be put into a temple of some other deity as an additional god or goddess, also cared for by the priest. Some temples become a sort of "old-age home" for thakurs, with unwanted gods donated along with money for their upkeep. There are sections for old goddess stones, *liṅgas*, Narayana stones, even small statues and photographs, in some temples. However, I have found the topic of getting rid of unwanted thakurs to be an embarrassing one for informants, perhaps comparable to getting rid of unwanted relatives. People are uncomfortable at leaving their grandfather's goddess in the spare room or sending her off to live on a temple's charity (such shame may show a bhakti or devotional element in this folk worship). In some cases, a deserted temple with a living deity may have the equivalent of "home health care"—a group or society may decide to hire a brahmin to visit the temple each day, to feed and care for the deity. This is because the ground on which the temple sits is sacred ground and it has been revealed that the deity wishes to stay in its own temple, on its own ground.

Another important aspect of folk Hinduism is the worship of goddesses in the form of old women. This is generally not seen in brahmanical Hinduism, where goddesses are portrayed as young and beautiful. In the folk tradition, there are many goddesses who are called Budi Ma or Buri Ma. In modern Bengali, *budī*

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means “old woman,” but the folk meaning of the term is “ancestress,” the woman who is old because she originated the group. She is not merely old, but ancient, and revered for her age and power. Some of these older goddesses are associated with trees (such as Vana Durga or Durga of the forests, and Budi Ma or Rupasi who dwells in the sheora tree). Nanimadhab Chaudhuri calls the Old Lady’s worship “the cult of a tribal clan deity,” and mentions Buri Thakurani, Burhia Mata, and Burhi Mai.¹¹ Hathi-dhara-Buri, the Old Lady who catches elephants with her hands, is said to have cleared the Midnapore jungle for her tribal followers by killing and chasing away the wild elephants (though now she has come to be brahmanized, and is also worshiped by Hindus). Sometimes the Old Lady is worshiped along with her consort, the Old Man, in the cult of Bura-Buri, especially in West Bengal, Bihar, and Assam. Chaudhuri notes three aspects as important in the worship of the Buri: the absence of any statue of the deity (she is worshiped as present in nature rather than in a particular form), the presence of outdoor shrines, and the *deyashi* or nonbrahmanical priest who leads her worship.¹² The Old Lady may be worshiped in a tree, in groups of plants with hibiscus and vermilion, or in a rock in the shrine.

In some instances various forms of the Old Lady are adopted into Hinduism. In this case her name changes (she becomes Vriddheshvari, the Aged Hindu Goddess), and the priest is usually a brahmin. A good description of this transformation was given by a land owner or zamindar:

The cult prevails also among the higher castes among whom the Buri is known as Vrddhesvari. A Brahman officiates as priest. In the Brahmanical form of worship the goddess is meditated on as follows: “Goddess fair-complexioned, adorned with all kinds of ornaments, dressed in yellow garments, two-eyed, two-armed, beautiful and smiling, who always grants boons to her votaries.” She is invoked as the nurse of the universe (*Jagatam dhatri*) and consort of Rudra (*Rudrakanta*). Goats and pigeons are sacrificed to her.¹³

We may note here that the aniconic folk goddess becomes a fair-skinned great goddess or Devi; the nature goddess is transformed into a distant deity of wealth and power, and consort of a Hindu god.

We see a similar phenomenon in the village of Asansol in Burdwan, with another Old Lady goddess, Ghaghrabudi. It is said by the people of the village that Ghaghrabudi dwelt within large pieces of stone under a tree on the bank of the river long before the village was built. She was found due to a flood in 1956, which uprooted the old tree and revealed the egg-shaped stones which were her home. According to the story, she had been the deity worshiped by a tribal community living in the forests, but as the tribal people moved out and brahmanical Hindu groups moved in, Ghaghrabudi decided to get worship from the Hindus. She appeared as an old woman wearing a *ghāghra* (a sort of skirt) before a depressed, sui-

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cidal brahmin named Kangal Chakravarti. She told him not to commit suicide, but instead to worship her in the form of the stones. He did so, worshiping her with the visualization of the goddess Chandika. As she was accepted by the Hindu community, her name was changed from Ghaghrabudi (the Old Woman or Ancestress in a skirt) to Ghaghrachandi (the tribal and folk goddess Chandi in a skirt) and later to Ghaghradevi (the Hindu great goddess in a skirt).¹⁴ She is thus transformed from the tribal ancestor (*budī*) to the folk or village goddess (*caṇḍī*) and then to the brahmanical Hindu goddess (*devī*).

While the figures of older goddesses and ancestresses are found fairly frequently in folk religion, they are rare in brahmanical Hinduism. This may be a result of the different conceptions of power. The Old Woman of the Village or Jungle has the knowledge that she has gained through age and, like the creatures of nature, she shows both increase of knowledge and increase of years. The Hindu goddess may enter nature but her home is elsewhere, and she takes on the form that represents her power: the face of a sixteen-year-old girl and the breasts of a nursing mother. She thus combines the powers of eternal youth, beauty, and immortality with the symbols of nurturing and motherhood. Her power is not in her wisdom gained in years of survival, but comes innately. The major Bengali Hindu goddesses—Kali, Durga, Tara, Lakshmi, and Sarasvati—are generally shown as young and attractive. Even Kali, whose images in other regions of India are emaciated and ugly, is frequently shown as beautiful and voluptuous in West Bengal. It is the youth of the Hindu goddess that shows her power, as it is the age of the Adivasi goddess that shows her wisdom.

Chandi is a goddess who was partially adopted into the Hindu pantheon. Sometimes she is the patron deity of Adivasi or tribal people (especially in texts such as the *Chandi Mangal Kavya*, in which she is worshiped by a hunter and his wife), and sometimes she is a folk goddess and village housewife. Tribal hunters would carry her rock for luck in the field, though more often it would rest beneath a sacred tree or in a small hut.

As a Hindu goddess, Chandi is represented by a dark rounded rock or a piece of the remains of a bas relief, often daubed with vermilion. Sometimes the area of her face may have silver eyes or a mouth drawn on, and the rock is kept on a wooden throne. She may be accompanied by clay and terracotta horses and elephants, a pitcher or “god-pot,” and a post for animal sacrifice. While in the folk style she may be worshiped by the village headman (*deyāsī*) or his wife (*deyāsīnī*), in the brahmanical style she is worshiped by a brahmin priest. Both may involve processions with music and song. As she is further Hinduized, she may get a human body, carved out of clay or wood. For instance, the Chandi at Barisha shows Hindu tantric influence: she is carved in human form, and sits on a seat of human skulls (*pañcamuṇḍa āsana*) painted brown, pink, green, yellow, and blue. She has four arms, a garland of skulls, a crown and ornaments, and a red sari.¹⁵

Some rituals combine both styles, and the goddess may be worshiped by both a nonbrahmin priest (often the headman of the village) and a brahmin priest.

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In the village of Khairadih near Bakreshwar, Mangal Chandi is usually kept in a mud temple and worshiped by a nonbrahmin priest of the weaver caste, but on her annual festival the nonbrahmin priest pays the expenses and a brahmin priest from another village is called to officiate. The shrine is cleaned and whitewashed and clay models of religious figures are exhibited. The goddess Manasa from Tantipara village is also brought for a visit. Mangal Chandi is placed by the brahmin priest on a wooden throne to circumambulate the village, and carried by members of the headman's family. The women of the headman's family lead the crowd, carrying the sacred pitcher, blowing conch shells and making the trilling sounds of ululation. The procession goes out to a sacred pipal tree, to perform the Gachbera ritual (encircling the tree). Eight women (of the headman's family) stand around the tree and then walk around it seven times. They unwind thread from a bamboo spool around the tree trunk. Then everybody else circles around the tree. There is music and the sound of conches. The procession then returns, and the deity is put back in her shrine.¹⁶ Then the brahmin priest sits down to worship Mangal Chandi while the headman observes from a distance. The brahmin performs a fire sacrifice (*yajña*) and chants mantras in Sanskrit.¹⁷ The goddess has not communicated whether she prefers a folk or orthodox Hindu style of worship.

Chandi may be associated either with good fortune or with disaster. She has many auspicious forms: Mangal Chandi, who is generally worshiped in a pitcher without an image, and brings good fortune; Jai Mangal Chandi, who gives children; Harish Mangal Chandi, who brings joy to the household; Sankat Mangal Chandi, who frees people from dangerous situations; Uday Mangal Chandi, who brings marriage, riches, and children; Natai Chandi, who is worshiped with joy and recovers lost treasures or relatives; and Rana Chandi, who brings victory in war.¹⁸ However, she may also be a disease goddess, especially as Olai Chandi, the goddess of cholera. She has also been associated with plague, eye trouble, and cattle diseases. The goddesses reflect the pragmatic concerns of folk Hinduism, overcoming the fear involved in war, disease, and danger.

Chandi may also be invoked for both love magic and exorcism. Among the Savara people, Chandi is invoked by the shaman (*ojhā*) for the ritual of *dhuloparā*, the magical use of dust. The man who desires a woman gets the dust from her footsteps and brings it to the *ojhā*, who chants an incantation three times. The man then scatters the dust onto the woman, and she finds herself attracted to him. The *ojhā* chants:

Dust, dust, dust, queen of dust
O beloved one, listen to my words.
I have taken the dust of the path with three fingers
Very carefully, and with Mahamaya's blessings.
I will take this dust in my fingers
And I will scatter it on you
When you are at the market, or elsewhere.

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It will bind you to me, you will be mine forever.
By whose will? By the will of the goddess Kamakhya of Kanur.
By whose will? The goddess Chandi, the Hadi's daughter.
This dust will work quickly.¹⁹

In this invocation, the shaman and the man are linked—the chant by the *ojhā* is intended to benefit the man. He places a binding spell on the dust and it becomes magically powerful, so that the woman who receives the dust will fall in love with the man. The spell is believed to work because powerful goddesses are invoked to support the spell. These are Kamakhya, the Assamese tantric goddess associated with Kali, and Chandi, here described as the daughter of a low-caste person (thus sympathizing with lower-caste petitioners).

Chandi and Kali are also invoked as exorcism goddesses by the Savaras. The *ojhā* finds out who is possessing a person by looking into the water in a clay pitcher; it becomes a mirror where images of the supernatural are seen. After he sees the image, he performs a chant, listing the various possible entities who could be causing the trouble, and he exorcises the possessing entity in the names of Kali and Chandi.²⁰

Such approaches are often called witchcraft by more brahmanical Hinduism. The role of witchcraft has changed in recent years, gaining a greater political focus, and accusations of witchcraft have come to be used for political scapegoats. I saw several articles following the theme of an article in the newspaper *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, entitled “Three Women Beaten for ‘Witchcraft.’” Two young tribal girls and their mother were severely beaten by supporters of the CPIM (Communist Party of India, Marxist) in Midnapore district, and were hospitalized. They were members of a rival political group, the DYFI, who had protested against local communist leaders demanding a percentage of their wages. After an unsuccessful attempt at rape, and ordered ostracism by the village, the local CPIM leader had the women beaten for witchcraft.²¹ As is unfortunately the case in many countries of the world, accusations of religious misbehavior are often a cover for persecution with a more political and economic basis. This is an example of the negative way that politics and religion may interact. Most folk religion emphasizes worship and healing, rather than destructive action.

An example of living Bengali folk religion which contains brata rituals may be seen in the worship of the goddess Tushu.