Discipline: Social Anthropology

The Brahmans of the Kāmākhyā temple complex (Assam). Customary rights, relations with pilgrims and administrative power.

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29th April 2015
To Gabriella and Ignazio,

amazing parents.
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Introduction.

The Temple of the Goddess Kāmākhyā is situated in the present-day town of Guwahati, the capital of Assam and gateway to North-East India. The Temple stands on the Nilachal (nīlācala, the blue hill), whose northern slope ends in the mighty river Brahmaputtra. As well as the Kāmākhyā Temple, the Hill hosts about twenty minor temples, dedicated to Hindu Gods and Goddesses. This ancient pilgrimage site is considered by many Hindus to be among the most powerful śākta sanctuaries of India and daily receives thousands of pilgrims coming from different regions of South Asia. Around the Temple is a village, inhabited by the temples’ servants1 (Brahmans and non-Brahmans), who are collectively called Shebaits.

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1 I will use the term “Kamakhya Dham” to refer to the inhabited area of Nilachal, this choice reflecting the local usage. When writing “Kāmākhyā Temple” I will refer exclusively to the major Temple. With the expression “Kāmākhyā temple complex” I will refer to the whole constituted by the Kāmākhyā Temple and minor temples.
This thesis studies the Brahmans of the Kāmākhyā temple complex; and in particular the social, economic and political issues agitating the priestly community. My interest concerns all Brahmans active at the temple complex. This includes the Brahmans who, on the basis of their bloodline, hold hereditary rights over the temples of the complex, namely the Bardeuris who have exclusive rights over the Kāmākhyā Temple and the Nananbardeuris who have rights over the minor temples, as well as those Brahmans, who coming from outside the Nilachal, have no rights over any temple in the complex, but nevertheless work there. I analyse the logic that organizes and hierarchizes the wide range of activities restricted to Brahmans; the financial aspect of these activities; and the way Brahmans conceptualize and legitimize their activities and standing. The focus is not much on the rites themselves (either public or private). Rather it is on the social and economic relations – between Brahmans and pilgrims, among Brahmans themselves and between Brahmans and non-Brahmans - resulting from the performance of rites; it is also on the way different classes of Brahmans involved in the rites understand the significance of the activities they undertake and their relative positions, frequently in sharply diverging ways. My approach is similar to that of Parry. In the Introduction to Death in Banaras, the author sets out the premises of his work:

I have chosen to write both about the social organisation of death and about matters of ritual and belief. [...] I believe that my choice is justified not only by the obvious fact that death in Banaras consists of both aspects, but also by the fact that the two kinds of data are often difficult to disentangle.²

I am persuaded, in line with Parry, that it is not possible to put aside the ideas Brahmans hold regarding their and others’ activities while studying how these activities are allotted to them and remunerated.

The rights-holder Brahmans are basically involved in two sets of activities: those connected to the public worship and those connected to their relations with pilgrims and the private worship. Part I of the thesis analyses the former, while part II discusses the latter. In dealing with pilgrims, the rights-holder Brahmans delegate certain activities to the Brahmans from outside the Nilachal (chapter 6, § 6). Considering both the spheres of activity of the rights-holder Brahmans not only gives the most realistic image possible of what goes on in the temple complex, but also shows how the two spheres are tightly interconnected in many ways. For instance, as far as the legitimation of the Brahmans’ activities is concerned, it is precisely their rights in the public worship which entitle the Bardeuris and the Nananbardeuris to be involved in the relations with pilgrims and the private worship; and it is precisely this which excludes the outsider Brahmans from coming directly into contact with pilgrims.

Most importantly, considering both the Brahmans’ activities connected to the public worship and those connected to the private worship allowed me to analyse the relative significance of the two spheres at the level of concepts and at that of the practices undertaken by the Brahmans. The chapters of this thesis will show that a significant gap can be detected between the two levels.

The public worship is the only activity which (in theory) should be undertaken every day and is understood to be the essential activity of the temple complex. Only the Brahmans who have been initiated and trained can carry out the worship. On the other hand, at present the temple complex receives thousands of pilgrims every day; as will be shown, that has a profound impact on the internal organization and agency of the Brahman community. My approach, which stresses the influence exercised by the pilgrim influx on the Brahman community is comparable to that which Fuller (2003, chapter 2) employs in analysing the internal dynamics of the Brahman community of the Minākṣi Temple in Madurai (Tamil Nadu). One of the main tasks of this thesis will be to find out the specific ways in which the flow of pilgrims contributes to shaping new models of relationships between the Brahmans of the Kāmākhyā temple complex, to orientating the Brahmans’
choices and actions, and to creating significant economic differences among the Brahmans.

The Brahmans’ practices will be analysed, along with the discourses they hold about these practices and the way they interpret the quickly changing reality before their eyes. It emerges from fieldwork that the present situation is not viewed positively by everyone.

Part III of this thesis explores the role of the rights-holder Brahmans in the administration of the temple complex. A seventeen-year-old dispute concerning the administration of the temple complex is presently pending at the Supreme Court of India. The two opposing parties are: the Kamakhya Bardeuri Samaj, which is made up of the majority of the Bardeuris who defend their right to elect among themselves the Dalais (heads of the temple complex); and the Kamakhya Debutter Board (KDB) which includes a few Bardeuris, Nanabanbardeuris and non-Brahmans and affirms that all the Shebaits, irrespective of their caste, should be allowed to elect their representatives in a mixed committee which would also include the Dalais. The analysis of the rhetoric employed by the two opposing groups allows me to explore the way different actors answer the question whether the political sphere should be informed by ritual ranking among Brahmans and between Brahmans and non-Brahmans or not.

To sum up, my approach consists in considering at the same time the Brahmans’ activities connected to the public worship, those arising from their relations with pilgrims and their engagement in the politics of the temple complex. This provides the reader with an overall view of the Brahmans’ lives in the public sphere and gave me the chance to explore many different materials I collected in the field. Also, it allowed me to detect multifold interconnections among the different spheres of activity of the Brahmans. These interconnections will be elucidated in the chapters of the thesis that follow the lives of specific individuals.
The anthropological analysis is backed by my former Indological studies which have provided a solid basis for my understanding of contemporary Hinduism.

Although I tried to expand my viewpoint as much as possible, I chose not to take any dīkṣā (initiation) from any guru-line connected to the temple complex and I did not observe the tantric, secret rites reserved for initiates which take place in the temple complex. Throughout my fieldwork, I enquired about the secret practices and their significance from initiates and non-initiates and my findings are set out in chapter 2, § 3 and in chapter 6, § 4. The statements which I reported and analyse are not supported by observation. On the other hand, I am persuaded that people's opinions constitute substantial and significant data in the same way as and independently from observation. Thus, I restrict my analysis to people's statements, leaving aside the question of how close these affirmations are to reality. The same applies to chapter 5, § 1 and § 2, where I expose the opinions held by many pilgrims regarding Tantrism in general and what they imagine the tantric practices taking place in the temple complex to be like in particular.

Data were collected from 2011 to 2013 during four periods of fieldwork (twelve months in total). A former period of fieldwork of two months between 2008 and 2009 resulted in my M.A. thesis “La Dea Kāmākhyā e le donne della collina blu” (Goddess Kāmākhyā and the women of the Blue Hill). The text explores the Kamakhyan way of experiencing the pan-Indian concept of sakti; it does so through the analysis of the position females (Goddesses, real women and divinized female children) occupy in the religiosity of the Kāmākhyā temple complex.

While on fieldwork I invariably lived in the village which surrounds the Temple. During my first two periods of fieldwork my host was Himangshu Sarma. Himangshu is a pāṇḍā and lives with his joint family in an Assamese-

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3 I suspect that even if I was to take the superior and tantric levels of dīkṣā, as a single, young, Westerner woman I may not have been able to get access to the secret practices.

4 By this I do not mean to say that it is not useful to compare people's activities with what they say about these activities.
style house (which he recently started to renovate), less then three minutes away from the Temple. He has bought a piece of land from neighbours a few steps away from his house and built a concrete three-storey building, which he rents to pilgrims (see photos 21 and 22). I was living in this building and used to visit his house almost every day. The deal was that Himangshu would give me two meals every day. From my third period of fieldwork onwards I moved to Pramesh Sarma’s house, which is few steps away from Himangshu Sarma’s house. Pramesh Sarma is a doctor by profession and lives with his joint family in an Assamese-style house. He has also constructed a concrete building, attached to his house, and uses it for pilgrims (and for the anthropologist). These two men are the ones I know best in Kamakhya Dham; as they appear frequently in this thesis, the reader will become increasingly familiar with them as the thesis progresses.

Living in the village gave me the chance to form significant relationships with a number of priests and their families. It was sufficient for me to go to the Temple or to roam around in the village streets in order to meet people and chat with them. Since the thesis centres on priests, men, not women, are the main protagonists. I did indeed interact with priests’ families and women do appear in this thesis, but the priests themselves are my main concern. Many priests invited me to observe the rites carried out for their pilgrims. In the evening, they would spend quite a lot of their free time outside their houses, for example hanging out near a chai shop. That I would sit with someone I was familiar with did not provoke comment: as in every small village, people actually spend most of their free time chatting with each other. Kamakhyan women do not hang out near chai shops in the evening and basically do not mingle much with men. The fact that I am a Westerner and a PhD student allowed me to do so. I assume that if I had had a male partner, the men would have talked mainly to him, not to me. In other words, my relations with the priests would have been filtered by the male presence. But since I was always alone, this problem did not arise.

At the beginning of my fieldwork I used to ask the priests to sit for an interview. The majority of them refused. They felt uneasy at the very idea; it
was sufficient to pronounce the word "interview" to receive an embarrassed denial. Many priests told me that they were not knowledgeable enough to discuss religious matters and that I should talk to their guru. With the passage of time, I understood it was easier to catch hold of Kamakhyans around a chai or at the vegetable shop and ask them questions in an informal way. Also, many Kamakhyans invited me to their homes\(^5\) to have a chai and a snack, sometimes for a meal. Again, these situations gave the opportunity to chat to them, while they were in a relaxed mood. The “chai-method” – notwithstanding its catastrophic consequences on my physical fitness – turned out to be very useful in understanding how far particular ideas were shared by people.

I always bore in mind the relevant issues I wanted to inquire about and introduced into the conversations questions related to those issues. But at the same time, I tried to be open to information which emerged unexpectedly. When someone’s words aroused my curiosity, I kept asking the same question to many other people, to understand how many of them would express similar thoughts. The following example will hopefully clarify this point. I was on my first period of fieldwork and decided to extend it until the Ambuvācī-melā, the biggest festival of the temple complex, which takes place in June. When asked about my departure I used to say happily (my translation from Assamese): “I’ll stay up to the Ambuvācī-melā. I want to see it!” The invariable reply was: “It’s dirty, you’d better go before it starts”. The first time I heard such a reply I was petrified. I could not make sense of it. I kept inquiring about the festival, as it was approaching, and only received similar answers. Eventually I realized that Kamakhyans, males and females,

\(^5\)I have always been invited to enter Brahman and (non-Brahman) houses. Brahman women would take my hand and hug me. When invited for lunch or dinner I was usually served the meal along with the householder at the same table. I was invited to sit on sofas and beds while chatting and watching TV with Brahman women. Several Brahmans drank my coffee and a Brahman girl, a good friend of mine, even accepted food prepared by me. I sometimes happened to distribute to Brahman friends \textit{prasāda} from the Temple, which they accepted from my hand with no hesitation. On the other hand, Brahmans were very fastidious concerning menstruation restrictions. My two landladies openly asked me to inform them about my periods and explained me in detail what I should and should not do; other women in the neighbourhood also found it appropriate that I would follow rules related to menstruation.
Brahmans and non-Brahmans, share a feeling of disgusted discomfort regarding the masses of destitute pilgrims who flock to the temple complex for the festival and “make the place dirty”.

By contrast, in other cases I realized that there were no shared views regarding a certain fact. Knowing that the deodhāis (possessed-dancers) are all non-Brahman males, I started inquiring about this fact. At my question “Why do the Brahmans not get possessed?” my interlocutors looked puzzled. A Brahman woman told me (my translation from Assamese): “Brahmans have a different power (śakti). They do the pūjās”. A deodhāi told me with a smile on his face (my translation from Assamese): “If they get possessed, who would perform the pūjās for the people?” After a few words, my interlocutors would stop talking, looking right into my eyes, as if they wanted to say: “It’s like this and that’s it”. Eventually, I realized that the fact that Brahmans do not get possessed is not backed up by any shared idea; no myth explains it.

Using a voice-recorder frequently disturbed the spontaneity of my interlocutors, especially during unplanned conversations. Thus in many cases I did not use it, keeping in mind the most salient points of my interlocutors’ arguments; that is why throughout the thesis I will not always be able to quote the priests verbatim. However, notwithstanding everything I just said, I did conduct semi-structured interviews, using a voice recorder and taking notes and did extract significant data from them.

I chose not to have an assistant, because his/her presence would have inevitably filtered my relations with my interlocutors. Since the majority of people residing in Kamakhya Dham do not speak English, I have been studying Assamese since the first fieldwork period. The knowledge I now have of this language, although not complete, allows me to communicate comfortably about different matters both with the priests and their families. As other Indians do, Assamese-speaking Kamakhyan know and use a number of English words, which helped me a lot. My modest knowledge of Hindi helped me too. On the other hand, as my ability to express myself in Assamese progressed, many of my Kamakhyan friends were disappointed by
the fact that I would use Hindi words and provided me with the equivalent in Assamese.

Old people were frequently quite difficult to understand, because or their old-fashioned way of talking. Puzzled, I frequently asked the help of bilingual younger people. For this task, I selected young men and women who were in good relations with the person I was talking with (frequently, a relative). The request for help was made during the conversation itself in a colloquial, informal way. By using these tricks I tried to preserve the spontaneity of the on-going conversation.

Little by little I realized that my ability to express myself and to understand partly depended upon the way I was feeling with regard to my interlocutor. The more I felt at ease with someone, the more I would understand. For instance, I never had any communication problems with Himangshu Sarma, who is an Assamese-speaker. Throughout my fieldwork we spent a lot of time together and talked about many different matters, ranging from religion and philosophy, to personal and family matters. And I was always sure that I got what he wanted to say. We also shared jokes, which made both of us laugh sincerely. By contrast, it was much more difficult for me to carry out even a simple conversation with people I was not feeling entirely comfortable with. At the same time, I started to realize that a recurring element in Kamakyans’ postures is the absence of doubt. Kamakhyans usually treat any item of conversation - be it religious, social, political or even personal - from a single, dogmatic perspective. Being unaware of this tendency, while conversing with to Kamakhyans during my first periods of fieldwork, I used to express my thoughts from multi-faceted perspectives (as I am inclined to do). My words went unnoticed. With the passage of time I realized that if I wanted to convey any sort of message to Kamakhyans, I had to express myself as if I was taking it for granted that my interlocutor would immediately accept my statement. Put into practice, the new strategy was effective and resulted in more fruitful conversations.

I said that I learnt Assamese, but actually what I learnt and spoke was closer to the parlance of Kamakhya Dham. I first realized this when I was
invited to his house by one of the deodhāis (possessed dancers) of Goddess Kāmākhyā. This man lives in Guwahati, not far away from the Hill with his joint family. On that day a pūjā for the Goddess Kāmākhyā had been performed and we had all had delicious non-vegetarian prasāda (food offered to the deities and then distributed among people). I was sitting on the veranda of the house, chewing freshly cut betel nuts and chatting with some female relatives of the deodhāi. Suddenly the women started laughing out loud. Puzzled, I stared at them in search of some explanation. Without being able to stop laughing, one of them said (my translation from Assamese): “She speaks like someone from Kamakhya Dham!”.

... Assamese is written with the alphabet which is also used for Bengali. Each grapheme of this alphabet corresponds to a grapheme of the devanāgarī. I transliterate Assamese terms following their standard written form. As far as the oral language is concerned, Assamese pronunciation departs from that of Hindi on the following graphemes

- **a** is pronounced as [ɔ]; a good example is the second phoneme of the Italian word “*donna*”. This excludes the *a* in final position which is mute.
- **c** and **ch** are pronounced as [s]; i.e. the first phoneme of the English word “sun”.
- **y** is pronounced as [dʒ]; i.e. the first phoneme of the English word “jacket”.
- **ś** and **s** are pronounced as [x]; i.e. the first phoneme of the Spanish word “*joven*”.
- **kṣ** is pronounced as [kk]; i.e. the second phoneme of the Italian word “*accademia*”.
- **śv** is pronounced as [ʃ]; i.e. the first phoneme of the English word “shock”.

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6 These are the differences that I was able to detect. Further research may enrich the list.
For instance, *darśana* is pronounced as [dɔʳɔn] in Assamese, whereas in Hindi it is pronounced as [darʃan]. Kamakhyans are aware of this and alternate the two pronunciations according to the context: a *pāṇḍā* talking to Hindi-speaking pilgrims will say [darʃan].

... 

To the best of my knowledge, the existing literature on the Kāmākhyā temple complex either focuses on issues concerning religion and ritual or has a historic or textual orientation. In 1948 Bani Kanta Kakati, an Assamese scholar, published “The Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā. Or studies in the fusion of Aryan and primitive beliefs of Assam”. As the book's subtitle suggests, one of the author's main arguments is that items due to the religious life of the populations residing in North-East India, the so-called “tribals”, would have mingled with elements proper to Brahman orthodoxy to shape the singular form of Assamese Hinduism. In order to back up his ideas, he quoted a well-known passage from the Yoginī-tantra (*siddheśī yoginī pīthe dharmah kairātajah mataḥ*, 2/9/13) and affirms that the text “frankly confesses that the religion of the Yogini Pīṭha is of Kirāta origin (*ibidem*: 10)”. Disentangling “tribal” elements from the “vedic” ones has been one of the major preoccupations of the further literature on the Kāmākhyā temple complex and on Assamese religious life in general. With different nuances, the works of Bhattacharyya (1999), Goswami K. P. (1998), Urban (2001 and 2008), Mishra (2004), Ramasso (2007) and Shin (2010) subscribe to this idea. Paolo Eugenio Rosati, a PhD student of the Istituto Italiano di Studi Orientali (ISO, the same institute of the University of Rome “Sapienza” I am part of) is presently working on the way Brahman orthodoxy and local religions could have contributed to the formation of the image of the Goddess Kāmākhyā. By contrast, Deka (2004) strongly opposes these ideas, stressing the link between the Kāmākhyā temple complex and West Bengal.
Gioia Lussana, another PhD student of the ISO, is working on the religiosity of the Kāmākhyā temple complex with special reference to the tantric, esoteric side of the cult rendered to the Goddess.

Emilie Arrago-Boruah is writing her PhD thesis on the Kāmākhyā temple complex in Paris. This is her own description of her research axes.

My work examined the origins, development and spread of the cult of Kāmākhyā, a love goddess primarily worshipped in Assam. My research focused on representations of the body, kinship rituals and sexuality, religious anthropology, history and Assamese literature.

I consulted an article of hers (Arrago-Boruah 2008) regarding the symbolism of the kumārī-pūjā (worship of an immature girl), a recurrent rite in the Kāmākhyā temple complex.

Dold (2012) has written an interesting article on the nām (choral devotional singing restricted to women) and on its role in the descent of the deities into the deodhāis’ bodies on the days when the latter are possessed.

Overall, an account of the Brahmans of the Kāmākhyā temple complex previous to the present one does not exist.

In writing this thesis I accumulated a large number of debts. I wish to express my gratitude towards my supervisors, Gilles Tarabout and Raffaele Torella, who guided me in this journey. Daniela Berti read the thesis in its entirety and contributed fundamentally to its make-up. Véronique Bouillier and Catherine Clémentin-Ojha read some parts of the thesis and enriched them with their remarks. The University of Rome “Sapienza” granted me a three-year PhD fellowship which enabled me to undertake this work. In 2013 I received a four-month fellowship from the École Française d’Extrême Orient: I spent three months studying at its centre in Pondicherry and then proceeded to the field. In 2014 I was granted a six-month fellowship by the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst to study at the Social
Anthropology Department of the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University. Karin Polit and William Sax welcomed me in their department where I remained even after my fellowship was over. My stay at SAI gave me the chance to use its excellent library. I am indebted to Axel Michaels who gave me the opportunity to present some of my findings at the Indology Department of SAI. Throughout my PhD course, I received financial help to undertake fieldwork from the Laboratoire d’Ethnologie et de Sociologie Comparative (CNRS/Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense), the École Doctorale “Milieux, Cultures et Sociétés du Passé et du Présent” (Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense) and the Centre d’Étude de l’Inde et de l’Asie du Sud (CNRS/EHESS). In 2014 I spoke about part of my research at the Centre d’Études Hymalayennes (CNRS), which pushed me to renew the way I was looking at my data.

The unplanned conversations with colleagues I met in Rome, Paris, Pondicherry and Heidelberg significantly enriched the analysis of my ethnography. I wish to thank in particular Serena Bindi, Dominique Baur, Daniele Cuneo, Elisa Ganser and Patricia Junge who read various drafts of my thesis and patiently discussed them with me.

I am grateful to Liz Potter who corrected my English in a very careful way.

The debts I accumulated in Kamakhya Dham are enormous. A heartfelt feeling of gratitude links me to Himangshu Sarma and Pramesh Sarma and their families, who provided me with accommodation and made me feel at home in a place which was new to me. Deviram Das, Shivanath Das, Juli Debi, Manoj Kalita, Prabeen Kumar, Anupam Sarma, Bharati Prasad Sarma, Gautam Sarma, Hemen Sarma, Hemen Krishna Sarma and Moon Tamuli spent long hours with me and answered my endless questions. Although I cannot name all of them, I wish to extend my gratitude to all Kamakhysans and pilgrims who agreed to spend time with me. I am very much indebted to my friends Pomi and Romy Baruah who from time to time “kidnapped” me from Kamakhya Dham and showed me incredibly beautiful places in Assam.
Finally, I wish to thank my family and my friends who warmly supported me throughout the journey.
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The Goddess Kāmākhyā and Her Temple on the Nilachal.

1.1. The source.

“The Holy Shrine of Kamakhyā”, a booklet available in the shops surrounding the Kāmākhyā Temple, contains the following account. The author is Dharanikanta Sharma, a priest of the Temple.

The Hindu think that the Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar, stands for creation, preservation and destruction. The idea of trinity is quite significant and works at the root of all religious faiths and is naturally scientific. Brahma and Vishnu set to work but Maheswar lost Himself in meditation forgetful of the work allotted to Him. To rouse Him from His reverie of meditation, Brahma asked His faithful son Daksha to pray to the Supreme Deity for a
daughter worthy of being the spouse of Maheswar. Long years passed in meditation and the Almamater condescended to be born as such [as Daksa's daughter] at the condition that at the slightest neglect on Daksha's part, She will immolate Herself.

Daksha consented and Sati appeared as His daughter and eventually was married to Maheswar. Maheswar was quite indifferent to the world and lived with Sati in Kaśī, in Tibet, now under Chinese domination.

Years rolled on, Daksha intended to perform a Jajna [yajñṇa], a sacrificial rite to which all the deities except Shiva (Maheswar) were invited, as He [Śiva] was uncanny and weird in His movement. Sati somehow wrested His [Śiva's] permission to join the rite though not invited.

In the array of Deities in their dignified seats all were found seated. Daksha forgetful of the promise made to Sati began speaking ill of Shiva and Sati unable to bear all these ill words against [Her] husband Shiva, sacrificed Herself. The meditation of Shiva, who was omniscient was disturbed. He came there, destroyed the Jajna [yajñṇa, sacrifice] and took up the dead body of Sati on His shoulders and travelled the length and breadth of India, causing destruction to wherever He traced His steps. This concerned the creator and the preserver and Vishnu [in order] to bring Shiva to His senses, wanted to take away the dead body of Sati and ordered His wheel of death (Sudaršan Chakra) to do its duty. The different parts of the body of Sati were chopped off and fell to wherever Shiva went. Each became a sacred spot reminiscent of the divine decree. The private part of Sati (Jyoni Mondal) fell on the Neel Parvat (The Kamakhya Hills). The hills came to be known as Nilachal and [the] presiding deity as Kamakhya Debi (Golda) [sic.]

Throughout my fieldwork I have heard endless variants of Sati’s myth. Whenever I said that I was preparing a PhD dissertation on the Kāmākhya temple complex, Kamakhyańcs thought it was appropriate to tell me how Sati’s body got dismembered and Her yoni (vulva) fell on Nilachal. According to them the Hill is no less than Śiva’s body, which turned blue because of the contact with the divine organ. That is why, my interlocutors concluded, the

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7 Sharma 2010: 8-10.
Hill is called nilācala. All the narrators agreed that Satī’s body was dismembered into fifty-one pieces and that temples (piṭhas, seats [of the Goddess]) have been constructed on the places where these pieces fell.

Sircar shows that the myth of Satī consists of two different “layers”. Several texts narrate how Śiva destroyed Dakṣa’s yajña, after being insulted by the latter.

The earliest form of the legend of Dakṣa-yajña-nāśa [destruction of Dakṣa’s sacrifice] is probably to be traced in the Mahābhārata (XII, chapters 282-83; cf. Brahma Purāṇa, ch. 39) and a slightly modified form of the same story is found in many Purāṇas (Matsya, ch. 12; Padma, Srṣṭikhaṇḍa, ch. 15; Kūrma, i. ch. 15; Brahmāṇḍa, ch. 13, etc.) as well as in the Kumārasambhava (I, 21) of Kālidāsa, who flourished in the fourth and fifth centuries and adorned the court of the Gupta Vikramādityas.

According to this modified version of the legend, the mother-goddess, who was the wife of Śiva, was in the form of Satī one of the daughters of Dakṣa Prajāpati. Dakṣa was celebrating a great sacrifice for which neither Satī nor Śiva was invited. Satī, however, went to her father’s sacrifice uninvited, but was greatly insulted by Dakṣa. As a result of this ill-treatment, Satī is said to have died by yoga or of a broken hearth or, as Kālidāsa says, she put herself into the fire and perished [...]. When the news of Satī’s death reached her husband, Śiva is said to have become furious and hastened to the scene with his numerous attendants. The

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8 Sircar places these five Purāṇas before Kālidāsa, which raises some problem. Rocher (1986: 100-103) summarizes several diverging theories regarding the Purāṇas’ dates of composition. “The initial reaction was to assign late dates to the purāṇas generally [...] Wilson’s late dating was followed by Burnouf, Lassen, Macdonell”. Nevertheless, Rocher adds, “there are indeed those who believe that the purāṇas go back as far as the Vedic period [...] There seems to be a widespread agreement that the orginal purāṇas existed “long before the beginning of the Christian era” (Hazra and Mehendale quoted by Rocher). To this it should be added, with Rocher and Torella (personal communication), that the Purāṇas, like other Sanskrit texts, have been deeply modified throughout the centuries. Kantawala (quoted by Rocher) affirms that “one will have to assign separate dates to sections, chapters or even stanzas of the Purāṇas”.

9 Sircar (1948: 5-6) sees in the myth of Prajāpati committing incest with his own daughter - a myth contained in several Brāhmaṇaṣ - a precedent of the myth of Dakṣa insulting his daughter and son-in-law. I am of course unqualified to evaluate his thesis which in any case goes far beyond the present purpose.
sacrifice of Prajāpati Dakṣa was completely destroyed. Śiva, according to some sources, decapitated Dakṣa who was afterwards restored to life [with the head of a goat] and thenceforth acknowledged the superiority of Śiva to all gods.  

Śiva’s furious wandering and the dismemberment of Satī’s body constitute the second layer of the myth.

In still later times, probably about the earlier part of the medieval period, a new legend was engrafted to the old story simply for the sake of explaining the origin of the Pīṭhas. According to certain later Purāṇas and Tantras (Devībhāgavata, VII, ch. 30; Kālikā Purāṇa, ch. 18; etc.) Śiva became inconsolable at the death of his beloved wife Satī, and, after the destruction of Dakṣa’s sacrifice, wandered over the hearth in mad dance with Satī’s dead body on his shoulder (or, head). The gods now became anxious to free Śiva from his infatuation and made a conspiracy to deprive him from his wife’s dead body. Thereupon Brahman, Viṣṇu and Śani [Saturn] entered the dead body by yoga and disposed of it gradually and bit by bit. The places where pieces of Satī’s dead body fell are said to have become Pīṭhas, i.e. holy seats or resorts of the mother-goddess, in all of which she is represented to be constantly living in some form together with a Bhairava, i.e. a form [rūpa] of her husband Śiva. According to a modified version of this story, it was Viṣṇu who, while following Śiva, cut Satī’s dead body on Śiva’s shoulder or head piece by piece by his arrow or his discus.

Sircar reviews a number of texts, giving diverging lists of the places where the pieces of Satī’s body fell. The discrepancy among the texts represents a lack of “something like a recognized tradition.” The number and localisation of the pīṭhas in fact widely vary from text to text and even

10 Sircar 1948: 5-6.

11 Each of the fifty-one Goddesses is understood to have a male counterpart, a bhairava, which is a form of Śiva. The Goddess Kāmākhyā’s bhairava is Umānānda, whose ancient temple stands on a river island on the Brahmaputra.


13 Ibidem: 32.
within the same text: the *Kālikā-purāṇa*¹⁴, for instance, gives two lists, one pointing out four *piṭhas* (chapter 64, 43-45) and the other one seven *piṭhas* ¹⁵ (chapter 18, 42-51). Also, Sircar argues, remote and not very popular places were inserted in some lists, probably to satisfy the writer’s affection for his place of birth. Eventually, the tradition listing fifty-one *piṭhas*¹⁶ crossed the centuries and is the one broadly followed in India today. The Kāmākhyā temple complex is present in the majority of the lists and in the list of fifty-one *piṭhas*.

The sanctum of the Kāmākhyā Temple is a subterranean cave. It is a tiny chamber of some ten square metres, constantly illuminated by oil lamps. The idol of the Goddess is a spring: from a natural rock, furrowed by a long slit, water flows spontaneously. The rock filled with water is understood to be Sati’s *yoni*. During the daily morning services the idol¹⁷ is hidden by cloths; throughout the day pilgrims place flower garlands and other cloths on the idol. Thus the pilgrims entering the sanctum to get the *darśana*¹⁸ of the Goddess cannot actually see the idol and I had to conform to this. During my fieldwork I went to the sanctum some fifteen times, but never actually saw the idol. Shin gives a detailed description of the rock – I do not know whether she was able to see it or had it described to her by a Kamakhyan:

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¹⁴ The *Kālikā-purāṇa* is an Upapurāṇa, consisting of ninety chapters. According to some scholars (Mishra 2004: 20; Urban 2001, see below) it was redacted in Assam. Mishra divides it into three parts. The first part (chapters 1 to 51) "deals mainly with different forms of many deities". The second part (chapters 53 to 76) is devoted to the way *pūjā* is to be offered to different Goddesses, including Kāmākhyā. The third part (chapters 77 to 90) is devoted to different Assamese temples. For the proposed dates of the text see below.

¹⁵ Sircar 1948: 12 and 17.

¹⁶ The *Piṭhayāsa* section of the *Tantrasāra* (XVII century, Bengali author) gives a list of fifty-one *piṭhas*. This list is based on a preceding one (*Jñānārṇavatantra*, composed before the XVI century), giving fifty *piṭhas* - according to Sircar, the author of the *Tantrasāra* would have split one of the two *piṭhas* into two. The *Piṭhanirṇaya* or *Mahāpiṭhanirṇāpāṇa* (XVII-XVIII century, probably a section of *Tantracūḍāmaṇi*) kept the number of the *piṭhas* to fifty-one; its list, however, is independent from the preceding one. See Sircar 1948: 20-24.

¹⁷ "Idol" may not be the right term to indicate a rock, that is, a completely natural formation which has not been modified by any human intervention. However, the term "idol" will be used to avoid weighing down the text.

¹⁸ The term *darśana* literally means "sight, vision" (*vīḍrś, to see). It indicates the fact of seeing an idol in the temple concerned.
Inside the cave, there is a sheet of stone that slopes downwards from both sides, meeting in a yoni-like depression, some ten inches deep. This hollow is constantly filled with water from an underground perennial spring.19

Kamakhyans understand the terms garbhasthāna or garbhagṛha (sanctum), but rarely employ them in day-to-day parlance. Instead, they point out the sanctum by the term bhitarat, meaning “inside”. Bhitarat is also used either as an adverb or as a preposition in any other context to convey the meaning “in, inside, within”. (Bronson: 1867, s. v.). It should to be noted that it is only the sanctum which is called bhitarat, while the other chambers of the Temple have different names (see below). Clearly the sanctum is the innermost part of every temple, both symbolically and spatially.20 Also, the sanctum of the Kāmākhyā Temple is the only chamber of the Temple to be underground: it is inside the earth, so to say.21

Two more deities inhabit the sanctum: Kamalā and Mātaṅgī. Their idols are two natural rocks filled with water and are situated next to that of Kāmākhyā. Pilgrims doing darśana worship Kāmākhyā first and then Kamalā and Mātaṅgī. These Goddesses are included in the group of the Daśamahāvidyās (the ten great wisdoms, see § 4). Kamakhyans plainly affirm that Kamalā is Lakṣmī and Mātaṅgī is Sarasvatī; Sanskrit scriptures uphold the same idea. However, while Kamalā is pretty much close to Lakṣmī, in the

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19 Shin 2010: 5.
20 The Sanskrit term garbha refers to the womb as well as to the embryo. Michell (1977: 62) renders the term garbhagṛha as the “womb-chamber”, “a term indicating that here is contained the kernel and essence of the temple”. Kramrisch (1976: 161-165) stresses the significance of the absence of light in the garbhagṛha which has thick walls and only one door. “The darkness in the Garbhagṛha is a necessary condition for the transformation which is wrought in the devotee. In darkness his change is effected and a new life is attained”. The garbhagṛha is separate from the outside world; it is “independent of time and space”. This gives the garbhagṛha an essential firmness which the world lacks. Kramrisch affirms that garbha “which signifies the womb as well as the embryo in the microcosmic sense, denotes Prakṛti, primordial Substance, in its macrocosmic application”. The garbhagṛha stands to the outer world as the source of the manifested world stands to the latter.
21 It would be tempting to see a connection between the nature of the idol enshrined in the sanctum, the yoni of Goddess Satī, and the fact that Kamakhyans call the sanctum bhitarat. But with this assumption I am probably over-interpreting my interlocutors’ thoughts.
texts Mātaṅgī departs quite a lot from Sarasvatī. Mātaṅgī is said to be an outcaste and some texts prescribe offering Her food leftovers with unwashed hands. She is connected to pollution. Pleased by the devotee, She will grant him supernatural powers. I must immediately point out that I never heard any Kamakhyan depicting a similar image of Mātaṅgī. Also, Kamakhyans present non-vegetarian offerings to all Daśamahāvidyās, except to Kamalā and Mātaṅgī.

Kamalā and Mātaṅgī are believed to be the daughters of Goddess Kāmākhyā. Unlike their idols, which are in the sanctum of the Kāmākhyā Temple, the eight remaining Daśamahāvidyās have each a temple of their own. I have wondered for a long time about the location of Kamalā and Mātaṅgī's idols. One day I incidentally mentioned this in passing while talking to Doctor Mudagamuwe Maithirimurthi (Department of Indology, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University). He suggested that the three deities must have been set together in the sanctum of the Kāmākhyā Temple in accordance with the widespread triad formed by Kālī/Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī.

The three idols occupy almost half of the sanctum, whose pavement stands some thirty centimeters above the idols. During darśana pilgrims kneel down placing their head right on the edge of the pavement (that is, as near as possible to the idol) and stretch their right hand downwards to get the water and drink it. Pilgrims arriving at the sanctum and leaving it, as well as the priests, can only walk on the half of the chamber which is not occupied by the idols themselves. Indian crowds have the ability to squeeze themselves into incredibly small places: whenever I visited the sanctum, I saw at least some fifteen to twenty individuals there.

Kāmākhyā is pictured as a beautiful young female. She has six heads of different colours; one of them has been severed. She holds various weapons, a conch and a lotus. Her central left hand holds a bowl full of blood, while Her central right hand shows the abhaya-mudra (the gesture for dissolving fear).

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22 See Kinsley (1998).
23 In Bengal Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī are believed to be the daughters of Durgā.
She is dressed in a red sāṛhī and wears opulent jewels. She sits on a lotus which emerges from the navel of Śiva, who is lying on a lion. According to Kamakhyans, the lotus is Brahmā and the lion is Viṣṇu; thus Kāmākhyā stands on nothing less than the Trimūrti. On each side of Her stand Brahmā and Viṣṇu, who are usually depicted smaller in comparison with Her. In the temple complex no idol resembles this picture; on the other hand posters on sale in the shops surrounding the Temple portray this image.

Kāmākhyā is understood to be a form of the Mahādevī: She is one with Parvatī, Kālī, Durgā, etc. As a young Brahman put it: “Kāmākhyā is a nickname”. At the same time Kamakhyans and pilgrims understand Goddess Kāmākhyā, the particular form of Mahādevī set on the Nilachal, to be extremely powerful. That the Temple enshrines no less than Śatī’s yoni, the organ of sexuality and generation, is the reason for its greatness. I have been told that visiting the Kāmākhyā Temple is equal to visiting all other pīthas. Kamakhyans affirm that if Śatī’s yoni was not to fall on the Nilachal, the srṣṭi (“emission”, “creation” of the Universe) would not have taken place; the Universe would not have come into existence. Like other Hindu Goddesses, She is called jagat-mātā (mother of the Universe) and mā (Mother). When talking to me Kamakhyans indicate the Goddess as “Kāmākhyā Debī”, “Mā Kāmākhyā” or simply as “Mā”. To satisfy my curious questions, Himangshu Sarma, one of the two priests, who was my landlord, said the following (my translation from Assamese):

A mother will take special care of her most naughty child: “He may fall down! He may get hurt!” She’ll take care of him. Do you remember when you were a child? Wasn’t your mother taking care of you? So, it’s the same.

Talking about the Goddess a deodhāi (possessed-dancer) told me that She is jagad-janani (mother or genetrix of the Universe). In saying so he stretched out his hands, a gesture signifying unrestrained acceptance. He stood silent for few seconds, in absolute awe. Then, he looked right into my
eyes; the bright expression on his face was saying: “what else can I add to this?” Then he went on (my translation from Assamese):

This is all Mā’s play [Māyer līlā]. Not ours. Today I had food, it’s Her play. Where will I eat? Where will I go? How will you people shoot your movie [at that time my friend Alessandro and I were shooting a documentary on the deodhāis]? It’s all in Her hands. What do we know? Nothing. What do you think? Do we know anything? We don’t.

Kamakhys plainly affirm that whatever happens in their lives and in everyone else’s life is only due to the Goddess. A wealthy Kamakhyan told me: “All I have is due to Her”. The idea of an almighty Goddess implies that even the bad in humans’ lives is somehow due to Her; indeed Kamakhys seem to be aware of this implication. After telling me at length about some problem affecting him and his dear ones, a priest concluded: “Māyer līlā”. While saying so, his face, which had been contracted in a disconsolate expression throughout the narration, relaxed. His feeling - as far as I could understand it - was that of acceptance: the Goddess’s inscrutable will can result in weird twists and turns in humans’ lives, but that does not at all diminish Her standing in the devotee’s eyes.

“Kāmākhyā” can be conveniently translated as “She who is called Desire” (kāma or kāmā + ākhyā). The Kālikā-purāṇa openly refers to the Goddess’s sexuality:

Because the goddess has come to the great mountain Nilakūṭa to have sexual enjoyment with me [Śiva], she is called Kāmākhyā, who resides there in secret24.

The Hindu Goddess, conceived as a loving mother, has also an antinomic side, strongly linked to transgressive sexual behaviour. The conception of a sex-seeking Goddess is of course coherent with the idea that

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24 This translation is provided by Urban (2008: 1). According to him the relevant passage is contained at the very beginning of chapter 62.
the Temple enshrines Sati’s vulva. However, I must immediately point out that I never heard any Kamakhyan making any affirmation regarding the Goddess’s sexuality. As I tried to show, Kamakhyans stress the faculty of motherhood and the quality of benevolence in the Goddess. On the other hand, I suspect that the idea of the Goddess’s transgressive sexuality may be at the core of tantric rituals for initiates. All this is also reminiscent of maithuna, namely the sexual intercourse conducted during tantric, secret rituals. I want to clarify that here I do not intend to make statements regarding the practices taking place during secret rituals; as sais in the Introduction, I chose not to take any initiation and never attended any ritual for initiates. Instead, here I am dealing with the way the Goddess’s image is constructed and communicated. To sum up, during the daytime an extremely powerful, somewhat capricious, but always benevolent Mother Goddess is put forward. I assume that a more dangerous, sexually voracious Goddess may be venerated during tantric rituals (see chapter 6, § 4).

Kakati explains the name “Kāmākhyā” in the following way:

...it may be suspected that the formation Kāmā in Kāmākhyā is of extra-Aryan origin. There is a strong suggestion of its correspondence to Austric formations like the following: Kamoi, Demon; Kamoit, Devil; Komin, Grave; Kamet, Corpse (Khasi); Kamru, a god of the Santals (B. Kakati: Assamese, Its Formation and Development; 1941; p. 53)27.

My modest knowledge of linguistics is sufficient to tell me that morphological similarity between two words is not a sufficient basis to establish a relation between them.

Before proceeding, a clarification regarding the term “Kamakhyan” is appropriate. By this term (introduced by me), I refer to the individuals who

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25 When narrating the myth of Satī, Kamakhyans of all ages and of both genders do not pronounce words like “vagina” or “vulva” and look quite embarrassed at that point of the narration. They usually find a way out, employing expressions like “the intimate parts” or “that part”.

26 Under British rule the Santals of Chhotanagpur were forced to migrate to Assam and settle there in order to work in the tea gardens.

27 Kakati 1948: 40.
live in Kamakhya Dham in what they understand to be their ancestors’ houses. Some Kamakhyaans had replaced their ancestors’ house with a new building. Others, due to family splitting, have left their ancestors’ house – where relatives reside - and constructed a new building for themselves in Kamakhya Dham. In other words, the term includes those people who live in Kamakhya Dham and feel that they belong to it. The question behind this category is “Ghar kat āche?” (Where is your house?) The use of this category raises two main problems. First, are the children of Kamakhyaans who moved to town themselves Kamakhyaans? It is noteworthy that these people, when asked “Ghar kat āche?” usually gave me a complex answer, pointing out both the place where they actually reside and the house in Kamakhya Dham, which they believe to be their ancestors’ house. To clarify the point further, usually these people named their relatives living in that particular house, asking me whether I was acquainted with them or not. These people continue coming to Kamakhya Dham from time to time, especially when a saṁskāra or a pūjā is performed in their ancestors’ house. As fieldwork was done almost exclusively in Kamakhya Dham, these people rarely appear in the following pages. Bharati Prasad Sarma, one of the individuals I will extensively quote, belongs to this group. His words will show the relevance of residence in the building of identity (see chapter 7).

A second problem arises concerning those people who live permanently in Kamakhya Dham, but do not understand themselves to be originally from there; in the majority of cases this category includes poor people. For instance, I know a Nepali man who lives in Kamakhya Dham with his family and runs a tiny chai shop near the western door of the Temple campus. Everyone understands him to be a Nepali – as he does himself - and sadly many full-right Kamakhyaans have quite a snobbish attitude towards him. He is always to be found in his shop – “hut” would probably be a more appropriate term, actually – preparing chai, chapatis, mixed vegetables and vegetable cutlets (the four items in his menu). Only once during my fieldwork did I find his shop closed; he had gone to Nepal, I was told. His children are growing up in Kamakhya Dham. His eldest daughter – some nine years old at
the time of writing – is always to be found in the Temple campus, along with other poor female children. They are frequently summoned by priests, when a *kumārī-pūjā* (worship of an immature girl) is to be performed. Now, are this man and his family Kamakhyans? I chose to include them and other people sharing a similar situation in the term “Kamakhyans”, on the basis of their residence.

1. 2. **The Temple and its antiquity.**

After telling how Sati’s *yoni* fell on the Nilachal, “The Holy Shrine of Kamakhya” narrates how the Temple was constructed by Kāma:

Brought back to His senses after the disappearance of the dead body [Sati’s dead body], Maheswar returned to the impassable part of the Himalayas to be lost in meditation.

The Demon Tarakasur, the unconquerable, emboldened by the boon of Brahma after long meditation and piety began to tread the sacred land [India] like a colossus, causing destruction everywhere. Dismayed at this, the deities tried to arouse Mahadev from His reverie and to make Him worldly minded. In the meantime Menaka, the wife of the Himalayas, propitiated Mahamaya, another self of the Alma-mater to obtain a daughter. This daughter Parvati dedicated Herself to Mahadev to get Him as Her consort. Maheswar could not be roused from His reverie. The deity Kamdeva with His wife Rati tried level best to perform His duty [that is, to break Śiva’s meditation and to convince Him to marry Pārvati]. Mahadev was roused, but the light, that emanated from His brow turned Cupid [Kāmadeva] to ashes and Mahadev came to His senses and left the place of meditation.

Parvati could not be dissuaded, She was bent on having Mahadev, who was Her lord in [Her] previous birth [as Sati]. [...] the marriage was
[eventually] brought about. At the plight of Rati, by the grace of Mahadev, out of the ashes of Kamdev came out Kamdev Himself but, alas!, His former beauty and grandeur were gone. Bereft of former beauty both husband and wife [Kāmadeva and Rati] prayed long to Mahadev for restoring to Kamdev His former beauty. Mahadev becomes easily pleased by the adoration of the devotees, goes the adage. At last Kamdev got back His former status after performing the sacred duty of unearthing the sacred spot [the place where the yoni fell on Nilachal], one of the fifty-one to be found all over India. He erected a magnificent temple over the spot with the help of the divine builder Biswakarma, the God of Vulcan. As Kamdev got back His beauty there, the place came to be known as Kamrup Kamakhya28.

This is another myth Kamakhyans love to narrate. At the question “Who built the Temple?” many Kamakhyans will answer with no hesitation “Kāmadeva”, adding that He had been helped by Viśvakarmā. A beautiful statue of Viśvakarmā, mounted on His elephant, stands near the northern gate of the Temple (see photo 7). With a humorous smile on his face, a priest once told me that Viśvakarmā is the “engineer” of the Gods.

The first part of this narration, ending with the rebirth of Kāma from His ashes, constitutes a well-known pan-Indian myth. Doniger (1973: chapter 5) reviews several variants of the myth, contained in the Mahābhārata and in various Purāṇas. In the variants she analyses, however, there is no allusion to the ugliness of Kāma rising from His ashes29. Instead, the Kālikā-purāṇa and the Gopatha-brāhmaṇa contain references to this element30. It is tempting to assume that the well-known myth has been adapted in order to explain the foundation of the Temple. Kamakhyans affirm that since Kāma regained His form (rūpa) in Assam, the region has been henceforth called “kāma-rūpa”.

28 Sharma 2010: 10-12.
29 According to Doniger (1973: 157), the Śiva-purāṇa (2. 3. 51. 1-14) affirms that “from the ashes Kāma appeared, smiling, bearing the scar on the place where the fire of Śiva’s anger had entered him”. Doniger does not feel the need to elaborate on this point. Also, the scene described in the Śiva-purāṇa is far milder than Kamakhyans’ elaborations on this point: according to them reborn Kāma was really unpleasant.
The Temple, some fifty meters in length and ten meters in breadth, consists of four chambers, aligned from East to West: the sanctum, the *calantā*, the *pañcaratna* and the *nāṭa-mandira*. The sanctum is the easternmost part of the Temple; it is accessible only from the communicating chamber, the *calantā*. The latter’s name (Sanskrit *calat*, “walking, moving”) is due to the fact that this chamber contains the movable idols of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī (the God and the Goddess of desire). Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī are understood to be Śiva and Śakti. Two tiny statues, made out of different metals, are placed on a huge, massively decorated silver throne. The statues, which face west, are usually almost completely covered with cloths and flower garlands. Only the face of the Goddess emerges from the flowers, wearing a blissful smile.

The internal walls of the *calantā* host several stone bas-reliefs, representing various deities. On its northern side, the *calantā* communicates with a tiny room, leading to the north gate; on the eastern side, it communicates with the sanctum, via some steps. To the South it opens onto with a tiny corridor, leading to the *bhoga-ghar*, the kitchen of the Temple. I have been told that the *bhoga-ghar*, now a concrete building, was only a hut made of perishable materials beforehand. On the west side the *calantā* communicates with the next chamber, called *pañcaratna* (the five gems). Mishra (2004: 164) asserts the name *pañcaratna* “to be based on the

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31 It is forbidden to take photos and to shoot inside the Temple and, out of respect for this rule, I never tried to do so. In the absence of images, the map of the Temple is intended to help in understanding the way pilgrims and priests circulate in the Temple.

32 Hemen Sarma, priest of the Kāmākhyā Temple (see chapter 2), named the bas-reliefs of the *calantā* one by one, starting from the south-eastern corner of the chamber. The south-eastern corner hosts five bas-reliefs: Maṅgala Caṇḍi, Kali Avatāra, Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhira, Rāmā Candra and Baṭṭuka Bhairava. After crossing the door leading to the *bhoga-ghar*, on the southern wall itself there is a bas-relief depicting Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu). On the western wall of the *calantā* there are four bas-reliefs: king Naranārāyaṇa of the Koch Bihar dynasty (see below) and Annapūrṇā, Gurū Dronācārya and king Cilārāy (king Naranārāyaṇ’s brother). Between Annapūrṇā and Gurū Dronācārya there is the door leading to the *pañcaratna*. The northern wall of the *calantā* hosts four bas-reliefs. Nilakaṇṭha Mahādeva, then Nandi and Bhrūṇgi, the Goddess’s “security-guards” (in Hemen Sarma’s words), who guard, one on each side, the northern gate and finally Kapila (or Jaratkāra) Muni with Manasā.
typical architectural pattern of its roof33, which is surmounted by five domes33 (see below). Kamakhyans tend to designate by the name “nāṭa-mandira” not only the forth chamber of the Temple, but also the third one, namely the pañcaratna. However, I will conform to the convention adopted by Mishra – which allocates two different names to the third and the forth chamber – because it helps identify the chambers without confusion.

In the very centre of the pañcaratna stands the stone statue of Manasā, Goddess of the cobras. Worshipped mainly in Eastern India, Manasā is said to be the daughter of Śiva, born from His semen. Kamakhyans (as well as Bengalis) insist that Pārvatī became jealous when this young girl was brought to Her house and did not accept Her; at the hands of Pārvatī, Manasā eventually lost Her left eye. Manasā’s myth can be summarized as follows. Cāndo, a rich merchant, refused to worship Her; the angry Goddess sent cobras to kill all the sons of the merchant; Lakhindar, the youngest son, was killed on the very day of his wedding. At that, the unfortunate bride, Beula, embarked in a long journey in non-human worlds and eventually was able to make the two ends meet: Manasā resuscitated Lakhindar and his brothers and Cāndo agreed to worship the Goddess. Variants of this myth are contained in the Maṅgala-kāvyas, medieval Bengali poems. According to Bhattacharya:

Dans leur ensemble, les maṅgalkāvyas peuvent se lire comme des tentatives pour introduire dans la théogonie hindoue des hautes castes des divinités intéressant au premier chef les couches populaires de la société. Les poètes s’efforcent de les mettre en valeur en leur donnant une origine qui leur rattache aux grands dieux et à leur mythologie. Ils montrent aussi l’extraordinaire puissance qu’elles exercent sur les humains34.

Also, Bhattacharya highlights nicely the image of the jealous Pārvatī:

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34 Bhattacharya 2007: xiv.
Elle [Caṇḍī ou Pārvatī] veut maintenir [Mānasā] dans les mondes aquatiques où vivent les nāga sur lesquels on lui a accordé le contrôle. Elle lui refuse l’entrée dans la société des dieux supérieurs et l’en disqualifie en l’éborgnant [...]. Elle lui donne un vêtement grossier et trop court qui ne lui permet pas de se présenter devant les autres divinités\textsuperscript{35}.

According to Bouez, Mānasā is “the scape-goat of the bad side of the Bengali goddess-mythology\textsuperscript{36}”. I do not entirely subscribe to his thesis: a fierce, dangerous Goddess, linked to marginal areas (the mountain) and marginal people (women, Muslims, low castes), She is also connected to the lotus, a universally positive symbol throughout Hinduism. Also, She both kills and gives life back. Smith summarizes Her ambiguous figure well:

Mānasā is both a folk goddess and a textual deity, she is worshipped by non-Hindu tribal people as well as by Brahmans, she is celebrated in a few purāṇas and completely ignored in many maṅgal poems; her myth is a complex blend of Sanskrit and popular elements and while written, meant to be sung, not read. Apparently an ancient figure, Mānasā seems sharply circumscribed in both time and space: there are no unambiguous references to her older that the present millennium and her cult seems confined to parts of eastern India\textsuperscript{37}.

“Mānasā” concludes Smith “remains very much a puzzle”. What is relevant for the present purpose is that all this does not seem to be there in Kamakhys’ minds. Mānasā is not thought to be some marginal, secondary deity - She is second to Kāmākhyā, but every divine being inhabiting Nilachal is second to Her. Indeed, the fact that Mānasā’s statue is in the Temple itself is an indication of Her importance\textsuperscript{38}.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibidem}: xvii.
\textsuperscript{36} Bouez 1991: 150.
\textsuperscript{37} Smith 1980: 7.
\textsuperscript{38} According to Chittattukalam (2002 : 57) the Koch Bihar kings contributed in spreading the cult of Mānasā in Assam. On the cult of Mānasā in Assam see also Neog (1984, chapter 5).
The *pañcaratna* also hosts the stone statue of the Goddess Cāmuṇḍā\(^{39}\), which is adjacent to the Southern wall of the chamber. Like the idols of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī, Manasā and Cāmuṇḍā “look” westwards - the sanctum too is open towards the West\(^{40}\). The throne of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī and the statue of Manasā are in line with each other: these idols, occupying the centre of their respective chambers, are situated on the central East-West axis of the Temple, in correspondence with the doors. In the *pañcaratna* the statue of Manasā is worshipped far more by pilgrims than the statue of Cāmuṇḍā; oil lamps burn for Her (Manasā) and a Shebait (servant of the Temple, see below) invariably sits in front of the idol to dispense *sindūra* to pilgrims and ask donations from them.

The westernmost and biggest chamber is the *nāṭa-mandira* (the temple of dance); it is so called so because the last stage of the *deodhāni* dance\(^{41}\) takes place in this chamber. The latter’s eastern wall hosts two huge bas-reliefs depicting Durgā, which do not receive any daily cult. The western wall of the *nāṭa-mandira* is in the shape of a semi-circle.

As far as the circulation of pilgrims is concerned, the Temple is divided into two halves: the sanctum and the *calantā* on one side and the *pañcaratna* and the *nāṭa-mandira* on the other. This is due to the fact that the door between the *calantā* and the *pañcaratna* is blocked by an iron grill,

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\(^{39}\) It should be noted that although I call them "statues", Manasā and Cāmuṇḍā’s idols may have been bas-reliefs, like the ones in the *calantā*. A number of pieces of the ancient stone temple constructed by Koch Bihar kings (XVI\(^{th}\) century, see below) have been adapted in the most recent part of the present Temple, built under the Ahoms. At present Manasā’s idol “functions” as a statue, that is, it is not embedded in any wall.

\(^{40}\) In Hinduism East is considered as auspicious; according to Kramrisch (1976: 91-95) it is “the quarter of the gods”. North too is auspicious and North-East is “the most auspicious of the intermediate regions”. By contrast West and South are unfortunate; South is linked to Yama, the God of death. West, according to Kramrisch, is guarded by Varuṇa who is “the power of darkness” and “the dreadful form of Agni [God of fire]” and His evil acolytes. Reiniche (1985: 79) affirms that in Tamil Nadu Śiva temples the sanctum containing the *liṅgam* is usually open towards the East. In some temples, however, the sanctum is open towards the West: “ cette inversion par rapport à la position usuelle indique, semble-t-il, que la divinité est alors dotée d’un pouvoir spécial (lorsqu’elle fait face à l’est, elle est « bienveillante »)“. The reasons behind the westward orientation of the sanctum and the idols of the Kāmākhya Temple are unclear. It should be noticed that some minor temples too are opened westwards, like the Chinnamastā temple and the nearby Śiva temple, while others are open to the South, like the Kāli temple and the Tārā temple.

\(^{41}\) On the *deodhāni* dance see chapter 2, § 3 and chapter 5, § 4.
permanently locked. Five different queues lead pilgrims right into the *calantā* and, from there, into the sanctum. These two chambers are almost always crowded with pilgrims waiting in line. By contrast pilgrims can freely enter the *nāṭa-mandira*, without waiting in any queue. From the *nāṭa-mandira* they go to the *pañcaratna*, which has no independent gate. From there pilgrims peep through the iron grill to have a glimpse of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī. The *pañcaratna* and the *nāṭa-mandira*, freely accessible, are usually less crowded. The *nāṭa-mandira*, being a comparatively big, empty chamber, hosts various activities, taking place at the same time. *Pāṇḍās*, whose pilgrims want to perform a *kumāri-pūjā*, frequently make arrangements for the rite to be performed in the *nāṭa-mandira*. Groups of people engaged in the recitation of sacred scripts often sit there to perform the recitation. Pilgrims keep passing through it to get to the *pañcaratna*; those who just had *darśana* sit down to relax and chat freely to each other. To sum up, in the sanctum and in the *calantā* the individual desires to get close to the divine frequently become much more competitive with each other, in comparison with what happens in the *pañcaratna* and the *nāṭa-mandira*.

The huge sixteen-sided brick dome of the Temple surmounts the sanctum. A four-sided sloping structure surmounts the roof of the *calantā*. As stated above, the roof of the *pañcaratna* is surmounted by five domes, the central one being the largest (see photos 3 and 4). A two-sided sloping roof surmounts the *nāṭa-mandira*.

The dome on top of the sanctum stands on a circular stone structure, whose outer walls are decorated by beautiful bas-reliefs, depicting Yoginīs and Bhairavas (see below), the Goddess’s retinue. Smaller four-sided domes surmount the bas-reliefs. A skirting decorated with lotus’ petals runs around the circular structure. The Goddess’s retinue consists of eighteen Bhairavas and sixty-four Yoginīs (who are worshipped during the daily morning rituals). Bhairava is usually understood to be the frightful, furious form of Śiva or the chief of the God’s host (for the last meaning see Monier-Williams).

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42 See chapter 6, § 2.

43 On its top stands a statue of an animal – it could be a lion, or a dog, for instance. I have been told that it is a lion, allegedly the symbol of the Ahoms.
The term yoginī is rendered by Monier-Williams (ibidem: s.v.) as “a female demon or any being endowed with magical power, a fairy, witch, sorceress”. In Tantrism the term has a wider sense and designates either the forms of a certain Goddess or Her retinue of female deities, without there being a precise distinction between these two meanings. Padoux affirms what follows in his book on the Yoginī-hṛdaya (the Hearth of the Yogini", a tantric text probably composed in Kashmir after the XI³ century):

Tripurasundarī [the supreme Goddess and supreme reality] is seen as the first of the Yoginīs, presiding over their activities. They issue from her in hierarchical order, reflecting and transmitting her power on all planes of the cosmos and fulfilling the functions allotted to them, but as YH, 3.194 says, “in truth, it is the Goddess herself who plays her cosmic game in the guise of these deities”: they are aspects (rūpa) of her.

To this Padoux adds that:

In the tantras and in the purāṇas, the Yoginī usually number 64, a number often understood as eight time eight, that is, eight times the aṣṭamāṭrkās[^45] [“the Eight Mothers”, another group of female deities].

The present circular structure bears some ten bas-reliefs of Bhairavas and only one Yoginī. The Temple, first built in the XVI³ century, has been modified several times (see below); it may be assumed that at some time in the past there were eighteen bas-reliefs depicting Bhairavas and sixty-four depicting Yoginī. But there is nothing to prove this assumption. On the other hand, today huge stone bas-reliefs (depicting both male and female figures) lie scattered here and there on the Nilachal.

At the southern convergence between the round structure and the calantā wall there is a bas-relief depicting Gaṇeṣa (the elephant-headed God, son of Śiva and Parvati, see photo 1), smeared with sindūra – red power

[^45]: Ibidem.
utilised in rituals; its brilliant red tone cannot but catch the eye of the passing pilgrim. Pilgrims rush to the bas-relief of Gaṇeṣa, donating money, flowers and sweets. In the evening I sometimes happened to see a mouse (the God’s vehicle!) coming out from a hole in the wall and quickly stuffing itself with sweets. Unlike the bas-relief of Gaṇeṣa, those of Yoginis and Bhairavas receive hardly any worship.

As stated above, a number of stone bas-reliefs and other parts of the ancient stone Temple are scattered here and there on the Hill. Some of them have been embedded in the outer wall of the nāṭa-mandira. Only one is worshipped: on the northern exterior wall a stone bas-relief depicts a pregnant female - a woman or a Goddess? - in the position of giving birth (see photo 5). The figure is naked, wearing a crown and jewels. Sindūra is smeared on the bas-relief, adding to its impressive beauty. It is worshipped by some priests and pilgrims; I once observed a priest blessing himself with the sindūra taken from the figure’s forehead and vulva. Other stone bas-reliefs ended up in private houses and are worshipped. Some of these beautiful pieces of art have been recently collected in a museum (see § 3 and photo 8), while other ones unfortunately lie abandoned, exposed to the inclement Assamese weather.

Scholars agree that the first temple for the Goddess Kāmākhyā was built in the first half of the XVIth century by king Viśva Siṅgha of Koch Bihar. “A man of unusual enterprise and courage”, he annexed the lower Brahmaputra valley and embraced Hinduism. Once he had established his rule, the Brahmans working at his court forged an outstanding genealogy for him: Viśva Siṅgha was no less than a descendant of Śiva Himself. The Temple built by him was soon destroyed, the causes being debated by scholars.

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46 This rapid survey of the Temple history is based on the following authors. In 1906 Gait, a retired employee of the Indian Civil Service, published his “A History of Assam”, which is considered one of the most reliable digests of the region’s history; I also used Baruah’s “A Comprehensive History of Assam” which was probably first edited in 1985; Bagchi’s (1980) rapid sketch of the Temple history provides some interesting hints, which are not to be found elsewhere. I also consulted Acharyya (2003 and 2007).
47 Gait 2008: 49.
48 According to Gait (ibidem: 55), the Temple built by Viśva Siṅgha was destroyed, together with many other Hindu sanctuaries, by Kālā Pāhār, the general of Sulaimān Kararānī, ruling
His two eldest sons, Naranārāyaṇa and Cilārāy, inherited the kingdom (after expelling a third brother), rebuilt the Temple for the Goddess Kāmākhyā and inaugurated it in 1565. They summoned Brahmans to worship the Goddess and gave them land grants in Assam. In the *calantā* there are two bas-reliefs, depicting the two royal brothers; an inscription extols them. According to Gait, at the grand inauguration of 1565, no less than one hundred and forty men were sacrificed and their heads offered to the Goddess. Naranārāyaṇa and Cilārāy ruled jointly over the lower Brahmaputra valley from the 1540 up to the 1580s and annexed nearby areas; to safeguard their rule they resisted at the same time the Muslim chiefs coming from Bengal and the Ahom kings had been settled in Upper Assam since the XIIIth century and aimed at extending their power over the lower portion of the valley. The Koch Bihar dynasty, however, did not last long. Naranārāyaṇa and Cilārāy’s heirs opposed each other and the kingdom was split into two halves. Sensing an opportunity to conquer Lower Assam, three forces intervened in the hostilities: the Ahoms from Upper Assam, the Mughals from Delhi49 and the Muslim chiefs from present-day Bengal and Bangladesh. Eventually in the 1650s, the Ahoms took hold of Lower Assam.

The Ahom dynasty originated in Mong Mao, a princely state situated in the present Yunnan region of China, on the border with Burma. At the beginning of the XIIIth century Sukhapha, the younger brother of the inheriting prince, left the state accompanied by an army: he wanted a kingdom for himself. He crossed the Patkai mountains, dividing present-day Burma from India, and ended up in what is now Nagaland. Having ferociously subjugated the populations living on those mountains, he headed to the plains. In the 1220s he entered the upper Brahmaputra valley and established his capital in Charaideo (nearby present-day Sibsagar) in 1253.

49 According to the *Ain-i-Akbari*, Naranārāyaṇa had repeatedly demonstrated his obedience to Delhi. See Gait 2008: 56.
The dynasty founded by him would eventually rule over the Brahmaputra valley and nearby territories for no less than six hundred years. In the course of time the Ahom kings embraced Hinduism and adopted Hindu names (along with their original ones). Like the Koch Bihar kings, they were provided with an outstanding genealogy by the Brahmans active at their court: Sukhapha, it was affirmed, was a descendant of Indra and a low-caste woman.

In 1681 the Ahom king Gadādhar Siṅgha ascended the throne. He became a śākta, namely a devotee of Śakti or Mahādevī, the great Goddess; and persecuted the powerful leaders of the sect founded by the vaisnava saint Śaṅkaradeva in the XV\textsuperscript{th} century. His reign resulted in a turning point in the history of the Kāmākhyā temple complex: Gadādhar Siṅgha’s heirs were śākta too and extended royal patronage to the temple complex. The ancient Kāmākhyā Temple was modified and several new minor temples were built; Brahmans were summoned to take care of the temples and given generous land grants by the monarchs. Gadādhar Siṅgha’s son, Rudra Siṅgha summoned Kṛṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭācarya, a śākta Brahman, living in West Bengal (Nadia District) to Assam, in order to be initiated by him. The famed Brahman agreed to go to Assam, but requested to be put in charge of the Kāmākhyā temple complex. The king at first agreed to the Brahman’s request, but changed his mind soon afterwodes; at that point Kṛṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭācarya headed back to Bengal and meanwhile the king died. His son, Śiva Siṅgha, eventually persuaded Kṛṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭācarya to return to Assam and was initiated by him. Kṛṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭācarya was given control over the Kāmākhyā temple complex.

It is not clear how much of the present Temple is due to the Koch Bihar kings and how much to the Ahoms. Also, it is not clear whether the Temple

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\(50\) The Ahoms’ history is quite well known because, unlike the preceding rulers, they kept minute records of the monarchs’ undertakings, called “Buranjis”.

\(51\) See Gait 2008: 289-290. Prior to Gadādhar Siṅgha, several Ahom kings supported and financed the monasteries (satras) affiliated to this movement, which became influential. For a more detailed description of the movement founded by Śaṅkaradeva see Neog (1984, chapters 13 and 14) and Rastogi (1994).

\(52\) On Kṛṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭācarya see Adhikary (2008: 108) and Gait (ibidem). On the line of gurus (allegedly) descending from Kṛṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭācarya see chapter 2, § 2.
built by Viśva Siṅgha was completely destroyed or some parts of it still survive today. According to Mishra the lower portion of the first three chambers is made of stone, while the upper portion, including the dome surmounting the sanctum, is made of bricks. Also, on the basis of an article written by Sarma, Mishra affirms that the nāṭa-mandira was built by the Ahom king Rājeśvara in 175953.

To conclude, the first solid historical data regarding the patronage of the deities inhabiting the Nilachal date back to the first half of the XVI\textsuperscript{th} century: Viśva Siṅgha conquered lower Assam and built a Temple for Goddess Kāmākhyā on the Nilachal. But what happened on Nilachal before that? This is a question every scholar working on the Kāmākhyā temple complex is confronted with. No definite answers are available. A number of elements, however, need to be highlighted. From the V\textsuperscript{th} to the XII\textsuperscript{th} century we know the names of kings ruling over the Brahmaputra valley. Three dynasties are to be found: the Varmans (V\textsuperscript{th}-VII\textsuperscript{th} century), the Śālastambhas (VII\textsuperscript{th}-X\textsuperscript{th} century) and the Pālas (X\textsuperscript{th}-XII\textsuperscript{th} century). There is no evidence that any of these monarchs ever extended royal patronage to the deities inhabiting the Nilachal. There is no mention of any Kāmākhyā Temple on the Nilachal either. On the other hand the Kālikā-purāṇa (and other Sanskrit texts) talk extensively about the Goddess Kāmākhyā, give accounts of the myth of Satī and invariably affirm that the Nilachal is the place where the Goddess’s yoni fell. Sanskrit texts are notoriously difficult to date: the dates which have been proposed for the Kālikā-purāṇa range from the VI\textsuperscript{th} up to the XI\textsuperscript{th} century. In any case, according to scholars, Kālikā-purāṇa was written long before the XVI\textsuperscript{th} century. The existence of this text complicates the picture. Where was the Kālikā-purāṇa produced and by whom? Who sponsored its production and why? On the base of preceding studies, Urban advances the hypothesis that the Kālikā-purāṇa was composed under one of the Pāla kings in order to bring together “both traditional Brahmanical rites

53 See Mishra 2004: 164-165. The article he draws his conclusions from is: Sarma P. (1982, see note 33).
drawn from the Vedas and indigenous practices drawn from the hill people of Assam\textsuperscript{54}.

One more element deserves to be highlighted. According to Bagchi, in the first half of the IX\textsuperscript{th} century the Śālastambas established their capital near present-day Tezpur. What is relevant for our purpose is that they built a Kāmākhyā Temple in Silghat, near Tezpur. This move may suggest that they were devotees of the Goddess Kāmākhyā inhabiting the Nilachal, but does no imply that there was any Temple on the Nilachal. Due to the shift of the capital, Bagchi argues, “Kāmākhyā situated near Guwahati received little royal patronage” under the Śālastambas\textsuperscript{55}.

To sum up, historical data allow the affirmation that a Temple was constructed for the Goddess Kāmākhyā on the Nilachal at the beginning of the XVI\textsuperscript{th} century. On the other hand, other elements, first of all the Sanskrit texts, suggest that if not a Temple, some cult was dedicated to the Goddess Kāmākhyā sometime before the XVI\textsuperscript{th} century.

1.3. The Temple campus.

The campus of the Kāmākhyā Temple is quadrilateral in shape. It is enclosed by a wall, about three meters in height and has gates on each side. The stairs leading pilgrims to the Temple end up in front of the eastern gate. The latter was rebuilt few decades ago; it is in stone and contains bas-reliefs of the ancient Temple built by the Koch Bihar kings. Two of the bas-reliefs depict lions, the animal usually associated with Durgā and other Goddesses.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{55} Urban 2001: 139-140. Baruah (2012: 159) too shares the same view.
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The western gate too is a massive stone structure. Nowadays pilgrims hardly use it, because they invariably climb the Hill in motor vehicles and end up on the eastern side of the campus. Kamakhyans enter the campus from whichever gate is more convenient for them.

Shoes are of course not allowed in the Temple campus. They are allowed outside it. Many pilgrims, however, find it more appropriate to take off their shoes before climbing the stairs. Kamakhyan priests invariably walk barefoot when “in service”. In fact, even when they are not inside the campus, they often need to come into contact with materials related to worship, for instance brass plates full of offerings. They do wear shoes when they are involved in other activities (visiting relatives, attending marriages and so on) and when they go to Guwahati.

The campus follows the curve of the Hill: the northern half of the campus is higher than the southern one and can be reached via a massive stone staircase, some twenty meters wide. The southern part of the campus hosts the Temple, various smaller shrines and the bali-ghar (the “house” of sacrifice). The bali-ghar is an open pavilion, situated on the western part of the campus; a covered corridor directly links it to the western door of the Temple. The bali-ghar contains two sacrificial wooden posts: a smaller one, which is used to kill goats and a bigger one, employed for the mui-bali (buffalo sacrifice). The former, which is used daily, is situated in a corner of the bali-ghar. It is enclosed by walls, in such a way that each sacrifice is usually observed only by the party who asked for it. The post for the buffalo sacrifice, some two meters in height, is used only during major festivals. It stands in the very centre of the bali-ghar. Pilgrims doing parikramās (circumambulations of the Temple) cannot avoid passing beside it. The post for the buffalo sacrifice is in line with the central East-West axis of the Temple, that is, it is in line with the western door, leading to the nāṭa-mandira, with the statue of Manasā in the pañcaratna and with the throne of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvari in the calantā. During the last stage of Deodhāni dance, each deodhāi keeps running up and down from the post for the buffalo sacrifice up to the statue of Manasā, before finally falling in front of the latter.
I do not know why the post for the buffalo sacrifice is in the centre of the bali-ghar, while the post for the goat sacrifice is in a corner. Also, it is noteworthy that only the latter is enclosed by walls; in fact all the Daśamahāvidyās temples have posts for goat sacrifice, which are openly visible. The Kāmākhyā Temple is of course of the most visited of the temples of the complex; it is tempting to assume that the post for the goat sacrifice has been concealed to avoid disturbing the feelings of vegetarian pilgrims.

Enormous trees grow in the campus, shedding their shade over it. Some of them are worshipped. Huge, immovable, round stones rise out from the pavement of the campus (made out of many different materials). Himangshu Sarma once told me: “If you have back-pain, lie on one of these stones. They’ll cure you”. Throughout Nilachal Kamakhyans worship stones; the latter are sometimes carved in order to depict Hindu deities. Plain stones too are worshipped and smeared with sindūra; it seems to be very probable that devotees identify the deity inhabiting a particular stone, even when the latter is not carved.

The saubhāgya-kūṇḍa (pond of good fortune, see photo 2 and 6) is on the northern side of the campus. It is quadrilateral in shape; stone ghāṭs lead to it on each side. The body of water is divided into two halves by a wall, visible above the water level; pilgrims bathe only in the western half. Bharati Prasad Sarma, a Kamakhyan Brahman and civil engineer by profession, told me that the eastern part of the kūṇḍa is connected through an underground channel to the spring venerated in the sanctum. To preserve the latter, bathing is not allowed in this part of the kūṇḍa.

The saubhāghyā-kūṇḍa is almost always crowded with pilgrims, sprinkling its water on their heads. Sometimes a few pilgrims immerse themselves completely in the water-body. Near to it stand five barely carved stones, understood to be Gaṇeśa. Many pilgrims worship these idols of

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56 In § 4, it will be shown how a non-Brahman girl in her twenties said that Hanumān inhabits a huge stone lying in the jungle.
57 See chapter 7, § 2. In the 1990s’ Bharati Prasad Sarma was very active in building new infrastructure in the Temple campus. Among other things he had a water filter placed in the saubhāghyā-kūṇḍa to purify its water. Nowadays the filter is no longer used.
Gaṇeśa before proceeding to the *darśana*. Whenever Kamakhyans have a *pūjā* performed in their residence, the principal object of worship is a *pūjā* containing water from the *kūnda*. The deity is invited to reside in the vase for the duration of the *pūjā*; once the latter is over, the vase is immersed in the *kūnda* (*visarjana*). The householder starts from his residence carrying the vase, while his wife fans it with a soft fan; a male relative carries burning incense. A crowd of relatives follows the procession, which is usually accompanied by a band. While the one carrying the vase is concentrated on this important responsibility, the people following him are frequently in a jubilant mood; during one of these processions, I observed a euphoric man splashing his female relatives (and the anthropologist) with water. The women's protests could not stop the man, who wore a triumphant, naughty smile. Kamakhyan women fetch water from the *saubhāgyā-kūnda* to give a ritual bath to a male relative on the day of his marriage. A party usually consists of some twenty women, dressed in their best finery and is accompanied by a band. A full bath in the *kūnda* is prescribed for the fetching of water and usually leads to loud laughter among the women.

Near by the ghāṭs leading to the *saubhāgyā-kūnda* stands the office of the Kamakhyia Debutter Board (KDB), the body which manages the Temple. Beside it a small shrine is devoted to Śaṅkaradeva, the famous Assamese *vaiṣṇava* saint of the XVIth century. Near the office there is a beautiful (brass?) statue of a Goddess with four arms. According to a Kamakhyan Brahman, the statue is of Tripurā Sundarī (see photo 9). Apart from the two statues in the calantā, it is the only metal statue in the campus. Some cult is offered to it. Pilgrims often prostrate themselves before it.

The campus hosts two *homa-ghars* (the “house” of the offering into the fire): one is close to the eastern gate and is used for the private *homas*.

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58 In § 2 it has been shown how in the second half of the XVIIth century the Ahom king Gadādhar Siṅgha, a devoted śākta, persecuted the heads of the *vaiṣṇava* sect founded by Śaṅkaradeva. With this in mind it may seem contradictory that a shrine devoted to Śaṅkaradeva stands in the campus of the Kāmākhyā Temple. However, it is possible that this shrine was built after the persecution of the *vaiṣṇava* sect.
required by pilgrims (see photo 19); the other one stands near the saubhāgyā-kuṇḍa and is used only for public, festive homas.

There are a number of chai shops on the campus. Kamakhyan pāṇḍās are often found hanging out outside these shops, blowing into their boiling hot cups of chai and chatting. There is also a photography shop, offering personalised souvenir photos to pilgrims. Pilgrims mainly circulate in the areas I just described. After entering the Temple for darśana, many pilgrims do parikramās around it. Many of them visit the saubhāgyā-kuṇḍa and those who want a sacrifice to be performed go to the bali-ghar. By contrast, the other parts of the campus I will describe are usually far less crowded.

A second, smaller pool of water is to be found on the northern side of the campus: the ṛṇ-mocan-kuṇḍa, “the pond of returning the debt”. Like the saubhāgyā-kuṇḍa, it is quadrilateral in shape and surrounded by ghāṭs. A metal fence, some two meters in height, encloses it; the gate of the fence is always locked. Passing pilgrims sometimes observe the kuṇḍa through the fence. To the best of my knowledge, no rite takes place around it; I never saw the gate open. From the time of my first fieldwork I kept hearing from Kamakhyans that several people had lost their lives in the ṛṇ-mocan-kuṇḍa; the latter, my interlocutors said, was thereafter rendered inaccessible to avoid further deaths. I have been told the name of one Kamakhyan, an adult Brahman male, who allegedly died in the pond some twenty years ago. Kamakhyans talking about the ṛṇ-mocan-kuṇḍa were visibly frightened. A non-Brahman woman told me that the pond has an “attraction” – the English word was used – on people. “There is something in it”, she said (my translation from Assamese). By contrast, Bharati Prasad Sarma told me: “There is nothing strange in it. Simply it’s the place where people who want to commit suicide go to do it”. Nevertheless, his statement implies that some people died in it. I want to clarify that I never came across any documents – such as police records - which prove that some people actually lost their drowned in the pool. On the other hand, the unanimity of my interlocutors’ statements leads me to presume that this actually happened. During my 2012 fieldwork, a new element unexpectedly appeared. Once day, a Bengali pilgrim
I was familiar with suddenly told me that previously human sacrifice used to be performed near the *kunda* and that, after the practice was discontinued, the *kunda* started taking human lives on its own. According to the Bengali pilgrim, it was a Kamakhyan priest who gave him this explanation. Kamakhyans I talked with regarding the *ṛṇ-mocan-kunda* did not make any reference to human sacrifice. As far as I know, the account concerning human sacrifice could very well be the fruit of the pilgrim’s imagination (on other occasions, he had proved to have a very fertile imagination). I leave to future researches the task of inquiring further into this unfortunate body of water, the only spot in the campus which has a dubious reputation.

KDB has built a museum, which was inaugurated some in 2011. It has a huge dome, replicating that of the Kāmākhyā Temple. It contains stone bas-reliefs (see photo 8), other parts of the ancient temple and a collection of ancient *dāos* (sacrificial blades). The museum is surrounded by a garden. When I first went to the garden during my 2011 fieldwork, I came across a man at work on some beautiful terracotta statues (see photo 10). This man, a non-Brahman Kamakhyan, spends most of his time in the garden. He has created many pieces of art - including a replica of the Nilachal – which are nicely placed in the garden. He showed me some smaller sculptures made out of wood. He does not carve the wood; rather he adapts the natural shapes of tree branches to depict Hindu deities.

There is an Assamese-medium school on the campus, near the garden. There are two more schools on Nilachal; they too are Assamese-medium ones. Only poor families living on Nilachal send their children to these schools. Anyone who can afford it sends their children to English-medium schools in Guwahati.

One more structure needs to be mentioned: the pilgrims’ shade. It is a long, covered corridor, one meter wide and two meters high. It is used to order into a queue the pilgrims waiting for *darśana*. The pilgrims’ shade starts on a minor entrance of the campus on its eastern side, runs along the northern and western sides of the *saubhāgyā-kunda* and through twists and turns crosses the entire campus. It runs along the Southern side of the
Temple and finally leads pilgrims into the calantā. The pilgrims’ shade is delimitated on both sides by railings, so that pilgrims cannot jump the queue.

During the morning and especially on auspicious days, the Temple is crowded with priests and pilgrims, busy in different rites: darśana, pūjās, homas, balis, parikramās, etc. At 1 pm the Goddess is served Her bhoga (daily meal) and darśana is stopped for two hours. Fewer number of pilgrims are to be found in the temple. In the summer the temperature can be very high during this part of the day; Kamakhyans priests go home, eat their meal and have a nap. A few employees of KDB are to be found, sweeping the area around the Temple with lazy and repetitive movements or showering it with water pumps.

Around 3 pm, darśana is reopened and the priests reappear in the Temple. In the evening once darśana is closed, ārati (weaving of lights before the idol) is performed. Spontaneous musical activities take place every evening during ārati. Himangshu Sarma has the habit of singing devotional songs outside the northern gate. Several habitués, “trained” by Himangshu (as he loves to say), join him almost every night (see photo 11). The habitués meet after sunset outside the northern gate, because it is from this gate that one can glimpse at Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī, inside the calantā. The group is quite heterogeneous; it comprises, among others, some Assamese devotees living in Guwahati and a man from U.P. who manages a restaurant near the Temple⁵⁹ – Kamakhyans, however, are conspicuous by their absence. Usually everyone waits for Himangshu; once he comes, he sits down in front of the gate, closes his eyes and starts to sing. Himangshu usually plays a drum and another one is sometimes played by Kali or Kanci, two extremely poor teenage orphan sisters, who are employed in a Bardeuri household as maids. Several devotees, sitting on the stairs just outside the northern gate, take part in the singing or clap their hands rhythmically. During major festivals the atmosphere is really vibrant and I frequently saw devotees dancing freely in the middle of the crowd.

⁵⁹ The habitués are not part of any official group. True, Himangshu has a leading role among them, but even when he is absent, they carry on the singing.
At the same time a group of mostly elderly women assemble on a large plastic cloth on the platform leading to the saubhāgya-kunda and sing nām, a type of choral devotional singing which mainly consists of chanting a deity's names. Bronson (1867: s. v.) renders noun nām as “a name, honor, an appellation of a deity, a noun in grammar”. Nām is responsorial singing, practiced exclusively by women. While singing, women beat the rhythm with their hands and cymbals or with an instrument made of two pieces of wood. Nām is performed at various occasions: it can accompany the performance of samskāras – the sixteen Hindu rites of passage - and of private and public pūjās or can be sung for a specific festival; for instance, at Śiva-rātri in 2011 I observed a group of Kamakhyan women singing nām in the vicinity of a small shrine dedicated to Śiva. In the Kāmākhya Temple it is practiced on a daily basis, usually shortly after sunset. The songs of nām are dedicated to various deities and are in Assamese. Towards the end of every song the rhythm becomes faster and all the women sing together. The nām session ends up with the uruli, the trilling sound produced by rhythmic vibration of the tongue.

A part from humans, various animals too enter the campus. Monkeys inhabit the jungle of the Nilachal and roam around in the village and in the campus, finding their way via trees, roofs of buildings and electric wires. They know that sweet foods are carried and consumed by humans in the campus and sometimes scare them with aggressive attempts to get some food. I was soon taught by Kamakhyans to cover the prasāda under my dupattā (shawl), to hide it from monkeys. Goats of all ages are to be found in the Temple: a rite “opposite” to the sacrifice consists in buying and releasing a billy goat. Some adult and old billy goats are found in the campus; their heads have been smeared with sindūra and some pilgrims bless themselves after

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60 The night (rātri) of Śiva is celebrated during the night of the thirteenth day of the kṛṣṇa pakṣa (dark fortnight) of the month of phālguna (February/March). It is sometimes celebrated on the following day, but in any case before amāvasyā (new moon) which immediately follows. In the Kāmākhya temple complex, on this occasion (and only then) Śiva is offered a non-vegetarian meal.

61 The term prasāda indicates the food which, having been previously offered to a deity, is later consumed by devotees. Unlike ordinary food, the prasāda is believed to be imbued with divine energy.
touching their horns. Nanny goats are also found in the campus. When a she-goat is on heat, it runs all over the campus, followed by males fighting with one another. Ducks enter the campus in large numbers. They move in groups, squawking. In the evening they gather near the shops to sleep. A gigantic bull roams around on the Nilachal - I do not know whether it belongs to anyone. In the evening it frequently goes to the Temple to get some *prasāda* or to the village where it “assaults” the vegetable sellers’ stalls.

The dome of the Temple is the shelter of a number of pigeons. According to an Italian man in his thirties initiated in the Nath *saṃpradāyā* the pigeons are attracted by the energy of the Goddess and are unable to leave the dome. When I met him in July 2013, he had just arrived at the temple complex and was not new to it. After few days he started making arrangements to leave the place in order to join his guru in Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh). For a week or so he kept saying that he would leave the next day, without actually doing so. One day he told me (my translation from Italian): “I should really go now. Else I may end up like the pigeons”.

1.4. **Minor temples on the Nilachal.**

The Nilachal is constituted of three contiguous peacks: the peacks of Brahmā, of Śiva and of Viṣṇu. Kāmākhyā Temple stands on the peack of Śiva. Large portions of the Hill, full of water bodies, small streams and springs, are covered with jungle and inhabited by wild animals: tigers, other big felines and snakes. Huge, dark birds of prey can be seen slowly flying over the jungle in large numbers. Due to the warm, extremely humid Assamese climate, vegetation grows luxuriantly; tall trees, some thirty meters in height, tower

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62 The Nath (*nātha*, lord, protector, refuge) *saṃpradāyā* is an ascetic initiatory tradition spread in North India. According to the common belief, it was founded by mythical ascetic Matsyendranātha and his disciple Gorakhnātha. On the Naths see Bouillier (2008).
over an intricate, impenetrable bush. Creatures of all kinds inhabit this vegetation: hairy spiders and colorful butterflies; fat sparkling green millipedes lazily hanging from the leaves; small insects of a sharp shade of red which stick to each other in dozens and end up looking like some strange fruit; slim spiders whose black hue is elegantly broken only by their yellow joints; big black ants whose bite can result in a burning sting (at least for the anthropologist). I was suddenly alarmed when one day I realized that a grey hairy millipede was walking on the back of my hand. And I was even more anxious when, after I somehow removed it, I saw its hair was still sticking to my skin!

The vibrant, invasive jungle borders the village on each side. When during marriages Kamakhyaans “decorate” their houses with neon tubes, small insects of all kinds, attracted by the light, can be seen sticking to the tubes. Kamakhyaans, however, surrounded as they are by the jungle, are quite indifferent to its creatures.

Like the Kāmākhyā Temple, the majority of the temples dedicated to Goddesses have been constructed around a natural spring. Among them are the temples of the Daśamahāvidyās. According to Kinsley,

The Mahāvidyās have been known as a group since the early medieval period (after the tenth century C.E.). Some of them predate this development and continue to be very well known in their own right, such as the fierce black goddess Kālī. She is also usually the primary, or ādi, Mahāvidyā [...]. It is not at all apparent why these particular ten goddesses have become associated with one another. As for the individual goddesses, several are obscure and have received no scholarly attention. In some cases the sources available on individual Mahāvidyās are so limited that it is difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct their histories or gain a clear impression of their worship.⁶³

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Kamakhyans uphold the following account regarding the Daśamahāvidyās. When Sāti set off to Her father’s yajña, Śiva forbade Her to go. At that, Sāti became furious, emanated Her ten forms and surrounded Śiva with them from every direction. Petrified with terror, Śiva eventually let Sāti go. Kinsley reports a variant of this myth which, according to him, is contained in the Mahābhāgavata-purāṇa and in the Brhadhārma-purāṇa “both late śākta upa purāṇas, probably written in eastern India after the fourteenth century C.E." In chapter 6, § 2 it will be shown how in the Kāmākhyā temple complex each Mahāvidyā is connected to one of the Navagrahas (Nine Planets). As far as I know, such an association is quite peculiar to the Kāmākhyā temple complex.

One of most visited Daśamahāvidyās temples is that of the Goddess Kālī. As Kinsley argues, Kālī’s fame surpasses Her inclusion in the Daśamahāvidyās group. Also, the temple is easily accessible, situated as it is right on the steps leading to the Kāmākhyā Temple. It consists of a small chamber, dominated by the source; the latter is one meter or so below the pavement. To reach the water one has to fully stretch out one’s arm. The temple has a square veranda, with platforms on three sides. I have been told that these are the seats of the Nautā Kālī (the nine [forms] of Kālī). Before the deodhāni dance, the fierce deodhāis of Goddess Kālī are invited to sit on these platforms to be smeared with a mixture of sindūra and ghī (clarified butter) and dressed by the two priests of Kālī.

Unlike Kālī’s temple, some other minor temples are difficult to reach, situated as they are in the jungle. Pilgrims hardly know of their existence and do not visit them. Apart from Goddesses’ temples, the Hill hosts five Śiva

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64 The Daśamahāvidyās are the following - I give Kinsley’s rendering of Their names in brackets: Kālī (the Black Goddess), Tārā (The Goddess who Guides through Troubles), Tripura-sundari (She Who Is Lovely in the Three Worlds), Bhuvaneśvari (She Whose Body Is the World), Chinnamastā (The Self-Decapitated Goddess), Bhairavī (The Fierce One), Dhumāvatī (The Widow Goddess), Bagalā Mukhī (The Paralyzer), Mātaṅgī (The Outcaste Goddess) and Kamalā (The Lotus Goddess).

65 There are eighteen Mahāpurāṇas (great or major Purāṇa) and a number of minor ones or Upapurāṇa. Some of them, like the ones quoted by Kinsley, are called śākta, because the main divine being they talk about is Śakti or the great Goddess.

temples, one Viṣṇu temple, four Gaṇeṣa temple and many minor ones. Throughout my fieldwork I have been visiting the Koṭiliṅga temple, a beautiful Śiva temple, located on the northern slope of the Hill, not far from the shore of the Brahmaputra (see photos 12 and 14). A staircase made out of cement starting in the village crosses through the dense jungle and ends at the entrance of the temple. The latter consists of two natural caves, where it is only possible to crawl, not to stand. In one there is a stone liṅga (phallic emblem of Śiva). Beside it, a natural stone is understood to be the Goddess and is worshipped. A tunnel leads to the second, long cave, which hosts a carving made right into the stone, depicting Gaṇeṣa. At the end of the cave opposite the tunnel there is a long slit between the rocks, some thirty centimetres wide: some devotees who are familiar with the temple find it more appropriate to leave the cave through that slit, not from the bigger tunnel through which they entered. Pilgrims on their first visit are sometimes encouraged by habitué devotees to exit from the slit. The procedure is not easy at all and pilgrims may find themselves stuck between the rocks for a couple of minutes, before they can finally come out.

Near the caves there is a small building with two rooms. One hosts a hearth, while in the second lives Tarun, a Bengali ascetic in his thirties who takes care of the temple. A second elder ascetic from North India settled in the temple sometimes after my first fieldwork (2011) – a number of ascetics live permanently on the Hill. Some ten years ago a committee of Marwari businessmen based in Guwahati sponsored the construction of a wide concrete terrace, standing on pillars. From the terrace there is a fantastic view of the Brahmaputra and of the river island where the Umānānda temple stands67. To get to Koṭiliṅga temple pilgrims need to go through the village; there are few signs to guide them. Thus, only a few pilgrims are aware of the existence of the temple and go there. The place is very quiet, immersed as it is in the jungle.

Apart from the Kāmākhyā Temple and the minor temples, the Hill hosts a number of small shrines. Also, as stated above, Kamakhyans worship

67 See note 5.
natural rocks. I also heard about some natural caves which are currently worshipped. During my very first fieldwork – I was an M.A. student at that time – I happened to go from the Koṭiliṅga temple to a nearby Gaṇeśa temple, right on the shore of the Brahmaputra. I went there with Shunki, a twenty-year-old, incredibly lively girl belonging to a very modest non-Brahman family. Two poor female children went with us. To get to the Gaṇeśa temple we descended the cement staircase, with the dense forest on both side. Before we started, a woman warned us that a tiger had been seen the previous day near the Koṭiliṅga temple. Shunki firmly told me that since she is a devotee of Durgā, nothing bad could happen to us. We went. The Gaṇeśa temple I visited with Shunki consisted of a small hut, almost entirely occupied by a massive natural stone, on which a Gaṇeśa-like figure had been carved. While we were on the way, we passed another huge round stone. It had no carving. Shunki stopped, touched the stone and told me: “There is Hanumān here”. On our way back we stopped, sitting on the stairs for sometime, before climbing up the last portion. Shunki entertained me talking about shooting stars and other incredible things. Suddenly, remembering the warning, I told her (my translation from Assamese): “Shall we go back to the [Koṭiliṅga] temple?”. At that she replied: “Aren’t we in a temple?” This episode and similar ones suggest that Kamakhyans hold the entire Hill to be holy – I am deliberately using a generic term. Certainly, they differentiate between temples and private houses, but the presence of the divine on the Hill is so multiform and abundant that a clearcut boundary does not seem exist, especially on the parts of the Hill covered by the jungle. By contrast, a much more clear distinction is drawn between the Hill and Guwahati.
1.5. Kamakhya Dham: symbiosis between the temple complex and the village.

The pilgrim arriving at the feet of the Nilachal will be “invited” by a crowd of drivers to sit in a jeep or van. When a driver judges that he has packed enough passengers in his vehicle – I once have counted seventeen people in a jeep – he will start driving up the road, while a couple of young boys will make the ride hanging outside the vehicle. There is only one road suitable for motor vehicles on the Nilachal; it was opened in the 1950s. After a ten minute ride, the driver will park his vehicle near the parking lot, which is at a walking distance from the Temple. The parking lot was built some ten years before the time of writing and is an efficient structure. It is guarded by doorkeepers, who collect fees from the cars going in and out. Only wealthy pilgrims who own or rent a private vehicle use the parking lot.

The pilgrim will pay the fees to the driver and will start walking along the only road which is lined with shops. The road leads them to Rajarbari, a kind of square, full of shops, restaurants and cars. One of the five Śiva temples has its entrance on Rajarbari. As the place is invariably packed with cars going in every direction pilgrims tend to pass through it rapidly; the majority of them do not notice the temple. It is from Rajarbari that the stairways leading to the Kāmākhyā Temple start. Also, from Rajarbari the paved road continues, running alongside the Bagalā Mukhī temple and ending up in front of the Bhuvaneśvarī temple, which stands on the highest peak of the entire Hill. At the very bottom of the steps stands the Chinnamastā temple and a second Śiva temple. Pilgrims heading to the Kāmākhyā Temple will climb up the stairs, finding on both sides an uninterrupted line of shops. These shops, like the ones encountered before, sell a wide variety of items: edibles and objects to be offered to the Goddess (coconuts, sweets, incense, sindūra, oil lamps, flower garlands, red cloths of different sizes, etc.), cheap ornaments for ladies, images of the Goddess in plastic frames and so on. Local handicrafts and plastic toys for children are also available in some shops. While climbing the pilgrim will find the Kālī temple on his right and
after few steps the Târâ temple and will finally end up in front of the eastern entrance of the Kâmâkhyâ Temple campus. That is the standard itinerary followed by the majority of pilgrims.

The village is inhabited by Brahman and non-Brahman Shebaits. “Shebait” is the current rendering of term sevāita in the written form and is based on the Assamese pronunciation of the term. Sevāita is translated by Barua (2011: s. v.) as “a worshipper; a tenant of a Devottar land”, while Bronson ignores it. Sevāiata is related to Sanskrit sevā, “service” or “worship” and is frequently used to designate the Brahman priests taking care of a Hindu temple. In the Kâmâkhyâ temple complex the term is used to refer to all the servants of the temple complex, including Brahmans and non-Brahmans.

The village surrounds the Temple on all four sides. It is a labyrinth of narrow lanes, going up and down with the slope of the Hill. It needs to be clarified that the temple complex and the village are intertwined with each other. In other words, temples, private houses, shops, restaurants and guesthouses are next door to each other. Cement has been used indiscriminately to build paths and houses. Nowadays many Kamakhyans destroy their ancient Assamese style houses in order to replace them with concrete buildings. Assamese style houses were one or two story buildings made of mud, bamboo and wood. I have been told that nowadays it is quite expensive to maintain these houses, which need to be repaired after each monsoon. The workforce which once had the know-how disappears along with the ancient houses.

It seems clear that the village was divided into areas inhabited by families of the same caste. The neighbourhood where I have been living was a Brahman one. The majority of the Brahman families living there are Bardeuri, namely Brahmans having rights over the Kâmâkhyâ Temple. Not only that. They belong to the same sub-group of Bardeuris, the Dekas (young). By contrast, the majority of Burha (old) Bardeuris live in a nearby area. The division into caste-based areas may once have been systematic, but now it is not. The number of inhabitants has been growing in the last century and the
village has expanded. Families have split and some Kamakhyans left what they understand to be their ancestors’ house to move somewhere else in the village. For instance, a cousin of Pramesh Sarma (my second landlord), a Deka Bardeuri himself, now lives near the parking lot. He told me that he bought some land there to build his own new house. At the same time, on the fringe of the Deka Bardeuri neighbourhood where I used to live, stands the house of a deodhāi, a non-Brahman possessed-dancer. Nearby lives a destitute old man who is employed as a porter and for other humble activities. His home is a hut made out of perishable materials.
PART I
The public worship
In order to carry out the public and private pūjā for the Goddess Kāmākhyā, a Kamakhyan Brahman needs to be initiated and instructed by his seniors. At the end of the training period, he will be recognized as a pujārī. The dīkṣā (initiation) is the basic requirement to start the training; in the Kāmākhyā temple complex three levels of dīkṣā can be acquired one after the other. Apart from pujārīs-to-be, many Kamakhyan Brahmans who are not interested in pujārī-hood take the dīkṣā for their own spiritual benefit. Anyone who has taken one of the three levels of dīkṣā understands himself to be either a vaidika or a tāntrika; but diverging opinions circulate among Kamakhyans regarding the significance of the opposition vaidika/tāntrika. The present chapter aims at analysing these opinions.
The three levels of dīkṣā are: the abhiṣeka (“asperssion” or “consecration”), the satyābhiṣeka (“the true asperssion”) and finally the pūrṇābhiṣeka (“the full asperssion”). The abhiṣeka is sufficient to undertake the training to become a pujārī. This dīkṣā is generally called vaidika (relating to the Vedas) because the mantras imparted are (believed to come) from the Vedas. At this stage the initiate does not make use of the pañcamakāras (“the five Ms”), namely the five dangerous and transgressive items used in Tantrism. The pañcamakāras are generally understood to be the following: madya (alcohol), māṃsa (meat), matsya (fish), mudrā68 and maithuna (sexual intercourse69). Those who restrict themselves to the first level of dīkṣā understand themselves to be vaidika precisely because they do not make use of the pañcamakāras.

By contrast, the use of the pañcamakāras is compulsory in the second and third stage of dīkṣā. Those who take at least the satyābhiṣeka understand themselves and are understood by everyone else as tāntrika. The interesting point is that these people strongly affirm that everyone who takes70 any dīkṣā – including those who take only the abhiṣeka - in the Kāmākhyā temple complex cannot be anything other than a tāntrika. In fact, certain ritual operations preliminary to any pūjā and to the saṃdhyās71 (the three daily prayers) aim at imposing divine energies on the body of the pujārī who throughout the ritual “is no longer just like a human being”. The involvement of the pujārī’s body in the cult and the quasi-divine status he acquires make him a tāntrika. Thus, a pujārī who took pūrṇābhiṣeka argued, even those who restrict themselves to the abhiṣeka are tāntrika, although they deny it.

68 According to Padoux (2010: 319, note 11) it is not clear what the term mudrā indicates in the context of the pañcamakāras. It has been generally rendered as “grilled grains”.
69 In the Kāmākhyā temple complex I heard a different explanations of maithuna (see § 3).
70 I will use the verb “to take” to render the Assamese verb lai which has this meaning – it is the equivalent of Hindi lenā. Lai is invariably used to convey the sense of getting or receiving the dīkṣā from a guru.
71 Saṃdhyā, whose primary meaning is “juncture”, indicates the morning and evening twilights, namely the conjunctions between night and day. It also refers to the three daily prayers to be ideally performed at dawn, noon and sunset (noon is invariably added to the other two moments of the day). Hemen Sarma (see below) said that, like him, Kamakhyans perform the noon prayer together with the dawn one, because at noon they are too busy with their priestly activities.
In order to analyse the diverging ways the *vaidika/tāntrika* opposition is thought of by Kamakhyans, the present chapter will consider the following elements: the divinization of the worshipper and the ritual operations which aim at imposing divine energies on his body; the alleged efficacy of tantric practices and their superiority in respect of Veda-based, less challenging practices; the “two levels of injunction” (Sanderson 1995: 23) observed by the tantric adept who, outside initiatic ritual, observes the rules of orthodox Brahmanism; the danger inherent in transgressive tantric practices; the role of women in tantric practices.

These elements are widely considered to be among the most important strands of Tantrism and have been analysed at length by scholarly literature. I want to clarify that I do not intend to consider the significance of these elements *in general*, nor the different nuances they have acquired in the frame of the various tantric traditions. Rather, I intend to highlight the peculiarity of the Kamakhyan way to understand and experience these elements. The scholarly literature will be evoked to analyse data collected in the field. For its capacity to synthetise complex and multifaceted conceptions, Padoux’s “Comprendre le Tantrisme” proved very useful for the present aim.

The chapter opens with the description of the various phases which constitute the daily rites offered to the Goddess Kāmākhyā and to the other deities inhabiting the Temple (§ 1). Although the present work is not concerned with rituals in themselves, I will describe the *pūjā* because knowing the significance of the ritual operations is crucial for understanding the way the *vaidika/tāntrika* opposition is operated by Kamakhyan Brahmans. As far as I know, no previous description of the *pūjā* for the Goddess Kāmākhyā exists. § 2 describes the first level of initiation and the training of the *pujārī*. It analyses the two diverging opinions circulating among Kamakhyans concerning the nature of the *tāntrika* in the light of the relevant literature. § 3 describes the two further levels of initiation, in relation to the notion of danger, inherent in tantric practices. It compares the figure of the Kamakhyan *pujārī* with that of the *deodhāi* (possessed dancer). The necessity of imposing divine energies on the body of the *pujārī* – a
widespread strand of Tantrism all over India – draws the latter close to the possessed.

2. 1. The daily worship.

The idol of Goddess Kāmākhyā in the sanctum receives the first services at dawn. It is bathed and dressed in fresh clothes. Thereafter, the idols of Kamalā and Mātaṅgi, which are situated beside that of the Goddess Kāmākhyā, are bathed and dressed. These operations are included under the term śṛṅgāra, of Sanskrit origin. The śṛṅgāra of the deities inhabiting the sanctum is carried out by the Athparias (āṭhpariā). The latter are non-Brahman Shebaits. The pālā-day of an Athparia starts once ārati is over and lasts for the following 24 hours. According to Mishra (2004):

The designation āṭhpariā refers to an incumbent whose duty is to attend to the Goddess throughout the eight prahars [parts] of the day.

That members of a non-Brahman caste are entrusted with the śṛṅgāra – that is, allowed to touch the idol - is remarkable. Throughout South Asia in various Hindu temples served by Brahmans, it is only the latter who are

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72 The term śṛṅgāra covers a wide range of related meanings from “sexual passion” up to “a dress for amorous purpose” and “finery” (Monier-Williams 2005: s. v.); as far as Hindu temple rituals are concerned, it is employed to refer to the bathing and dressing of the deity’s idol. The term includes the idea of beautifying a person or an idol, not merely of wearing clothes.

73 The Shebaits are the individuals who by virtue of their bloodline have rights (and tasks) in the temples. In the Kāmākhyā temple complex the term includes both the Brhamans and the non-Brahmans attached to the temples. On the term sevāita see chapter 1, § 5.

74 The pālā (turn) is a rotation system that entrusts each single day to a specific Shebait. Each group of Shebaits (including the Brahmans) follows its own pālā, because a number of different services is needed for the daily rites to be properly performed (see below).

75 Mishra 2004: 76.

76 In chapter 4, § 2 it will be shown how an Athparia proudly affirms his group’s particular nearness to the Goddess on the basis of this fact.
allowed to touch and serve the idols - I will come back on this issue later on. According to Hemen Sarma:

They [the Athparias] close the door at that time. Brahmans are not allowed to go inside the Temple [in the sanctum?77] when they are bathing the Goddess.

While the Athparia bathes and dresses the idols in the sanctum, the pujārī in charge bathes and dresses the idols of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī in the calantā.

We must wash the calantā’s murtis, we must clean the previous flowers and garlands, we must bath Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī, make them wear new cloths. Then we put new garlands. It takes one hour [...]. They [the Athparias] are inside [in the sanctum], we are outside in the calantā temple. Similar duty. They also spend one hour, we also spend one hour. It’s called śṛṅgāra.

Once the double śṛṅgāra is over, the pujārī proceeds to the sanctum where he performs the pūjā for the Goddess Kāmākhyā, which consists of several distinct phases. It is followed by the sacrifice (bali) of a billy goat, whose head is placed in the sanctum, near the idol. Thereafter the pujārī comes out of the sanctum and proceeds to the calantā, where he worships the idols of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī.

The Temple remains closed throughout the dawn rituals; pilgrims are never allowed to observe them directly and I had to conform to this custom. However, during my fieldwork I observed a number of private pūjās sponsored by pilgrims, which are replicas of the daily, public one. The explanations provided by Hemen Sarma, a Bardeuri (see below) pujārī in his early fifties were crucial in understanding the meaning of the different

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77 As shown in chapter 1, § 1, Kamakhyans employ the Assamese term bhitarat, meaning “inside”, to designate the sanctum. When Hemen Sarma says “inside” or “inside the Temple”, he is actually referring to the sanctum, by rendering bhitarat into English.
phases of the ritual. In this § I will describe the ritual operations with the help of Hemen Sarma’s quotations.

Many of the operations described in the following pages have been discussed in scholarly literature\(^ {78}\). The function Hemen Sarma ascribes to some of these ritual operations is different from the meaning that operations bearing the same name have in other contexts. For instance, for Hemen Sarma the operation called *bhūta-śuddhi* is aimed at purifying (*śuddhi*) the *pujārī* from the *bhūtas*, evil beings which constantly menace human life. By contrast, in other contexts the term *bhūta* is employed to designate the five elements constituting the human body (earth, air, water, fire and space). The worshipper deconstructs his regular human body, in order to replace it with a divine one, which enables him to carry out the worship\(^ {79}\). Clearly there has been a shift in the meaning attributed to the term *bhūta* and the related ritual operation. I want to clarify that it is not my aim to retrace the evolution of the ritual sequences’ exegesis. Rather, I intend to highlight the significance Hemen Sarma attributes to these sequences, because this has a bearing on the way he understands himself to be a *tāntrika*. As will be shown, Hemen Sarma’s understanding of what it means to be a *tāntrika* is very much in tune with some of the most significant strands of Tantrism highlighted by scholarly literature.

Before proceeding, it should be made clear that the sequence of ritual operations I will describe in the following pages is employed not only for the Goddess Kāmākhyā, but also for each deity inhabiting the Nilachal, including male deities. The Brahmans of the Kāmākhyā temple complex categorize themselves into two main groups, namely the Bardeuris who have hereditary rights over the Kāmākhyā Temple and the Nananbardeuris who have hereditary rights over the minor temples of the Nilachal. It is not sufficient for a man to be born a Bardeuri in order to perform the public and private rites for the Goddess Kāmākhyā. To do that, he needs to be initiated and

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\(^{79}\) The *Somaśambhupaddhati* employs the term *bhūta* in this sense and gives detailed instructions regarding the way the five elements are to be visualised and purified by the worshipper. See Brunner-Lachaux 1963: 102 and 118-128.
trained. The same applies to Nananbardeuris; the Nananbardeuri who has
been initiated and trained is entitled to carry out the public and private rites
in the temple(s) he is attached to. He cannot under any circumstances carry
out any rite for the Goddess Kāmākhyā\textsuperscript{80}.

The pūjā described by Hemen Sarma falls within the ṣoḍaśopacāra-pūjā,
that is, the pūjā where sixteen offerings are made to the deity\textsuperscript{81}. The list of
services to be rendered to the Goddess Kāmākhyā will be given at the end of
this paragraph. What is of far greater significance for the present purpose is
the ritual operations required in order to make the place, the utensils and the
priest fit for the act of worship.

According to Hemen Sarma, the first step is called either Gaṇeśa-pūjā,
or ādipaṅcadevatā-pūjā. Five deities need to be worshipped: Gaṇeśa, Sūrya,
Nārāyana (Viṣṇu), Śiva and Durgā. After that the Kamakhyan pujārī carries
out the samkalpa (declaration of the purpose). If the pūjā to be carried out is
a private one sponsored by a devotee, at this stage the pujārī utters the name
and the gotra\textsuperscript{82} of that individual; the samkalpa consists in declaring that the
pūjā will be carried out on behalf of that person. Instead, in the public
worship of the Goddess Kāmākhyā, Hemen Sarma proudly affirmed, the pūjā
is performed “in the name of every person in the world”. The next step,
according to Hemen Sarma, is the Sūrya-pūjā (worship of the Sun). The latter
is followed by the sāmānyārgh(y)a (common oblation), a phase whose
significance is not yet entirely clear to me. Thereafter the pujārī carries out
the dvāradevatā-pūjā, the worship of the “doorkeeper” deity. The āsana-pūjā,
which follows, is intended at purifying the āsana – the “seat”, usually in the
form of a tiny carpet - upon which the pujārī sits for the entire duration of the
ritual. It goes along with Prthivi-pūjā, the worship of the Earth.

After purifying the flowers with some mantras, the pujārī performs the
so-called phatphaṭ-pūjā. He repeatedly snaps his fingers around his head in

\textsuperscript{80} This fundamental distinction is analysed in detail in chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{81} Bühnemann (1988: 29) distinguishes between the ṣoḍaśopacāra-pūjā and the
pañcopacāra-pūjā, where five offerings are made to the deity.

\textsuperscript{82} The term gotra, whose primary meaning is “cow-shed”, indicates a patrilinear lineage
bringing together individuals who acknowledge common descent from a mythical ancestor,
usually a sage.
order to “send away bad, harming things”. Phat, according to Brunner-Lachaux “est une syllabe explosive souvent utilisée pour opérer des destructions”.

With the bhūta-śuddhi the pujārī gets rid of the bhūtas. The term bhūta is understood here as a malevolent spirit and could be translated as “ghost”; Bronson (1867: s. v.) renders it as “an evil spirit, a devil, Satan, a ghost, a goblin”. Bhūtas are super-human harmful, wicked beings which are constantly threatening the smooth flow of life. They need to be kept as far as possible from every sphere of human activity and above all from the ritual one. Hemen Sarma:

There should be no effect of any demons, any evil, any bhūta in my body.
"Go away bhūta! You should not come to me!" We should purify ourselves, God must come to us.

In the bhūta-śuddhi, prāṇāyāma is employed. The technic evoked by Hemen Sarma is called sola-coṣaṣṭi-batris (sixteen, sixty-four, thirty-two). With the right thumb the priest blocks the right nostril and inhales from the left one. While doing so he repeats his mantra sixteen times. Then he closes both nostrils and holds his breath, while repeating the mantra sixty-four times. Finally he opens up the left nostril and exhales, while repeating his mantra thirty-two times. According to Hemen Sarma with the inhalation the bhūtas "come to the nose". With the holding of the breath they are locked into the pujārī’s body. When the latter finally opens up his left nostril the bhūtas cannot but leave the pujārī’s body. In Hemen Sarma’s words, “they all go away”.

With the bhūta-śuddhi, the pujārī is purified and can proceed to the prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā. Hemen Sarma explains this operation as follows:

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84 The term prāṇāyāma of Sanskrit origin refers to several practices which aim at deliberately altering the normal flow of the breath.
We establish the Goddess [or any other deity] into our body [...] There is a special mantra for every God and Goddess. We welcome the God or the Goddess in our body.

He spontaneously went on:

For the relation with the God or the Goddess we are no longer just like a human being. We are other...I’m not saying that we become God. That time we become the main pujārī of the Temple, the main devotee of the God or the Goddess. Establishing the God or the Goddess in my all body, I’m not saying that I become the God or the Goddess.

Kamakhyans have the habit of repeating significant concepts at least twice, in order to make sure that their interlocutor grasps the idea. Hemen Sarma is firm in affirming that with the prāṇa-pratīṣṭhā he does not become God. However, he also affirms that he is “no longer just like a human being”.

The pujārī needs to participate in the divine nature of the deity he is about to worship, in order to be able to carry out the worship. However, his ephemeral otherness from regular humankind does not result in a complete fusion or identification with the deity. With the prāṇa-pratīṣṭhā (and the following ritual operations) the pujārī surpasses his normal human status and acquires a status which combines humanity and divinity - the implication of this process for the self-understanding of the Kamakhyan pujārī will be examined in § 2. This idea is very much in line with the tantric Weltanschaung. According to Padoux:

L’univers tantrique [...] est celui de l’omniprésence de la puissance divine animatrice de l’univers, de l’identification avec cette puissance, de sa captation et de sa manipulation par les rites. C’est parce qu’ils mettent cette force en action que les rites sont efficaces [...] Prescrits en principe par la divinité, puisque les tantras sont des textes révélés, ce
[les rites] sont des actes accomplis par des êtres humains, mais que penètre et anime l’énergie divine, la shaktī.

In Hinduism and most particularly in Tantrism, human and divine, microcosm and macrocosm, are isomorphe, to use Padoux’s term. The human being is inhabited by a divinity which expands itself in the multiform world we know, to afterwards reabsorb it at every cosmic destruction. Divine energy dwells in the human body whose structure reflects the structure of the whole of creation. Tantrism claims that the potent, formidable tantric rites are able to effectively reactivate that energy; they bring the human to the divine plan in a powerful, speedy way which, on the other hand, is, precisely because of that potency, very dangerous too.

Unlike asceticism, which recommends seclusion from the world, Tantrism teaches immersion in the world, in its extreme and transgressive joys and pleasures, precisely in order to overcome all this and bring the human being to salvation from rebirth. The human body is the laboratory where this emancipation from the world through the world can take place. The tantric rite aims at infusing the human with divine energy.

Once he has completed the prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā, the pujārī proceeds to the mātrkā. The term mātrkā originally means “mother”, but is also used to indicate “any alphabet” (Monier-Williams 2005: s. v.). With this operation, the pujārī ritually places the letters of the alphabet on different parts of this body. While miming the gestures, Hemen Sarma said:

To do pūjā we must learn something; without learning anything we cannot do any pūjā. The Goddess of learning is Sarasvatī. You know the A, B, C, D, etc? It’s the same, we have a, ā, i, ī, u, ū, r, etc. Establish letters, we must purify every part of the body. We write letters on our body, but no need of ink [laughing]. After learning, we can pronounce mantras to the Goddess.

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The performance of the māṭṛkās enables the pujārī to pronounce the mantras connected to the deity he is worshipping. The first one to be uttered is the bija-mantra (“seed-mantra”), accompanied by the performance of prāṇāyāma. The definition of bija-mantra given by Brunner-Lachaux is worth quoting at length:

Ce sont des associations monosyllabiques de voyelles et consonnes qui n’ont aucun sens pour les profanes ; mais la nature et l’agencement de ces voyelles et de ces consonnes ont une signification ésotérique, qui est révélée à l’initié et ne devrait l’être qu’à lui86.

The next step listed by Hemen Sarma is called nyāsa. Unfortunately Hemen was rather unclear on this point. The nyāsa (literally, putting down, settling, placing, depositing) is according to Bühnemann “the assignment of alphabets, parts of mantras, word divisions, etc. to various parts of the body, thus believed to be invested with divine power and made secure87”. The māṭṛkās are usually included in the nyāsa. Hopefully further researches will allow me to explore the significance Kamakhyan pujārīs attribute to the operation they call nyāsa.

Next follows the dhyāna-mantra. Dhyāna can be translated as “meditation”. Monier-Williams (2005: s. v.) also renders it as “mental representation of the personal attributes of a deity”; the dhyāna-mantra describes the appearance of the deity the pujārī is going to worship. Hemen Sarma:

How many hands does She [or He] have? Which weapons [does She or He hold]? What type of clothes does She wear? How is Her face? How is Her nose? How is Her ear? Every part of Her body is described. Which type of animal is She using as a vehicle? The dhyāna-mantra of some Gods is short; that of other Gods is two or three pages.

While the *pujārī* visualizes the deity, his hands must be in the *dhyāna-mudrā*. The term *mudrā*’s primary meaning is “seal”; outside the context of the *pañcamakāras*, *mudrā* designates “particular positions or intertwining of the fingers [...]”, commonly practiced in religious worship and supposed to have an occult meaning and magical efficacy” (Monier-Williams 2005: s. v.). Padoux stresses the conventionality of *mudrās*:

Une *mudrā* n’est jamais un mouvement ou une attitude quelconque. C’est un geste codifié: les positions de doits de la main ou autre attitudes formant une *mudrā* sont décrites avec précision dans les textes88.

Each specific *mudrā* is to be used in a particular ritual operation and contributes fundamentally to the efficacy of that operation (see § 3). The *dhyāna-mudrā* is thus the *mudrā* which needs to be associated with the uttering of the *dhyāna-mantra*.

Hemen Sarma added that the *pujārī* must put on his head the flower he held in his hands while visualizing the deity. To my curious questions about this practice, Hemen Sarma said:

The flower represents the God. God must come on our head. He is blessing us; he delivers power to us.

The next step is the *mānasa-pūjā*, which Hemen Sarma labelled as “meditation *pūjā*”. According to Hemen Sarma, at this stage the *pujārī* must close his eyes and “understand what type of *pūjā* he is going to do”. The salient feature of this step on which Hemen Sarma insisted is the uttering of the letters of the alphabet from \(a\) to \(kṣa\) and then back from \(kṣa\) to \(a\). In this way, the total number of the two series of utterings becomes 108 (54+54). The practice is called *anuloma-viloma* as well.

The second-last step is *pīṭha*(throne)-*pūjā*, which again requires the involvement of the *pujārī*’s body. “We do *pūjā* in our body and then to the

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Goddess” said Hemen Sarma, but unfortunately he did not say any more about this operation.

The last phase of the preliminaries is a second utterance of the dhyāna-mantra. Hemen Sarma:

We again utter the dhyāna-mantra. This time we must throw flowers to the Goddess; we should not place the flowers on our head. While uttering the dhyāna-mantra [of the concerned deity], we must do the yoni(vulva)-mudrā and hold the flowers in our hands [...] And before throwing the flowers to the Goddess, we must breathe on them [on the flowers]. Then we give them to the Goddess.

With the second utterance of the dhyāna-mantra the preliminaries are over and the pujārī starts to offer the different services to the Goddess\(^9\), who is treated like a distinguished guest visiting one’s house. First of all She is offered a seat (āsana-pūjā) and is welcomed (svāgātām-pūjā). Immediately afterwards, the Goddess is offered water to wash Herself. In the next step she is again offered water.

If someone comes from outside, we must give him water to wash his hands and feet.

Then follows the snāna or bath. After that, the Goddess is given fresh clothes, candana (sandalwood) and mālās (flower garlands). Incense is offered, as well as ornaments and candles. The Goddess is offered vermillion and is then fed with the naivedya (an offering of raw fruits and uncooked rice). She is given water to drink and then betel nuts. Then comes the japa, namely the murmured repetition of a particular mantra. In this case it is the “main mantra” (the bīja-mantra) of the deity that has to be repeated 108 times. Thereafter the japa must be dismissed (visarjana). The dakṣiṇā (an

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\(^9\) It needs to be clarified that throughout this long interview Hemen Sarma never spoke of what I call the “preliminaries” as distinct from the services. This distinction reflects my point of view, based on Bühnemann. In a potential further interview it would be interesting to point out such distinction to Hemen Sarma, in order to observe his reactions.
offering of money) is given to the Goddess. Sūrya-pūjā (worship of the Sun) and Candra-pūjā (worship of the Moon) follow. The pūjā approaches its end and Viṣṇu is worshipped: as Hemen Sarma effectively put it:

First time Viṣṇu [worshipped in the ādipāṅcadevatā-pūjā]...last time also Viṣṇu!

At this point the praṇāma-mantra is uttered. The term praṇāma points out the act of bowing down before a deity or a human being who is considered superior to oneself (one’s the parents, for instance). The praṇāma-mantra is the mantra accompanying this gesture. It is recited by the Kamakhyan pāṇḍā and repeated by pilgrims during the darśana90. Unlike the bija-mantra, which is only revealed to the initiate, the praṇāma-mantra can be communicated to every devotee.

The final operation the pujārī needs to carry out is the śānti. The term means “peace”; in the case of a pūjā sponsored by devotees, the latter bow down to the idol and repeat the praṇāma-mantra. While they are bowing down, the pujārī sprinkles them with the water used during the worship. Thereafter he sprinkles them with the uncooked wet rice offered with the naivedya (see above). Devotees (including Kamakhyans) only need to be present for the praṇāma-mantra and the śānti; they are not expected to observe the ongoing pūjā, which is the concern of the pujārī. While the pūjā is performed, women usually comment on one another’s new outfits, while men chat among themselves. Once it is time for the praṇāma-mantra and the śānti, on the other hand, each devotee is expected to appear and to prostrate himself. It is important that each devotee gets some water and some rice on his/her back, while prostrating. For that reason, if there is not enough room for the number of devotees, the praṇāma-mantra and the śānti can be repeated twice. With the śānti, the pūjā for the Goddess is completed.

At this stage, the sixty-four Yoginīs which accompany the Goddess are worshipped. Their worship mainly consists in the uttering of their names.

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90 On the darśana see chapter 6, § 2.
The next step is called *bali-pūjā* or *kharga-pūjā*. The term *bali* points out the sacrifice and *kharga* (or *dāo*) designates the long blade⁹¹ used for sacrifices. The *pujārī* sets several deities on both the *kharga* and the goat, which will immediately afterwards be sacrificed. In the Kāmākhyā temple complex, the people who actually decapitate the animal all belong to the same non-Brahman group: they are called Balikata⁹² (*balikaṭā*). The animal’s head is brought to the sanctum and presented to the Goddess.

The next step is the *pūjā* to be rendered to the idols of Kamalā and Mātaṅgī. Thereafter the *pujārī* leaves the sanctum and proceeds to the *calantā* where he worships Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī and a stone bas-relief located on the Southern wall of the *calantā*: Baṭūka Bhairava. This is indeed the only bas-relief of the *calantā* which receives a daily service⁹³. Monier-Williams (2005: s. v.) renders *baṭuka* as “a form of Śiva (among the Śāktas)”, as well as “a boy, a lad”. If my interpretation is correct, unlike the eighteen Bhairavas – who along with the Yoginis form the Goddess’ retinue⁹⁴ - Baṭūka Bhairava of the *calantā* is more closely understood to be a form of Śiva⁹⁵.

The performance of the entire set of daily rituals requires the services of several non-Brahman Shebait, who provide this or that item necessary for the worship. The *pujārī* and the non-Brahman Shebait need to cooperate for the performance of the rituals. The *pujārī* cannot, for instance, fetch water himself for the cult; he has to rely on the Paneris (*pānerī*, a group of non-Brahman Shebait having the task of providing water for the cult). The contribution of every single segment is strictly necessary: the *pujārī* cannot carry out the ritual unless the water is provided to him. If this does not happen, he can only wait; that is, he postpones the performance of his task to the moment when all the other incumbents have accomplished their tasks.

⁹¹ Bronson (1867) ignores the term *kharga*. I transliterate the term as *kharga*, in accordance to the way I heard it pronounced. Bronson (*ibidem*: s. v.) renders term *dāo* as “…a long knife used also a sword”. The word Kamakhyans pronounce is actually *dāo*, not *dā*.


⁹³ On the bas-reliefs of this chamber see chapter 1, § 2.

⁹⁴ See chapter 1, § 2.

⁹⁵ Kamakhyans and devotees sometime pay homage to young boys and call them “Bhairava”. I once observed a devotee worshipping a male child and calling him “Baṭūka”. It is tempting to see in the composed name “Baṭūka Bhairava” the meaning of “boy, child Bhairava”.
Each group of non-Brahman Shebaits has hereditary rights over the Temple and discharges its duty on the basis of a rotation system, equivalent to that of the Bardeuris. It is noteworthy that the non-Brahman Shebaits handle many of the items employed in the cult. Also, as shown at the beginning of the §, a non-Brahman, the Athparia, is entrusted with the śṛṅgāra of the Goddess, which involves touching not only the items used in the worship, but the idol itself. The customs just described are perfectly accepted by everyone, including Bardeuris. The latter do not see any threat for the idols in the fact that non-Brahmans are allowed to touch them. Hemen Sarma did not feel the need to justify the actual arrangements inside the Temple.

With the worship of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī and Baṭuka Bhairava, the pujārī has completed his morning duty. As far as I know, he has no part in the preparation and offering of the bhoga\(^6\) (the daily meal of the Goddess). Instead, the Supakars (sūpakāra) are in charge of these rituals. They are ranked as Nananbardeuris, so I’ll analyse their duties and status in chapter 3, § 7.

In the evening, the pujārī is in charge of the ārati: he waves lamps and offers sweets to Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī. In the Kāmākhyā Temple the ārati is not expected to be performed every day at the same time. True, it invariably takes place after sunset, but is performed when there are no more pilgrims who wish to have darśana; thus the timing of the ārati can vary considerably according to the number of pilgrims visiting the Temple on a particular day. During especially auspicious days or festivals, when large number of pilgrims visit the Temple, the ārati may be performed as late as a couple of hours after sunset. Non-Brahmans usually bring the burning five-fold lamp and prasāda out from the Northern gate and distribute it to devotees waiting outside. However, I frequently observed other people

\(^6\) This term combines several sets of related meanings. It can be translated as “enjoyment” or “(sexual) pleasure”; it refers to the fact of possessing something and can be translated as “property”; and finally it refers to eating and feeding; in Hindu temples the term is employed to indicate the meal which is served to the deity every day around 1 pm.
helping out in the distribution of prasāda: for instance, Tarun, the Bengali ascetic who takes care of the Kotiliṅga temple97.

In the past two groups of non-Brahman Shebaits had the task of playing music and singing devotional songs in the Temple; they were the Gayans (gāyan) and the Bayans (bāyan). Mishra affirms that they were supposed to do it at the ārati98. I never happened to see any of them carrying out any musical activity. As elsewhere in India, a brass cymbal is played during ārati99.

2. 2. The first level of dīkṣā and the training.

To illustrate the process leading to pujārī-hood, I rely on the words of Hemen Sarma who was initiated and trained in his youth, and now is a pujārī.

Hemen Sarma:

Firstly thread ceremony is necessary. In the teenage. We got many mantras. My father is the guru at that time. He puts many mantra in my ear, guiding mantra. This is the first step.

The Assamese word for the sacred thread is lagun; my observation and Bronson (1867: s. v.) are concordant on this point. Kamakhyns understand the term upanayam (imposition of the sacred tread), but usually employ its Kamakhyan equivalent: lagun-denī100. In 2011 I was invited to the lagun-denī of one of Himangshu Sarma’s nephews. The rite, centring around the young boy, went on for many hours and was followed by a lavish feast – later on the

97 See chapter 1, § 3.
98 Mishra 2004: 79.
99 Mishra states that the brass plate is played by Duaris (ibidem: 77).
100 Bronson (1867: s. v.) spells it out as lagun-dyini.
boy's father, a pāṇḍā, told me that he spent what he had earned in six months to arrange the rite and the feast. In one of the most salient passages of the rite, the father whispers in his son's ear some particular mantras (see photos 15 and 16). The mantras should not be heard by anyone else, so the two men, sitting in front of each other, cover their heads with a white cloth. While the rite was going on, an adult male relative of the boy approached me to give me his explanation: “Today he is for the first time a Brahman”.

Hemen Sarma:

My father was a teacher of Sanskrit. He was related to the Temple also. One member of my family must be related to this [priesthood]. I was studying. I am a Bachelor of Science. I also got LLB. But he [Hemen Sarma's father] was getting ill, he was in bed; eventually he handed over all his responsibilities to me. He asked me: “Is it possible for you to maintain the Temple’s duty or not?” At that time I did not promise him that I will do it, but by the blessing of the Goddess I came to the Temple’s duty and he explained all the duties to me. How can a person become a pujārī? What is our relation to the Temple? He explained everything to me. Then he died. I got all the responsibilities of our family on my head. I had to carry all of his business, all his duties. I was 17 or 18 years old. He handed over everything to me.

When Hemen Sarma says that his father was “related to the Temple”, he is pointing out his father’s rights in the rota (pālā) concerning the public, daily cult, as well his rights in the rota concerning festive rites101. Along with these rights, Hemen Sarma inherited his father’s pilgrims too. In short, Hemen Sarma’s father entrusted his son with “all the responsibilities in the Temple”, that is with the entire set of priestly activities he was carrying out during his lifetime. To avoid confusion, I will use the term “priesthood” to refer to the totality of priestly activity a Brahman can undertake: taking part in the pālā and in the rota concerning the festive rites, dealing with his

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101 The Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris’ rights and the rotas organizing these rights are examined in chapter 3.
pilgrims (*pañḍā*-hood) and performing public and private rituals (*pujārī*-hood). However, when the argument requires the singling out of any one of these activities, I will name it explicitly.

Hemen Sarma is the youngest of three brothers; his elder brothers are employees in the service sector. The fact that his father asked him to become a *pujārī*, which he accepted, is in line with a recurring pattern I detected among Bardeuri families: when the elder sons of a Bardeuri become educated and have employment outside the Temple, the remaining one, that is, the youngest, is pushed by the family to take on the priesthood. This is what happened, for instance, in one of the two main guru families of the temple complex. The current guru, Tarini Prasad Sarma (see below), is the youngest of his father’s three sons and his elder brothers are employed in the service sector. During a semi-structured interview he said that he *had* to take on the priesthood – which in his case entails guru-hood as well – precisely because his brothers were employed elsewhere. The number of male relatives an individual has, as well as the family’s expectations, are significant drivers in sending a man towards priesthood.

Hemen Sarma continued spontaneously and talked about the first stage of *dikṣā*.

Then I took initiation from my guru. There are two types of initiations, *vaṇḍika* and *tāntrika*. In the *vaṇḍika* one the *mantras* come from Veda, in the *tāntrika* one the *mantras* come from the *tāntra* anthology. To be a *pujārī* we must first take initiation and guru must belong to our family, we cannot ourselves select guru. First I took *vaṇḍika* initiation. I learnt everything, the process of taking *japa*, meditation, etc. There are three types of meditation, in the morning time, in the mid-time [at noon] and in the evening time. Three prayers, they are called *samdhyās* [daily prayers].

Three stages of initiation (*dikṣā*) are imparted by the guru-families connected to the temple complex. The first is the *abhiṣeka*, the so-called *vaṇḍika* initiation. Although everyone agrees that at this stage the adept
makes no use of the *pañcamakāras*, controversies do exist among Kamakhyans regarding the nature of this initiation (see below). After *abhiṣeka*, there are two more stages: the *satyābhiṣeka* and the *pūrṇābhiṣeka*. Both of them entail the use of the *pañcamakāras* and are understood by everyone as *tāntrika* initiations.

Bardeuris (as well as Nanbanbardeuris) take initiation from certain specific guru families. Many of the latters are based in Kamakhya Dham, while a few are based elsewhere but are connected through guru-disciple relations to the ones based in Kamakhya Dham. Although Hemen Sarma says that “guru must belong to our family” he does not have any blood relationship with his guru (whom I know). In fact, with these words, he wants to say that a Bardeuri (as well as a Nanbanbardeuri) is expected to take initiation from the guru line his father (and his ancestors) took initiation from. His initiation should take place on the same *tithi* (date in the lunar calendar) when his father and ancestors took it. Taking the first stage of initiation (the so called *vaidika* one) enables a Bardeuri to perform the daily *samdhyaś* and is a precondition for the training to become a *pujārī*.

Before proceeding a brief survey of guru families who impart *dikṣā* is appropriate. As stated in chapter 1, § 2, in the second half of the XVIIth century Krṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭācarya, a *śakta* Brahman from Bengal was put at the head of the Kāmākhyā temple complex by the Ahom king Śiva Siṅgha; afterwards the monarch took the *dikṣā* from the famed tantric Brahman. There is a family in Kamakhya Dham that claims to be descended from

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102 I know one exception to this custom. Jyoti Sarma (pseudonym), a Kamakhyan Brahman, took initiation from a North-Indian guru. The two men met in the temple complex, as the guru was there in pilgrimage. Jyoti Sarma told me that when he saw the guru he immediately understood that the latter was the right person to guide him on his spiritual path. Jyoti Sarma is now in early thirties and does not practise priesthood. That is probably why his father (who does not practise priesthood either) did not strongly oppose his son’s choice. However, Jyoti Sarma’s choice entailed some difficulties in his relations to his family. He told me that his guru, who is a vegetarian, asked him to become a vegetarian too, which he accepted. That initially provoked some argument between him and his parents. However, it seems that now his parents accept his choice, but Jyoti Sarma repeatedly complained with me about the inconveniences he has to face being the only vegetarian in a non-vegetarian family.
Kṛṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭācarya\textsuperscript{103}. Like their ancestor, the Bhattacharyas are the gurus of a large number of Kamakhya - for instance, Hemen Sarma's guru is one of the Bhattacharyas. The family has currently two branches; four men are gurus. The Bhattacharyas proudly affirm that the dīkṣā is transmitted in their family from father to son.

Not every Kamakhyan is a disciple of the Bhattacharyas. Many inhabitants of the Blue Hill, including Brahmans, take the dīkṣā from one Bardeuri family, known as the Bara Dalai Ghar (the house of the Major Dalai, head of the temple complex). From the 1830s for about a century the Bara Dalai was been chosen among the members of this family. In the 1930s this family lost its exclusive access to dalai-ship: the last Dalai belonging to this family was Vishnu Prasad Sarma who died some time before 1950. Vishnu was a renowned guru and his descendants have been guarding guru-ship to this day. Tarini Prasad Sarma, the present guru, is Vishnu's great-grandson. Tarini Prasad Sarma is one of the most venerated gurus of the temple complex and a highly regarded pujāri. He is one of the major religious authorities of the entire temple complex and is regarded as a guardian of tradition\textsuperscript{104}. Now in his forties, he lives with his family in Kamakhya Dham in a newly built four-storey building, a few steps away from the house where Vishnu Prasad Sarma used to live. As many Brahmans of Kamakhya Dham are Tarini Prasad Sarma’s disciples, the latter is frequently required to perform

\textsuperscript{103} It is very much probable that this family actually descends from Kṛṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭācarya. I cannot state it with certainty because there exist no studies of their genealogy. However what is relevant for the present purpose is that the Bhattacharyas understand themselves and are understood by everyone else as direct descendants of Kṛṣṇarāma Bhaṭṭācarya.

\textsuperscript{104} During the month of sāon (July/August), many Kamakhyan households perform Manasā-pūjā in their own residences. Every household, which performs it does so on the same day every year. Those families which do not perform the pūjā in their residences contribute to other families’ pūjās. As sāon was approaching, a number of people told me that on the very first day of the month ‘Tarini Prabhu’ would perform his Manasā-pūjā; the event was anticipated almost like a festival. I attended Tarini Prabhu’s Manasā-pūjā: it was the largest private rite I had ever observed in Kamakhya Dham. Throughout the day, a continuous flow of people entered the room where Tarini Prabhu was conducting the pūjā himself, assisted by two other pujāris. After prostrating themselves before the idol of the Goddess, Tarini Prabhu’s disciples would immediately prostrate themselves before their guru. Some seventy billy goats were sacrificed, many of them being donated by the gurus’ disciples. An army of Brahman cooks was busy cooking a variety of different dishes which were served late in the afternoon, after the pūjā was finally over.
their pūjās. Busy in these and other religious duties (like giving initiation), Tarini Prasad Sarma rarely appears at Kāmākhyā Temple.

There are a few other gurus who are connected to the temple complex; they are the disciples of one of these two families – usually of the Bhattacharyas. For instance, Himangshu Sarma took the dīkṣā from a guru who presently lives in Rangia (Northern Kamrup District). In 2011 Himangshu and his family went to Rangia to pay their annual visit to the guru and I went with them. The guru takes care of a beautiful temple immersed in the jungle and also owns a couple of cinemas in Rangia. Himangshu’s father and their ancestors¹⁰⁵ took the dīkṣā from this line of gurus. The interesting point is that the Rangia gurus do not receive the dīkṣā from their fathers; rather they receive it from the Bhattacharyas. Thus, according to Himangshu, the Bhattacharyas are his “dādā-guru”; whenever he meets one of the Bhattacharyas, Himangshu prostrates himself before him. At the same time he shows a respectful deference towards Tarini Prasad Sarma (but does not prostrate himself before him).

The Bhattacharyas and Tarini Prasad Sarma are widely understood to be the two main guru families of the temple complex. The members of the Bara Dalai Ghar claim that in earlier times the dīkṣā used to be transmitted in their family from father to son. This custom, however, was discontinued in the recent past. As he himself affirmed, Tarini did not take the dīkṣā from his father, Ambika, who was a guru himself; Tarini took the dīkṣā from one of the Bhattacharyas. It is not clear in which generation this development took place – on the basis of some data it seems probable that Tarini’s father too took the dīkṣā from one of the Bhattacharyas – and it is not clear why it took place. However, it must immediately be pointed out that this development did not diminish the prestige of the Bara Dalai Ghar and of Tarini Prabhu.

At this point in the interview, Hemen Sarma spontaneously stopped the narration of his life and made an excursus into the significance of the various

¹⁰⁵ Himangshu’s father went to Rangia that day. While we were there, he told me that he took the dīkṣā from the father of the present guru. Like Himangshu, he maintains that their ancestors too took the dīkṣā from this guru line. This is very plausible, but I cannot back their statements with any solid evidence.
stages of initiation. The following quotations are of central importance to grasp the way Hemen Sarma understands himself to be a tāntrika.

All these things [the three saṃdhyās, the japa as well as prāṇāyāma] we learn in the vaidika initiation. Though we call it vaidika initiation, the process is from tāntrika initiation. Because the meanings of mantras, even in the saṃdhyās, have same relation with tāntrika mantras. [...] First initiation is called vaidika, but, main thing, tāntrika initiation is also there. Everyone who takes initiation here in Kāmākhya [temple complex], gets the tāntrika initiation, although the first one is called vaidika. Everybody thinks that if we take wine, fish, meat that is called tāntrika initiation, but it is not like this. Some process, though we call it vaidika initiation, is from is tāntrika initiation.

To clarify, Hemen Sarma eventually affirmed with emphasis:

We pray tāntrika. Tān\textsuperscript{106} means body in Sanskrit. We [I] pray in my body also...that is the tāntrika!

According to Hemen Sarma, it is not (only) the use of the pañcamakāras which makes a man a tāntrika. Rather, a person initiated by one of the guru families linked to the Kamakhyā temple complex cannot but be a tāntrika. Even if the mantras given in the first initiation, the abhiṣeka, are (said to be) from the Veda, the very operations carried out in the pūjā as well as in the daily saṃdhyās are tāntrika, because they entail the imposition of divine energies on the worshipper’s body. Hemen Sarma’s opinion is shared, with slight differences, by other (but not all) Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris. His point of view is in line with the image scholarly literature gives of Tantrism. According to Bühnemann:

The basic difference between these two forms of worship [the vaidika-pūjā and the tāntrika] is the worshipper’s identification with the deity in

\textsuperscript{106} There is no Sanskrit term tān or tāna, meaning “body”. Instead the term tanu means “body”, as well as “slim, emaciated” (Monier-Williams 2005: s. v.).
Tāntric pūjā, which is made possible by the performance of such rites as bhūtaśuddhi [intended as the purification of the five elements constituting human body] and nyāsa [...]. The deity is not imagined as coming from outside but from the devotees’ heart.\footnote{Bühnemann 1988: 9 (note 14)}

Hemen Sarma and Bühnemann agree, so to say, that the worshipper is a tāntrika if he voluntarily undergoes a transformation, which makes him a semi-divine being. Bühnemann affirms that the worshipper becomes “identified” with the deity. I think it is better to analyse the issue in terms of power (śakti). According to this widespread idea, the regular human being lacks the purity and potency of worshipping the deity. The pujārī needs to call the deity he is going to worship in his body and to let His or Her energy pervade himself, precisely in order to be able to worship that deity. Only when he is impregnated with divine power can the pujārī perform the pūjā.

Fuller too stresses how similar ideas circulate among the priests of the Mīnākṣī Temple:

In Hinduism, in absolute contrast to the monotheistic religions, that problem [the problem of communication between human and divine beings] is sought to be resolved by progressive identification of the worshipper and his god, so that the two can ultimately become one. Thus, for example, in a Śiva temple the officiating priest is held to be a form of Śiva and, before he starts any ritual, he should invoke the god within himself and worship himself [...]. The essence of the idea is encapsulated in the Āgamic precept that ‘only Śiva can worship Śiva’, though the idea is not confined to south Indian Śaivism.\footnote{Fuller 1984: 14-15.}

Fuller is clear in affirming that similar concepts are not confined to the Mīnākṣī Temple. With different nuances, various scholars\footnote{See among others Padoux (1999), Sanderson (1985), Torella (1994 and 2008, chapter 7) and Freeman (1998).} too have stressed the significance of the ritual operations aimed at infusing the divine

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essence into the worshipper. According to Padoux in the tantric rite “le corps [est] divinisé, transcendé et surtout participant actif du rite ou de l’ascèse spirituelle110”.

Vivre, « s’exister » en tantrika, c’est vivre dans un univers éprouvé comme pénétré par l’énergie divine, un ensemble énergétique où le corps est immergé, en faisant partie et le reflétant dans sa structure : un corps où les forces surnaturelles, sont présentes, l’animant et le liant au cosmos, un corps à la structure et à la vie divino-humaine, ce corps étant en outre un corps yogique. 
Tantrisme et yoga sont en effet indivisible. L’importance du corps dans le monde des tantras est en fait si grande que l’on pourrait traiter de presque tous les aspects du domaine tantrique sous l’angle du corps111.

Later on he affirms:

...il nous faut souligner comme traits fondamentalement tantriques le rôle essentiel de l’imagination créatrice d’images, la visée identificatrice mentalement et corporellement vécue, et, plus spécialement, le rôle des mantras, car si on peut utiliser un mantra hors de tout rituel, il n’y a pas de rite sans mantra112.

Not everyone in Kamakhya Dham would agree with Hemen Sarma. In his words, Hemen Sarma summarises the opposite opinion circulating among Kamakhyans: those who restrict themselves to the first stage (the abhiṣeka) understand themselves to be vaidika, exactly because they do not make use of the pañcamakāras, which are only required in the second and third stages. I know one Bardeuri pujārī who understands himself to be vaidika, because he took the abhiṣeka, but never proceeded to the following stages. His name is Bhagavati Sarma; he is a Bardeuri, now in his late forties. These two arguments (of Hemen Sarma and Bhagavati Sarma) are built in opposition to

110 Padoux 2010: 134
111 Ibidem: 123.
112 Ibidem: 190.
each other. For the initiates who took at least the *satyābhiseka*, those who understand themselves as *vaidika* are in error, precisely because everyone who takes initiation in the Kāmākhyā temple complex cannot but be a *tāntrika*. Those who, like Bhagavati Sarma, think of themselves as *vaidika* are not only naïve, they are also stopping their spiritual (and ritual) development, because they content themselves with what is considered a kind of preliminary to the highest degrees of initiation. Hemen Sarma does not at all deny the necessity of taking the first level of initiation, but, as will be shown in § 3, felt the need to surpass it with the second and the third level. His choices are reminiscent of the way tantric texts position themselves before the Veda. According to Padoux:

*Ces révélations [tantric texts] se considèrent comme supérieures à celles du Véda parce qu’elles sont, affirment-elles, plus efficaces que lui pour le salut des humain, les y menant plus vite et jusqu’à un plan plus élevé que en le fait l’enseignement à base védique [...]. Les traditions tantriques, en général, ne rejettent toutefois pas complètement la tradition brahmanique issue du Véda. Elles la considèrent comme valable, mais seulement sur un plan inférieur, comme un enseignement ou des règles générales de base auxquels s’ajoutent sans les oblitérer les règles plus spéciales, plus hautes des tantras*113.

Similarly, Sanderson writes the following regarding the śaiva tantric tradition of Kashmir (Xth-XIVth century):

*The Śaivas claimed to have access through their Tantras to a ritual life which was higher and more potent than the Vedic. But they were Vedic to the extent that like all Hindus of caste they had first been purified by the Vedic rites of passage, from conception to investiture and (optionally) marriage. And even when they had gone through the ceremony of initiation, the Tantric rite of passage which gave them access to Śaiva ritual, they were still bound to conform to the rules of

the Veda-based social system and its local variants. The Śaiva initiate therefore saw himself as subject to two levels of injunction: the general or common Vedic level and the special level reached by his initiation.[114]

Tantrism does not aim at replacing Brahman orthodoxy. It sees the latter as a necessary, yet flat base on which it builds his higher way to salvation.

It should be clarified that is not only the pujārīs who have different opinions of what it means to be a tāntrika. Pāṇḍās, Brahman who do not practice any form of priesthood and non-Brahmans too understand themselves to be either vaidika or tāntrika on the basis on the dīkṣā they took. The arguments these people use are the similar to those of Hemen Sarma and Bhagavati Sarma.

Having taken the abhiṣeka, Hemen Sarma started his training:

Only after learning the correct procedure, I started to do the main pūjā for the Kāmākhyā Temple. Experienced pujārīs taught me everything. We have our own book. It is called Kāmākhyā-pūjā-pāddhati. We must learn it first. We call it kāthā too. There is no printing. It is all handwriting. I collected it from them [senior pujārīs]. I used to read it till 12 o'clock in the night, sometime till rising sun. Then I went to my elder pujārīs. They examined me. They had to say whether I was OK or not. “You are OK”, they said. ”Now we must go to the practice”. When the pūjā starts in the morning time, they call me. “You sit here, you already learnt the books, but the practice is also necessary. With the pronouncing of mantras, you need to know how to use your fingers [you need to know the correct mudrās], how to use your body, how to establish Gods and Goddesses in your body”. Many processes are there. Then we [I] must sit with the priest, in the garbhastraṇa, the main sthāna. Many priests called me, “Please come, tomorrow is my duty [tomorrow I will have my pālā], come in the morning. Then you can be a master”. And one day they said that I was fit.

The pujaṛī-to-be collects the Kāmākhyā-pūjā-pāddhati or kāthās\(^{115}\) from senior pujaṛīs. Kāthās are manuscripts giving instructions on the correct procedure to worship the Goddess Kāmākhyā. As Hemen Sarma states, they have never been printed; the manuscripts circulate exclusively among Bardeuri households, who guard them jealously. In Hemen Sarma’s words: “it is our secret”.

Having obtained the kāthās from his elders, the pujaṛī-to-be starts reading them. The image of the young Bardeuri reading the kāthās with perseverance and terrific effort throughout the night is a recurring one in Kamakhya Dham. Several Kamakhyans told me how demanding it was for them (or for their relatives) to go through the kāthās; the adjective kathin - “hard, severe, unfeeling, difficult to do or to understand, illiberal”, Bronson (1867: s. v.) – is frequently employed to describe the difficulties involved in studying the kāthās and in the entire process of training to become a pujaṛī.

Having studied the kāthās, the pujaṛī-to-be accompanies elder pujaṛīs to the sanctum when they have their pālās and observes them while they perform the pūjā. The pujaṛī-to-be is literally apprenticed to his seniors, who have the power to say whether he has successfully learned the required skills or not.

When there was no problem for me to make pūjā, I sat in front of the Goddess, on my pālā-days\(^{116}\); I became a priest, a main pujaṛī from that day [with a solemn accent]. There is no certificate, no evidence [laughing]. But they [senior pujaṛīs] must examine us [me], whether I’m fit or not. If I’m not fit, no one dares to allow me to go inside. When I became fit to be pujaṛī, then I must go and perform pūjā.

\(^{115}\) From now onwards I will refer to these manuscripts by the term “kāthās”.

\(^{116}\) When he was ill, Hemen Sarma’s father appointed a second pujaṛī to perform the daily rituals on his (Hemen Sarma’s father’s) pālā-days. While Hemen Sarma was going through the training and until he was confirmed by his seniors, the same pujaṛī continued to perform the daily pūjā on the former’s pālā-days.
2. 3. The second and third levels of dīkṣā.

Declared a pujārī by his seniors, Hemen Sarma wanted to go ahead into the second stage of initiation, but encountered his mother’s opposition:

It was the time to get tāṇtrika initiation. At the beginning my mother obstructed me: “Do not go for tāṇtrika pūjā, because it’s very tough, you must take wine, fish, meat”. [At first] my mother did not allow me. After the death of my father, my mother becomes just like my guru. She advised me in everything: “Step by step you should go”.

All those who understand themselves to be vaidika invariably say that being tāṇtrika is dangerous and that a man who goes on the tāṇtrika way risks losing his right path. On one side, tāṇtrika rituals are believed to be dangerous because they entail the use of impure substances and stir up powerful divine energies; the neophyte may not be experienced enough to cope with the energies he has aroused. In this sense, tāṇtrika practices are ritually dangerous. However, many Kamakhyan women fear a much more concrete threat in the tāṇtrika practices: that a man who starts drinking alcohol within the ritual context may become an alcoholic in his daily life. Sadly, several Kamakhyan women are indeed alcoholic and are looked upon by their fellow villagers with contempt. Their lifestyle, which does not fit with the standards, is, in the eyes of the Kamakhyan, a proof of the danger inherent in the consumption of alcohol.

Just like Hemen Sarma’s mother, other Kamakhyan women delayed (or even stopped) their sons’ initiation into the second stage. Himangshu Sarma, now in his forties and practising pāṇḍā-hood, took the abhiṣeka along with his wife and never proceeded further, nor is he currently planning to do so. When I asked him why, he plainly said that his mother told him that he should never drink alcohol throughout his life. According to him the tāṇtrika path is a “shortcut” – a very powerful and speedy path towards divinity\textsuperscript{117} -

\textsuperscript{117}See § 2. Throughout my fieldworks I became familiar with a family of pilgrims coming from Bhopal who regularly visit the temple complex. Husband and wife, both understand
but entails huge risks for the practitioner. In contrast to the figure of the unrestrained alcoholic is the ideal ṭāntrika; in the eyes of Kamakhyans, he is the one who exclusively drinks alcohol for ritual purposes and is able to control himself throughout the rituals. Tarini Prasad Sarma incarnates this ideal; he is said to be able to carry out the most intricate rituals with terrific accuracy, notwithstanding the large quantity of alcohol he is required to drink during and for the performance of these rituals.

Notwithstanding all this, many of those who understand themselves as vaidika do affirm that the tantric practices are worth undertaking. In my most recent fieldwork, I had a long conversation with a non-Brahman Shebait. This man, in his forties, earns his living taking photos of pilgrims. Of very modest means, he always has a radiant smile on his face. One day he invited me to his place. At some point the conversation revolved around tantric practices, of which he provided a long explanation. According to him, tantric practices would be aimed at making the concentration of the worshipper as sharp as possible. The way he spoke clearly demonstrated that he sees a great value in such an effort. “It is not for me” he added in the end (my translation from Assamese), shaking his right hand in the gesture signifying denial.

Let us go back to Hemen Sarma. With the passage of time, he was eventually initiated into the second stage:

themselves to be ṭāntrika because they took the dikṣā from a now deceased guru who used to claim to be a ṭāntrika. The guru, based during his lifetime in Jodhpur, used to visit the Kāmākhya temple complex and it is for this reasons that the pilgrims from Bhopal were acquainted with the place. It is not important for the present purpose what their practices are; rather I want to highlight their ideas regarding the efficacy of the practices. One evening we had a long conversation regarding what it means to be a ṭāntrika. According to the man, bhakti is a “simple road”, while in Tantra “you achieve your goal by full force”. Tantric practices are a very formidable means to go close to the divine; precisely because they are powerful tools, they are also very dangerous. To explain his view the pilgrim provided the following example. The distance between New Delhi and Guwahati is more or less 2000 km. If one walks it will take six months; cycling three months; with a motorbike one week; by rājdhāni (the fastest train) two days and by air two hours. The distance is in all cases the same but, he concluded, “it’s up to you how you want to cover it”.

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In the end I took tāntrika initiation. In the tāntrika five things are necessary. Madya, maṅgsu\(^{118}\), māca\(^{119}\), mudrā, maithuna. It is called pañcamakāra. Wine, meat, fish, mudrā and maithuna. Mudrā is the practising of hands\(^{120}\). Maithuna is of two types. If we discuss something, like now, it’s called maithuna, and from the discussion some result comes out. I’m giving something to you, you’re getting something from me. But maithuna also means the sexual relation between man and woman, but this process is not practised here.

Hemen Sarma’s statement is consistent with that of another Kamakhyan who took the tāntrika initiation. According to both of them the tāntrika rituals practised in the temple complex do not entail sexual intercourses - I do not have the means to either confirm or question their statements.

Hemen Sarma continued spontaneously:

My wife took tāntrika initiation along with me. In the tāntrika initiation she is the main guru. Śakti...though normally she sits at my left hand, in the tāntrika she sits at my right hand. They [women] are the powerful ones. They pour wine for us, they control us; we cannot take wine ourselves, according to our wish. She helps me, she maintains me, she controls the amount of wine I drink.

Clearly, in the tāntrika initiation the woman has a prominent and supervisory role over the man. That the wife controls the amount of alcohol drunk by the husband can be compared to the fact the Kamakhyan women

\(^{118}\) In Bronson (1867: s. v.) the spelling of the Assamese word for “meat” is maṅgsa. I adopt the Kamakhyan variant, which replaces ←a with ←u.

\(^{119}\) Hemen Sarma uses the Assamese terms maṅgsu (meat) and māca (fish). The corresponding Sanskrit terms are māṃsa and matsya (see Monier-Williams 2005: s. v.).

\(^{120}\) In the introduction to the present chapter it has been highlighted that when counted among the pañcamakāras, mudrā is generally understood as “grilled grains”. Outside the context of the pañcamakāras, mudrā refers to the codified gestures of hands which are considered to be an essential element of ritual operations (see § 1, note...). It is noteworthy that Hemen Sarma understands mudrā in the second sense even when it is counted among the pañcamakāras.
may delay or stop the initiation of their sons into the second stage. In both cases, a woman keeps a man (her husband or her son) away from the excesses of the tāntrika practices, and especially from the use of alcohol. The role of women is wider though. Like Hemen Sarma, Kamakhyans usually take initiation (either the vaidika or the tāntrika) along with their wives\textsuperscript{121}. It is the women who have śakti, “they are the powerful ones”; men can only acquire śakti through females. This is reminiscent of the tantric secret rituals involving sexual unions. The female partner of the tāntrikas was “a yoginī […] identifiée à une forme de la Déesse (qui pouvait être leur épouse, une autre femme ou une prostituée)\textsuperscript{122}”.

The Minākṣī Temple priests too take initiation along with their wives\textsuperscript{123}. Fuller further states that widowed priests are not allowed to practise priesthood any more.

They [the priests] stress particularly that they must have access to śakti, the divine power personified as feminine that is required to worship Minakśi properly. A priest can only legitimately gain access to this power, incarnated in the goddess but also inherent in all women, through sexual relations with his wife. This notion is reminiscent of the Tantric doctrine that in the ritual intercourse the female incarnates the goddess's power\textsuperscript{124}.

\textsuperscript{121} Anupam Sarma, a Nanabdeuri of my acquaintance took the abhiṣeka and the satyābhiseka when he was a bachelor. Later on, after his marriage and the birth of his son, he took the pūrṇābhiseka. He invited me to his initiation, which took place in his guru’s house. The entire process had various phases and lasted several hours. When I arrived, Anupam Sarma had just completed some preliminaries and was waiting in the sitting room of his guru’s house. Intrigued, I asked him what was going on. He told me that his wife was taking the abhiṣeka and the satyābhiseka, so that later on she would be able to take the pūrṇābhiseka along with him. Anupam Sarma took me to the room where the ritual was taking place: the young woman, dressed in a nice cotton sārhi, was performing various ritual operations under the guidance of a pujārī deputed by Anupam Sarma’s guru. The guru himself and a third pujārī were performing some other rituals, which Anupam Sarma simply labeled as “preliminaries”. I told him “your wife needs to be updated”. He said: “Yes, update the system!” miming the phrase used on computer’s screens and started laughing.

\textsuperscript{122} Padoux 2010: 156.

\textsuperscript{123} Fuller 1984: 28-30.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibidem: 30-31.
All these ideas are consistent with each other: the worshipper needs to be imbued with divine energy (śakti) in order to be able to worship the deity. A transfer of energy is, in one way or another, needed to make the priest fit to carry out the worship. Significant differences exist and will be analysed with the help of Hemen Sarma’s next (and final) quotation.

I have been enquiring for a long time about the activities Kamakhyan tāntrikas carry on after taking initiation. As is well known to scholars, secrecy has been one of the very mark of Tantrism in all its different forms. Since I never took any initiation from any guru family connected to the temple complex, initiates I am otherwise very familiar with sometimes told me that they could not share their experiences with me. I never pressed them further, which in turn helped them to open up somehow. What I learnt from these conversations is that tāntrikas meet up at night in what is called the cakrānuṣṭhāna. The dates for these meetings are not fixed and the meeting itself can be called for by seniors, or asked for by juniors. Hemen Sarma:

*Anuṣṭhāna* is just like organisation. *Cakra* is circle. There is a master. We must follow him. There is no wife, no śakti. Our wife is at home, we are in the temple; then one senior person controls us. At that time his name is cakreśa: master of the cakra, teacher of the cakra. He controls us [...] when I’m sitting in the cakrānuṣṭhāna, I got another name. They call me with that name. It’s hidden, I should not pronounce it.

According to some further information, it seems that in the cakrānuṣṭhāna the initiates talk about different religious matters. I have been told that “it is like a school”. In the cakrānuṣṭhāna consumption of alcohol is mandatory and it is the cakreśa who controls the other initiates. Participation in the cakrānuṣṭhāna is only open to initiates; on the basis of some data I assume that several different circles exist among the initiates of the temple complex. In other words, it seems to me that an initiate does not take part in every cakrānuṣṭhāna, but only in those of the circle he belongs to.

According to Tarabout (personal communication), the cakrānuṣṭhāna is most probably a sanitized version of the rituals which, in other contexts,
entail(ed) sexual intercourse; the double meaning ascribed by Hemen Sarma to *maithuna* supports this assumption. It should be noticed, with Padoux that “*cakrāpūjā*” was one of the terms used to point out the secret rites for initiates involving collective sexual unions\(^{125}\) (described by Abhinavagupta in the 28\(^{th}\) chapter of the *Tantrāloka*\(^{126}\)). Several couples, consisting a man and a woman each had an intercourse at the same time. Just like mirrors reflecting each other, says Abhinavagupta, the passionate feelings of the participants fuel one another and thus arouse “une presence intense, effervescente, partagée par tous, de la puissance divine”. It is reasonable to assume that the denomination *cakrāpūjā* is due to the disposition of the couples who were positioned in concentric circles around the guru.

Hemen Sarma denies that sexual intercourse takes place in the secret rites for initiates, but nevertheless acknowledges the role of women who alone have *śakti*. Their role is restricted to the *dikṣā* which they take with their husbands; neither they, nor other women take part in the *cakrānuṣṭhāna*. Mīnākṣī Temple priests not only take the initiation along with their wives, but also stress the importance of a regular sex life to make the priest apt to worship the Goddess Mīnākṣī – Kamakhyan priests did not express a similar idea to me. In both cases, as well as in the secret rites for initiates involving sexual intercourse, the role of the women is the fundamental.

Before proceeding further it is appropriate to summarise the rites a confirmed *pujārī* is allowed to perform. First of all, a Bardeuri *pujārī* can perform the daily *pūjā* for the Goddess Kāmākhyā, along with the entire set of regular rites (see § 1). Second, a Bardeuri *pujārī* can perform any private *pūjā* for the Goddess Kāmākhyā, asked for and sponsored by a pilgrim. Very frequently, the *pūjā* is followed by a *havana* or *homa*, a ritual centred around the lighting of a fire, where different kinds of raw foods are offered (see photo 19). The *pujārī* who has performed the private *pūjā* will also perform

\(^{125}\) Padoux 2010: 156-157.
\(^{126}\) Abhinavagupta, one of the greatest Indian philosophers of all time, lived in present-day Kashmir between the X\(^{th}\) and the XI\(^{th}\) century. His *Tantrāloka* (*The light of the tantras*) is a monumental, encyclopedic treatise on Tantrism.
the related *havana*. Finally, a Bardeuri *pujārī* can direct a *kumārī-pūjā* (worship of an immature girl), although the latter is actually performed by the devotee who has demanded it.

The *abhiseka*, along with the training, is a sufficient condition to get access to *pujārī*-hood. Thus on his *pālā*-days Bhagavati Sarma, who understands himself to be *vaïdika*, is entitled to perform the regular set of daily rituals, as much as Hemen Sarma, who understands himself to be a *tāntrika*.

A Nananbardeuri *pujārī*, who has been recognized and trained by his seniors, can perform the equivalent rites in the temple(s) he is attached to, that is, he can perform the daily worship of the deity concerned as well as the *pūjā* and *havana*, requested by pilgrims. In fact, a Bardeuri *pujārī* can in theory perform the private *pūjā* and *havana* for any deity inhabiting Nilachal\(^\text{127}\). However, the contrary is not possible: a Nananbardeuri cannot under any circumstances perform the private *pūjā* and *havana* dedicated to the Goddess Kāmākhyā, nor Her daily rites. The worship of the Goddess Kāmākhyā is first, superior to the worship of the other deities. The fact that someone is entitled to perform Her worship implies that he is able to perform the worship of any other deity inhabiting the Hill.

One point concerning the *kāthās* needs to be highlighted. Like any other Bardeuri, Hemen Sarma proudly affirms that the Bardeuri *pujārī* performing a *pūjā* for the Goddess Kāmākhyā in Her Temple is strictly prohibited from consulting the *kāthās*. He must know all the *mantras* by hearth. However, he can consult the manuals during the performance of *pūjās* for minor deities. According to Hemen Sarma, unlike the Kāmākhyā-pūjā-pāddhati, manuals giving minor deities’ *pūjās* are on sale and can be bought.

It is not enough for a *pujārī* to be a *satyābhiseka* in order to carry out Tārā-pūjā. Only *pūrṇabhisekas* are allowed to perform it as only they can perform the *pūjā* connected with the sacrifice of the buffalo. A *pujārī* told me that “the Tārā-pūjā starts from the end”. This statement is reminiscent of the

\(^{127}\) To do this, he needs the authorization of the Nananbardeuri who is in charge of the minor temple, where the rites ought to be performed. See chapter 6, § 2.
abhicāra which, according to Türstig, "may be cautiously be termed ‘sorcery’\(^{128}\). Having mainly destructive aims, the abhicāra practices “were at all times highly feared and despised (as much as secretly sought and used)”. Türstig says that:

One peculiar feature of abhicāra-rites is that of 'inversion'. Since abhicāra is indeed opposed to other common practices as far as purpose and public evaluation is concerned, it is obvious that this should find its expression also in elements of an actual performance\(^{129}\).

The principle of inversion takes shape in a number of uncommon practices; it is relevant for the present purpose that it includes “reverting and confusing the common order of ritual acts\(^{130}\).

An interesting hint regarding Hemen Sarma’s statements was given to me by Dominique Baur, a student of Indology in South Asia Institute (Heidelberg University), who patiently discussed various parts of my thesis with me. He suggests that Hemen Sarma’s affirmation that he does not “become the God or the Goddess” may be intended to differentiate the pujārī from the deodhāi. Every year in August deodhāis are believed to be possessed by various deities inhabiting Nilachal, including the Goddess Kāmākhyā, and dance to the sound of Assamese drums for three days\(^{131}\). Some deodhāis started dancing during their adolescence, while others became possessed for the first time when they were adults. In the devotees’ eyes, a deity chooses a man as his vehicle: whatever his age, the latter will be possessed every year for the rest of his life. During these three days devotees, including Kamakhyans, worship deodhāis and beg for their blessing. An intrinsic part of the festival is the three-day Manasā-ṑjā, celebrated at the statue of Manasā in the pañcaratna.

\(^{128}\) Türstig 1985: 69.
\(^{129}\) Ibidem: 90.
\(^{130}\) Ibidem: 109.
\(^{131}\) The dance is called deodhāni nāc. Kamakhyans understand the term deodhāni as "the sound of God". It is reasonable to assume that the term is related to Sanskrit deva (God) + dhvani (sound).
The deodhāis dance most of the time throughout the festival. During the second and the third day, however, they are expected to stop dancing for some time and to sit in bali-ghar, namely the pavilion dedicated to sacrifices. During these pauses, devotees approach deodhāis in order to consult them and get their advice regarding their problems. The words a deodhāi utters are understood to be those of the deity - all the deodhāis affirm that they do not recognise even their close relatives during the possession. Some deodhāis may give a flower from the garlands they are wearing to the devotees who are prostrating themselves. Once the festival is over, deodhāis go back to their ordinary lives.

In order to understand the way deodhāis conceive the possession they undergo, I will quote the expression used by Deviram Das, the deodhāi of Manasā. I became particularly familiar with him throughout my fieldwork, because he lives with his family in the same neighbourhood where I used to stay. He insists that Manasā actually takes his body (gā lay). Gā is the Assamese word for “body” and is used as a synonym of śarīr, which is also employed in everyday parlance. Lai is the Assamese equivalent of the Hindi lenā; it means “to take” and is used in several different contexts. Deviram Das also employs the verb lambhi, which can be conveniently translated by the English “to possess”. Unlike lai, lambhi is uniquely used to point out the fact that a human becomes possessed by an external, non-human force, either a deity or a devil. A third expression Deviram Das uses when talking about the Goddess Manasā, is śarīrod jāi (to go into [someone’s] body).

Deviram Das’ words convey the idea of a veritable invasion of the divine energy into the deodhāi’s body. The deodhāi cannot cause the deity’s entry into his body, nor he can stop it. Instead, it is the deity who, according to His or Her inscrutable will, chooses a particular individual as His or Her vehicle. The only thing the deodhāi is bound to do is to make his body suitable for the deity; that is why during the month before the festival the deodhāi observe a set of limitations, concerning diet, sexual activity, clothing, etc. Several

132 Lambhi does not convey the sense of “property”. It is significant that I first learned the use of this verb when I started interviewing the deodhāis.
deodhāis affirm that anyone who does not follow these limitations, risks causing divine anger and consequently to become crazy (pāgal hai jābo). On the first day of the festival, all the deodhāis undergo the prāyaścitta. This ritual aims at purifying the person who undergoes it and can be conveniently translated as “purification” or “expiation”. In the Kāmākhyā Temple, the ritual takes place around the saubhāgya-kuṇḍa (see photos 2 and 6). The deodhāis bathe in the kuṇḍa and then carry out a set of operations under the guidance of a Brahman, in order to get rid of all the impurities accumulated throughout the year.

The way deodhāis feel regarding the fact that they are possessed is explored by the documentary “Ghora. Waiting for the Goddess” (2014), made by film-maker Alessandro Cartosio and myself. The film follows two deodhāis (also called ghorās in Kamakhyā parlance), Shiva Nath Das and Deviram Das, in the delicate phase preceding the Dance and explores the way they gradually separate themselves from their families and their day-to-day life. The documentary shows how the deodhāis feel somehow uneasy in the days preceding the festival and fear that something bad may happen during the dance. This feeling is consistent with the fact that, according to the deodhāis, they do not act, but are acted upon by the deities. Thus, the course of the dance is not in their hands, but depends upon the capricious will of the deities.

Unlike the deodhāi, the pujārī intentionally sets divine energies on his body. He acts according to an aim (performing the pūjā) and retains the awareness of his identity throughout the ritual. Carrying out the pūjā is in the hands of the pujārī\textsuperscript{133}; the latter has to cope with deities, who can show their dissatisfaction\textsuperscript{134}, but never loses his agency and identity. It is the pujārī who

\textsuperscript{133} Vidal (1989) explores the different modes of action of the pujārīs and of the mediums of local deities in Himachal Pradesh. The deity disappears behind the pujārī during the ritual, devotees interact with the pujārī, whom they understand to be a human being. The deity is the receiver of the gifts conveyed in their name by the pujārī, but is not accessible directly, so to say. Instead, the deity is fully present in the body of the medium: the devotee can pose questions to the deity and the words the medium utters are understood to be those of the deity.

\textsuperscript{134} For instance, the fact that a goat which ought to be sacrificed does not die with a single stroke of dāo (the blade used for sacrifices) means that the deity concerned does not accept
makes the first step towards the deity. Unlike him, the deodhāi is the arrival
point of a movement that starts somewhere else, namely in the deity’s will to
possess a human body and dance. Nevertheless, both the deodhāi and the
pujārī come into contact with the divine. The contact between the deodhāi
and the divine is total and almost violent, while the contact between the
pujārī and the deity is induced and controlled. Since they both become
temporary abodes of the deities, they both have to purify themselves in order
to be the proper receptor of the divine energy. The function of the limitations
deodhāis observe and of the prāyaścitta they perform is equivalent to the
function of the phatphat-pūjā and the bhūta-śuddhi, performed by the pujārī.

Berti points out a similar distinction between two figures involved in
rituals in Kullu valley (Himachal Pradesh): the purohit and the gur. The
purohit is a Brahman, who has studied Sanskrit texts, masters a number of
mantras and observes various restrictions, which safeguard his high
standards of purity. These factors enable him to perform for his clientele a
certain number of rites, namely the saṃskāras (rites of passage) and the yāgs
(occasional rites). According to Berti:

Le purohit, ou pandit (“savants”), sont les officiants des rituels privés
pour les familles de hautes castes, et sont également astrologues. Ce
sont les dépositaires de la connaissance sanskrite, ceux qui maîtrisent le
langage rituel transmis par les textes savants et se présent comme les
garants de l’orthodoxie. Un purohit n’accomplit jamais un rituel sans

the sacrifice. I observed innumerable sacrifices, but never happened to see a similar incident.
A Kamakhyan girl told me that in 2012 her uncle came to the Manasā-pūjā taking place in her
house and wanted to offer a goat to the Goddess. As explained in note 37 during the month of
śāoṇ several Kamakhyan households perform Manasā-pūjā in their residences; those who do
not do so, usually contribute to other households' Manasā-pūjā. Thus the wish of the girl's
uncle to offer a goat was in line with the customary habits and was perfectly accepted by
anyone. However, something went wrong and the goat did not die at the first stroke. It had to
be killed with a second stroke. The main pujārī in charge of that Manasā-pūjā was Tarini
Prasad Sarma who is the guru of both the girl's father and of her unlucky uncle. Tarini
Prabhu had to carry out a long ritual, requiring large quantities of alcohol, in order to
remedy the fault.
avoir un livre à portée de main, et aucun de ces actes ni de ses paroles n'est en principe improvisé\(^{135}\).

Like the Kamakhyan pujārī, the purohit of Berti needs to be a Brahman and legitimize his authority over rites on the basis of the training he has undergone under the guidance of a superior authority – the guru for the purohit of Berti, senior pujāris for the Kamakhyan pujārī\(^{136}\). Instead, the gur is a (Brahman or non-Brahman) individual who, according to the devotees and to himself, has been chosen by a deity to be His or Her vehicle. He can be asked by devotees to invoke the deity into his body, in order to enable them to communicate directly with the deity. Once the session starts, the devotees understand his words to be those of the deity. He also invokes the deity in his body when the latter is expected to take part in public rituals\(^{137}\). To sum up, the gur and the deodhāi have two things in common. In both cases, the initial choice is ascribed to the wish of the deity. According to the common view, none of them needs any sort of training; that is, none of them needs to learn anything\(^{138}\). According to Berti:

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\(^{135}\) Berti 2001: 46.

\(^{136}\) In the temples observed by Berti there are pujāris, who have a certain number of common points with the Kamakhyan pujāris: they are attached throughout their lives to the temple and frequently transmit to their sons their charge and the rights on the lands they enjoy because of their link with the temple – instead the purohit is independent of the temple; they carry out the daily worship of the deity inhabiting the temple concerned; they have to follow a number of rules. Unlike the Kamakhyan pujāris, the Kullu pujāris are not all Brahmans and may get possessed. Also Berti stresses how the pujāri does not need to have the knowledge and the skills of the purohit. To sum up, the Kamakhyan pujārī shares some features with the purohit (see the principal text) and other ones with the pujāri of the Kullu Valley. I chose to compare the Kamakhyan pujārī with the Kullu purohit because it is relevant for the present purpose that they are both trained ritual specialists. It would be reasonable to compare the Kamakhyan pujārī with the Kullu pujārī, for instance as far as the rights over land and the tasks in the temple are concerned, but this is not needed for the present purpose.

\(^{137}\) A difference is observable between the gur and the deodhāi. The latter in fact becomes possessed only once a year, during the festival, and is not supposed to be able to invoke the deity into his body for any reason. In this regard, the gur can be said to have a higher degree of agency, because, on request of the devotees, he can start a session.

\(^{138}\) Berti (2001: 67) stresses that the successor to a gur is frequently one of his descendants or a person linked to the temple who, thus, is familiar with possession sessions; “cela semble suggérer une transmission non officielle, fondée davantage sur l’observation que sur l’apprentissage initiatique”. 

La source qui légitime le pouvoir et l’autorité du possédé n’est ni la caste, ni un savoir acquis, ni un pouvoir obtenue par un effort personnel, mais la capacité de démontrer à tous qu’il a été choisi par la divinité pour que celle-ci puisse parler et se manifester aux hommes139.

One of the purohits interviewed by Berti, said:

[Le gur] n’a pas de force propre, mais il a une force externe, celle du devtâ [deity]. Il n’a pas étudié chez un maître. Tout ce qu’il possède s’appelle : « histoires traditionnelles » (paramparā kathā). Il n’a pas de mantra […], il n’a pas les moyens140.

2. 4. Concluding remarks.

The process leading to pujārī-hood is thought to be difficult. Hemen Sarma repeatedly affirmed how only those who are really competent to carry out the pūjā for Goddess Kāmākhyā should be allowed to do so.

Pujārī-hood traces the same distinction in each of the two Brahman groups, namely the Bardeuris and the Nananbardeuris. A Bardeuri pujārī is entitled to worship Goddess Kāmākhyā, while a Nananbardeuri pujārī is entitled to worship the deities inhabiting the temple(s) he is in charge of. However, since the two groups’ rights are clearly asymmetric, the Bardeuri pujārī is entitled to worship every deity inhabiting Nilachal (while the opposite is not possible): the capacity to worship Goddess Kāmākhyā includes the capacity to worship minor deities.

The first level of dikṣā is a sufficient qualification to be trained as a pujārī - Bhagavati Sarma, who decided to stop at this level is a pujārī and

139 Berti 2001: 61.
140 Ibidem: 53.
currently carries out the daily worship on his pālā-days. He understands himself to be a vaidika, because the first level of initiation does not require the use of the pañcamakāras. Like him, those who stop at the first level of dīkṣā, believe that the tāntrika dīkṣā is dangerous and that danger resides very much in the use of alcohol.

By contrast, after becoming a pujārī, Hemen Sarma decided to take the second and third levels of dīkṣā too. He denies that the first level of dīkṣā is in its nature vaidika. According to him, the very nature of the cult carried out for the Goddess during the samdhyās (daily prayers) and in the Temple is tāntrika, because it aims at bridging the gap between the human and the divine. The pujārī sets divine energies on his body in order to alter his normal human status. This new status, impregnated with divine energy, enables him to worship the Goddess. As has been shown, the divinization of the worshipper, so strongly stated by Hemen Sarma, is among the most significant concepts of Tantrism. For him the so called vaidika dīkṣā is necessary, yes, but needs to be superseded. Similarly, tantric traditions do not deny the importance of less challenging, orthodox traditions. They place themselves above the latter, and claim superiority because of the effectiveness (and danger) of the tantric practices. The latter happen behind closed doors, in secret, at night. In the daylight, the tāntrika observes orthodox rules.

Hemen Sarma stressed the role of the wife of the initiate during the dīkṣā. The wife has a supervisory role over her husband and administers alcohol to him during. Apart from that, however, Hemen Sarma’s words suggest that the woman plays a fundamental role as the unique source of śakti. This is again very much in tune with the role attributed to women in tantric rituals involving sexual intercourse.

In the last part of the chapter I suggested comparing the pujārī with the deodhāi. They both come into contact with the divine but in two radically different ways. The pujārī decides to undertake a set of operations which aim at altering his regular status. He keeps the awareness of his identity and his
capacity to choose and act throughout the ritual. Also, devotees understand him to be a human being and interact with him accordingly.

By contrast, according to my interlocutors, the deodhāi is a kind of puppet in the deity’s hands. He does not choose to be possessed, he simply accepts becoming the vehicle of the deity. During possession he (in principle) loses the awareness of his identity; devotees understand his words to be those of the deity and worship him.
The Brahmans' rights in the public worship. 
Festive and daily rites.

The Brahmans of the Kāmākhyā temple complex categorize themselves into two main groups, namely Bardeuris (baradeuri) and Nananbardeuris (nānānbaradeuri). The former, also known as Barpujaris (barapujārī), have hereditary rights over the Kāmākhyā Temple, while the latter have hereditary rights over the minor temples of the Nilachal. The term deuri (priest) is well attested in Lower Assam and the priests of several temples in this area are called baradeuri.

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141 The distinction between Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris is briefly described by Mishra (2004: 74-76).
142 This statement requires some further qualification. Two groups of Nananbardeuris have customary rights in the Kāmākhyā Temple, but are nevertheless rated as Nananbardeuris (see § 5).
143 See Adhikary (2008: 95). Throughout his book the author employs the term deuri to refer to the priests of Lower Assam temples. According to Prayer (Chair of Bengali, Sapienza), the
This chapter deals with the rights of the Bardeuris and of the Nananbardeuris in the public worship (both festive and daily\textsuperscript{144}) of their respective temples. It aims at analysing the arrangement which gives access to the rights and the concepts the Brahmans have regarding this arrangement. As will be shown, the rights are inheritable and uniquely follow the bloodline. It is not necessary for a Bardeuri or a Nananbardeuri to be involved in priestly activities in order to enjoy his rights. The way he gains his livelihood does not in any way interfere with the fact that he is the legitimate holder of a certain proportion of rights. It is tempting to assume that in the past the enjoyment of rights (and of the lands attached to them) depended on the actual performance of ritual tasks on the part of the rights-holder and that, under colonial rule, the rights of the Brahmans eventually became disconnected from the actual performance of the rituals.

The focus of this chapter is not so much on the possible historical evolution which led to the present situation as on the present situation itself. A Bardeuri, who has been initiated and trained and is recognised as a \textit{pujārī}\textsuperscript{145}, is a rights-holder as much as a Bardeuri who has none of these qualifications; on the other hand, a recurrent idea among Bardeuris is that in each family there should be at least one \textit{pujārī} and in the recent past fathers used to push one of their sons to become \textit{pujārī}. In other words, Bardeuris are aware that their rights over the Kāmākhyā Temple – which give them

\begin{itemize}
  \item priests of the populations of the Chotanagpur plateau (Jharkhand) are called \textit{deuri} (personal communication). During the XIX\textsuperscript{th} century, under colonial rule, the Santals of the Chotanagpur plateau were forced to migrate to Assam in order to work on the tea plantations. Their descendants live in Assam to this day and are called “tea tribes”. It is tempting to assume that the term may have migrated along with the Santals to Assam; but this assumption is far from having a solid basis. Berti said (personal communication) that in the parlance of Kullu valley (Himachal Pradesh) the term \textit{deuri} refers to people in charge of a deity (\textit{deu}) and having a link with the concerned temple.” Also, Prayer suggested, and I agree, that \textit{deu} may be related to \textit{deva}, the Hindi (and Sanskrit) term for “God”.
  \item The adjectives “festive” and “daily” render the Sankrit terms \textit{naimittika} and \textit{nitya}, respectively; Monier-Williams (2005: s. v.) renders \textit{nitya} as “continual, perpetual, regularly repeated, constant, uninterrupted [...] ; necessary, obligatory, essential; ordinary, usual, (opposed to \textit{naimittika}, unusual, produced by an unusual cause)”. Those rites which need to be performed every single day are \textit{nitya}; by contrast those which only need to be performed during festivals are \textit{naimittika}.
  \item The \textit{pujārī} is the ritual specialist who has been trained and declared apt by his seniors. See chapter 2, § 2.
\end{itemize}
access to private worship and pāṇḍā-hood as well – are primarily aimed at ensuring that the worship of the Goddess is properly performed.

Bardeuris categorize themselves into five groups (Burhas, Dekas, Hotas, Brahmas and Bidhipathaks), each group having a distinct ritual task to be discharged during the major festivals, in addition to the regular set of daily rituals (§ 1). A member of each group is selected through rotation and is in charge of all the festivals occurring over a period of twelve months. The individuals selected in this way have to carry out the ritual task of the group they belong to; they are called vratīs (those who took a vrata or vow) because they are bound to undergo a set of restrictions for the entire duration of each festival (§ 2). § 3 describes the rotation system, pālā, regulating the daily service of the Goddess. As will be shown, all five groups participate in it. The pālādāra in charge of a particular day is bound to ensure that the daily rites (described in chapter 2, § 1) are performed properly; if he is not a pujārī he needs to appoint a pujārī to have the daily rituals performed. The § also highlights the asymmetries existing between the subgroups of Bardeuris: only Burhas and Dekas are allowed to be pālādāra and to perform the daily rites on highly auspicious days.

Pālā-days are unevenly distributed among Bardeuris. § 4 analyses the activities of those Bardeuris who have a comparatively smaller number of pālā-days. Some of them are employed by fellow Bardeuris to guard the sanctum at darśana hours; others “activate” marginal images and ask donations for these images from pilgrims. A centre-periphery model would shown how hereditary rights hold good as far as the central idols are concerned, but ignore the marginal images. Quite naturally, this fact incites the intervention of the less fortunate Bardeuris, provided that there is enough “demand” on the part of the pilgrims. Looking only at the rights-based activities would not give a complete image of the activities taking place in the Temple and of the relations among Bardeuris arising from these activities.

The final § of the chapter describes the rights of Nananbardeuris.
To the best of my knowledge, the only existing description of the Kamakhyan Brahmans’ rights prior to the present one is by Mishra. The latter’s data and mine generally fit with each other; thus I will only quote him on the points where there is some discrepancy.

3. 1. Bardeuris: the five groups.

Bronson (1867: s. v.) renders the Assamese term *deuri* as “an attendant of an idol temple” and the adjective *bara*¹⁴⁶ as “great, eminent, first born”. Barua (2011: s. v.) translates *deuri* as “an officer of the temple, one who distributes to the people what was offered to an idol”. *Baradeuri* can be conveniently translated as “the main priests” or “the great priests”¹⁴⁷.

The Bardeuris of the Kāmākhyā Temple categorize themselves into five groups: the Burhas, the Dekas, the Hotas, the Brahmas and the Bidhipathaks¹⁴⁸. Each group has a different ritual task; before analysing them, it needs to be clarified that the differentiation between ritual tasks holds good exclusively during festivals. That is, during festivals a member of each group is in charge of the rituals his group is traditionally connected to. In contrast, as will be shown in § 3, during the daily worship the same set of regular rituals is carried out by all five groups, in rotation.

The Burhas’ and Dekas’ common ritual task is to perform the *pūjā* for the Goddess; they are collectively called Pujari (*pujārī*). The Assamese

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¹⁴⁶ It needs to be noted that Barua (2011) does not have a separate entry for *bara*. The latter only appears in compound terms, like *bara-pāṇī*, “flood” (literally “big water”). The adjective *bara* is understood by Kamakhyans, but is rarely used in everyday parlance, the meaning “big, great” being conveyed by adjective *dāṅgar* (unknown to both Barua and Bronson).

¹⁴⁷ A bilingual Nananbardeuri translated the term *baradeuri* as “the chief priests”.

¹⁴⁸ The earliest reference I found regarding the “five houses of Brahmans” is contained in a judgement of 1838 *Certified copy of Decree of the Sudder Dewani Adalat of Calcutta in Suit No. 251 of 1838*: 12. On the suit which was arbitrated by this judgement see chapter 7, § 2.
adjectives *burhā*\(^{149}\) and *dekhā*\(^{150}\) respectively mean “old” and “young”: Burhas and Dekas are believed to be the descendants of the two brothers, brought to the temple complex by the kings, in order to have *pūjā* performed. The Burhas are thought to be the descendants of the elder brother, while the Dekas are thought to descend from the younger brother. They collectively claim to be the descendants of the mythical Kendukulāi, who is believed to be the first Brahman ever brought to the Kāmākhyā temple complex\(^{151}\). Since they trace their genealogy from a common ancestor, Burhas and Dekas do not intermarry. At the risk of being repetitive, I wish to stress that the Burhas and the Dekas constitute a single ritual specialization and share the same

\(^{149}\) Bronson (1867: s. v.) renders the term *burā* (not *burhā*) as “an old man; old”. My transliteration *burhā* is based on my informants’ script in Assamese. Mishra (2004: 74) writes *burhā*, which is most probably based on the Kamakhyans’ variant of the term (Mishra is not entirely reliable on transliterations). However the way Kamakhyans employ the Assamese alphabet when writing varies considerably, from one individual to another one and I think (although I did not ask) that the majority among them would feel comfortable enough with the Assamese equivalent of *burā*. I choose to employ *burhā* (rendered as “Burha” in the text) because this transliteration represents better than *burā* the way the term is pronounced in everyday speech.

\(^{150}\) The terms *burhā* and *dekhā* do not only designate the Burhas and the Dekas, but are also employed in everyday parlance to convey the meanings “old” and “young”. This fact sometimes caused funny misunderstandings between my interlocutors and myself. One day a middle-aged Bardeuri friend and I were talking about a second Bardeuri, who was not present. When I asked him (my translation from Assamese) “Is he Burha?”, my friend replied “No, come on, he is not that old. He must be my age!” I explained him that I was not making a statement about the second Bardeuri’s age, but I was asking whether he belonged to the Burhas or not. The misunderstanding resolved, we both ended up in laughing.

\(^{151}\) Kendukulāi’s myth is wide spread in Kamakhya Dham. I have heard different variants of it; nevertheless the main points are shared in all of them. Kendukulāi, a priest, was taken to the temples complex by Koch Bihar kings, Naranārāyaṇa and Cilārāy (on the Koch Bihar dynasty see chapter 1, § 2). He used to play music for Goddess Kāmākhyā during the night (or at sunset) inside the temple. The Goddess was pleased and used to dance naked before him in the form of a sixteen-year-old girl. One of the Koch Bihar kings (either Naranārāyaṇa and Cilārāy), intrigued by the music, approached Kendukulāi and inquired about it. When the priest told him of the dancing Goddess, the king immediately said he wanted to see Her. As Kendukulāi refused, the king repeatedly offered him enormous riches. Finally Kendukulāi agreed. The two men devised a plan: that night the priest would play as he usually did, while the king would peep at the Goddess through a hole in the Temple wall. That night, as soon as Kendukulāi started playing, the omniscient Goddess understood what was going on and became enraged. The priest lost his life and the king was cursed: if he or his descendants ever returned to the temple complex they would die. See also Mishra (2004: 148). According to Kamakhyans, a bas-relief in the sanctum represents Kendukulāi.
ritual task. According to Hemen Sarma\textsuperscript{152}, the Pujaris’ specialisation constitutes “the main duty”. In § 3 it will be shown how, as far as the daily worship is concerned, the Pujaris are considered ritually superior.

In order to avoid confusion, I will employ “Pujaris” to indicate Burhas and Dekas taken together. Instead I will employ “pujārī” to refer to the trained ritual specialist, described in chapter 2, who carries out the daily rites. Any Bardeuri, regardless of the group he belongs to, can become a pujārī.

The Hotas (hotā) are entrusted with the performance of the homa, the offering into the fire. The term hotā is of clear Sanskrit origin: it is the nominative form of the stem hotṛ, which Monier-William (2008, s. v.) renders as “an offerer of an oblation or burnt-offering (with fire), sacrificer, priest, (esp.)…” One of the semi-structured interviews conducted with Hemen Sarma took place in October 2013, while the Durgā-pūjā was going on. In the Kāmākhya temple complex the festival is observed for fourteen days, from the ķṛṣṇa navamī till the śukla navamī of the month of āśvina (September-October). According to Hemen Sarma, the Hota in charge has to attend the Temple each day; however “his main duty” is on śukla aṣṭamī, when he has to light a homa and to supervise its continuous burning up to the end of the next day, navamī, which marks the end of the festival. The rite takes place in the homa-ghar, a small building within the Temple Campus, which is devoted to the public, festive homas. Hemen Sarma insisted that the homa-ghar is never used for the private homas sponsored by pilgrims\textsuperscript{153}; these rites are hosted in a second small pavilion within the Temple’s campus. According to him, the homa on śukla aṣṭamī is “a very critical [challenging, arduous], very heavy homa” and “totally separate from the ordinary homas”. The Hota in charge may require the assistance of his seniors in order to perform the rite properly.

\textsuperscript{152} Hemen Sarma is a Hota Bardeuri. Chapter 2 contains his accounts of the process which led him to pujārī-hood.

\textsuperscript{153} The rule evocated by Hemen Sarma is almost always followed; during my fieldworks, I only once observed a private homa being performed in the homa-ghar (see chapter 6, § 2).
During my first periods in the field, each time a festival was going on I had mostly focused my attention on the relations between priests and pilgrims and somehow overlooked the festive rites. I was in the field in 2013 during the Durgā-pūjā and planned to observe the grand *homa* and the other festive rites, but was not able to do so because of health-related problems. Thus I cannot support the statements of Hemen Sarma with my own observations.

My interlocutors agree in stating that the Brahmās (*brahmā*) have died out; on the basis of some data it is possible to affirm that that happened some time before 1931.

Mishra (2004: 74) affirms that the Brahma had to “keep count of the āhuti in *homa*”; he does not provide any further detail on the meaning of the term āhuti. During one of the central passages of the *homa*, the priest throws 108 handfuls of ghee and various seeds into the fire, while repeatedly uttering *swāhā* for every throw. Monier-Williams renders āhuti as “offering oblation with fire to the deities”. It seems probable that with the term āhuti Mishra refers to each distinct throwing action. Thus, the Brahma’s task would have been to assist the Hota during the performance of the *homa*. Now, during all the numerous, private *homas* I observed, the priest himself counted the throws, with the help of his 108-*rudrākṣās* necklace (see photo 19). By this I do not want to suggest that it is impossible that the Brahmās’ duty was to count the āhutis. In fact, the *homas* I observed were private ones, while the Brahmās’ duties, like those of the other groups, have to be discharged during the public, festive rites. In other words, my evidence that nowadays the priest performing a private *homa* counts the āhutis himself is

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154 A judgement dated 1931 delivered by the Special Sub Judge, Assam Valley (*Certified copy of Judgement of the Spl. Sub-Judge, Assam Valley District in Title suit No. 45 of 1927, Jibanram Balikata and others of Kamakhya against Bisnuprasad Sarma Daloi and others of Ditto*) reports that one among the plaintiff witnesses affirmed that the Brahmās died out some times before the beginning of the trial. Since the opposing party did not comment on this assertion, it is reasonable to conclude that at that time the Bardeuris, the Nanbardeuris and the non-Brahmans, who were involved in the trial, agreed on the Brahmās’ extinction. Thus, we have a *terminus ante quem* (1931), but not the means to establish when the Brahmās actually died out. I do not doubt that the group existed, because the *rota* for the daily worship (see § 3) is based on the existence of five groups.
not sufficient grounds to deny that the Brahmās’ duty was to count the āhutis during the public homas held at the time of festivals. However, if Mishra’s statement cannot be denied, it cannot be verified either. Hemen Sarma affirmed that the Brahmās’ task was mainly to perform japa, the repetition of the deities’ names, although his statement was somewhat vague. Whatever the Brahmās’ task may have been, during festivals a Bardeuri belonging to one of the four surviving groups replaces the Brahma. In Hemen Sarma’s words, “we [the surviving Bardeuri groups] have to take the responsibility of the Brahma”.

The Bidhipathaks’ (bidhipāṭhāka) task is to read out the bidhis to the pujārī, while the latter performs the pūjā. Bronson (1867: s. v.) renders noun bidhi as “a law, a precept, an ordinance, a formula”; the term conveys the sense of “ritual prescription” or “instruction for a given ritual” too. It is reasonable to assume that what the Bidhipathak reads to the Pujari are passages from the kāthās, namely the texts giving instructions about the way pūjā for the Goddess Kāmākhyā is to be performed. “The Bidhipathak is the Pujari’s helper”, Hemen Sarma affirmed and added that, during festivals, the Bidhipathak follows the Pujari throughout all his ritual tasks, while the Hota and the Brahma are more independent from the Pujari.

Each of the four surviving groups is exogamic; the four groups regularly intermarry. As stated above, since they believe themselves to be descended from the same ancestor, Burhas and Dekas do not intermarry; according to Hemen Sarma “they are like brothers”. Thus the rules regulating marriages are the following: a Burha (either a man or a woman) can marry into the Hotas or into the Bidhipathaks; the same applies to the Dekas; a Hota can marry into the Burhas, into the Dekas or into the Bidhipathaks; finally, a

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155 The Sanskrit term brahmā is rendered by Monier-Williams (2005: s. v.) as “one who prays, a devout or religious man, a Brahman who is a knower of Vedic texts or spells, one versed in sacred knowledge”. The term also denotes one of the four principal priests involved in the Vedic sacrifice. “The Brahman was the most learned of them and was required to know the 3 Vedas, to supervise the sacrifice and to set right mistakes”.

156 This is also the meaning of Sanskrit noun vidhi. Monier-Williams (2005: s. v.) renders it as “a rule, form, formula, sacred precept, injunction...”

157 These manuals are described in chapter 2, § 2.
Bidhipathak can marry into the Burhas, into the Dekas or into the Hotas. The children belong to their father’s group.

3.2. The vratīs.

During every festival four Bardeuris, called vratīs, are in charge of the festive rites: a Pujari (either a Burha or a Deka), a Hota, a Brahma (that is, a Bardeuri belonging to one of the four surviving groups who plays the role of the Brahma) and a Bidhipathak. This custom clearly shows that Burhas and Dekas constitute a single ritual specialization. Each of the two groups has one year in turn: if in 2014 a Burha is the vratī for the Pujaris, in 2015 he will be replaced by a Deka.

Vratīs are selected through rotation: each of the four ritual specialisations follows its own rota (rotation system). According to Hemen Sarma, “vratīs are bound for one year”. That is, a vratī is in charge of the entire set of festivals occurring over a twelve month period; the charge is handed over to the next vratī on the return of the festival which marked the beginning of the outgoing vratī’s tenure. According to Hemen Sarma, the Pujari vratī’s tenure starts with the Durgā-pūjā of the month of chat (March/Avril). Mishra’s data are consistent with mine on this point; he further states that the Hota vratī’s tenure starts with the Janmāṣṭamī (bhāda, August/September) and that of the Bidhipathak vratī with the Manasā-pūjā (bhāda).

A vratī is someone who currently follows a vṛata; this term, whose primary meaning is “an enclosed space” (Monier-Williams), refers to a set of limitations which temporarily alter someone’s ordinary life and can be translated as “vow” - for instance, pilgrims travelling to a pilgrimage place frequently undergo a vṛata. A vṛata includes sexual abstinence and some sort
of fast. Fuller says that in the Mīnākṣi Temple (Madurai), the nampiyār, namely the priest selected to be in charge of the major festivals, has to undergo “a series of ascetical restrictions” for the duration of each festival.\textsuperscript{158} The vratī or any person following a vrata is a sort of temporary ascetic; the effect of the vrata is to make someone purer and more powerful, compared to the state he is in during his day-to-day life.\textsuperscript{159}

In the Kāmākhya Temple, vratīs are bound to follow the vrata only for the duration of the festivals they are in charge of. In the periods between one festival and the next, they resume their ordinary behaviour. Hemen Sarma said the following while the 2013 Durgā-pūjā was in progress:

...four priests are taking vrata for fifteen days, from krṣna navami to śukla navami. They are living here [in the Kāmākhya Temple], they are cooking here, they cannot take any food from their house [...] Hota and Brahma are cooking food, near the bhārala [the Temple treasure] not in bhoga-ghar [the kitchen of the Temple]. Not with gas and cooker, but with wood. Totally vegetarian, no oil, only ghee is used.

Hemen Sarma showed me how the vratīs were accommodated in one of the rooms of Kamakhya Debutter Board’s office, which is located within the Kāmākhya Temple campus. Four thin mattresses were laid out in the room, which in theory is used for dealing with the public (as the sign above the door indicates). Beside every mattress, there were travelling bags, containing clothes and various object of daily use, which the vratīs must have brought from their homes.

As far as the remuneration of vratīs is concerned, Hemen Sarma states that they get some gold coins “from the officials”. I do not know whether by this he meant the Kamakhya Debutter Board (the committee which manages the temple complex) or the Kamakhya Bardeuri Samaj (the organization of the Bardeuris). His words were somehow vague and immediately followed

\textsuperscript{158} See Fuller 1984: 83.
\textsuperscript{159} On the concept of tapas, namely the heat emanating from the meditating ascetic, see Tarabout 2005: 144-150.
by the statement that “we have to do our duty, whatever we get or not it’s a different matter”. Mishra does not say anything on the remuneration of the vratīs. He reports some interesting information about the alleged impossibility of a vratī being substituted by one of his fellow:

In the event of any birth or death in the family of these vratīs, no other person outside this set, can be given the right to take part in the pūjā [festive rituals]. Thus if the pujārī happens to be incapable of performing his responsibility, the hotā takes up the absent incumbent’s functions. And if misfortune strikes either the hotā or the bidhipāṭhāk, then the pujārī assumes extra responsibility. In case both the pujārī and the hotā become incapable of doing their respective functions, then the bidhipāṭhāk has to do all the work.\(^{160}\)

Hemen Sarma did not describe this custom as clearly as Mishra does. However some data reinforces Mishra’s statement: Hemen Sarma affirmed that the inexpert vratī may and should ask for the assistance of his senior fellows in order to discharge his ritual task properly. He cannot simply hand over the charge to his seniors. As will be shown in § 3, the rules regulating the public, daily worship (outside festivals) are different. Here, the Bardeuri who has not been trained to perform the regular set of daily rituals appoints a second Bardeuri who has been duly trained – a pujārī - to have these rituals performed. In other words, because it entails a vrata, the festive worship tightly imposes on the concerned individual the obligation of performing the appropriate rites; by contrast, in the daily worship the individual can delegate the performance of rites to one of his fellow Bardeuris.

\(^{160}\) Mishra 2004: 75.
3.3. The pālā.

Bronson (1867, s.v.) renders the noun pālā as “turn”. The term is linked to the verb pālī, “to turn, to return” and to a set of words having the same root and related meanings. In Kamakhyan parlance the term pālā designates a rotation system\textsuperscript{161} which assigns each day to a Bardeuri\textsuperscript{162}. In order to avoid confusion, it needs to be clarified that the pālā only concerns the public, daily worship (see chapter 2, § 1), and not the festive one. The Bardeuri who is in charge of a particular day is the pālādāra of that day; he is bound to ensure that the public worship of the Goddess\textsuperscript{163} is performed properly and that two Bardeuris are present in the sanctum throughout the entire day. The next day a different pālādāra will be in charge and will have to ensure the same services. The money donated by pilgrims in the sanctum is called pranāmī, because pilgrims throw it to the icon, when they kneel down (pranāma) to it. The pālādāra receive a consistent percentage of the pranāmī; a second portion of this money is given to the Kamakhya Bardeuri Samaj\textsuperscript{164} and a third goes to two groups of non-Brahman Shebaits, namely the Athparias and the Duaris\textsuperscript{165}. The pālādāra also has the right to collect the clothes donated in the sanctum, but not the jewels, which become part of the Goddess’s treasure.

All the five groups of Bardeuris described in § 1 (the Burhas, the Dekas, the Hotas, the now defunct Brahmas, and the Bidhipathaks) take part in the pālā. Each of the five groups has pālā-rights for two successive days in a ten-day cycle, beginning with the Burhas. While at the time of festivals the vratī acts according to the ritual specialization of the group he belongs to, during

\textsuperscript{161} “Rotation system” is the expression several Kamakh yans used to explain me what pālā is.

\textsuperscript{162} I know of couples of brothers who hold their pālā jointly.

\textsuperscript{163} On the set of daily rituals see chapter 2, § 1.

\textsuperscript{164} The Kamakhya Debutter Board, the organ which manages the Temple, does not receive anything from the money donated in the sanctum. However, it receives a share of the money donated by pilgrims at the various minor shrines inside the Temple campus, which are taken care of by non-Brahman Shebaits.

\textsuperscript{165} For the Athparias see chapter 2, § 1. The Duaris’ (duārīs) task is to guard the door of the Temple. Today, however, the Kamakhya Debutter Board pays guards on a monthly basis. On the Duaris see also Mishra (2004: 77).
the daily worship the pālādāra is responsible for the performance of the very same set of regular rituals, no matter which group he actually belongs to. The way rotas are organised is in line with this principle. As far as the festivals are concerned, every group has its own rota, while the five groups are brought together into the same rota regulating the daily worship.

Only Pujaris can carry out the daily rites on five particularly auspicious days of each month of the Hindu calendar. These days, collectively called pañcaparwa, are the two aṣṭamis (the eighth day of the bright fortnight and of the dark fortnight), the two caturdasis (the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight and of the dark fortnight) and the saṅkrānti, namely the day of passage between two months of the Hindu calendar. The Hotas and the Bidhipathaks cannot be pālādāra on these particularly auspicious days. If a Hota’s or a Bidhipathak’s pālā happens to fall on one of these days, his pālā will be postponed to the next day, while the auspicious day will be entrusted to a Burha or a Deka. Concluding his discourse on this issue Hemen Sarma – a Hota – commented: “We have no power to worship the Goddess on these days” and further added: “It is not for us”. By saying “power”, Hemen Sarma is rendering into English the term śakti: Hotas and Bidhipathaks are not apt to carry out the daily worship on the above-mentioned auspicious days, because of their bloodline itself.

The principle of segmentation, enunciated by Evans-Pritchard in relation to the Nuers, can be of help in understanding the asymmetries existing among Bardeuris’ rights.

Nuer tribes are split into segments. The largest segments we call primary tribal sections and these are further segmented into secondary tribal sections which are further segmented into tertiary tribal sections.

166 It is unclear whether Brahmas were allowed to be pālādāra on these particularly auspicious days or not.
167 Also, only the Pujaris can carry out the daily worship during the three concluding days of the Durgā-panja of āśvina (September/October) and – according to the lawsuit quoted below – during the Pohān-bīrā, namely the marriage of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī (celebrated on the dvitīyā or trīyā of the bright half of puh, December/January).
What is relevant for the present purpose is that:

Any segment sees itself as an independent unit in relation to another segment of the same section, but sees both segments as a unity in relation to another section; and a section which from the point of view of its members comprises opposed segments is seen by members of other sections as an unsegmented unit. Thus there is [...] always contradiction in the definition of a political group, for it is a group only in relation to other groups\textsuperscript{169}.

Similarly, on a normal day a Bardeuri pujārī performs the daily worship as a member of the Bardeuri community, as opposed to the Nananbadueurs. But on a particularly auspicious day a Pujari performs the daily worship precisely because he belongs to the Pujaris, in opposition to the Hotas and the Bidhipathaks.

Clearly, the Pujaris are considered ritually superior \textit{vis-à-vis} the Hotas and the Bidhipathaks. It needs to be remembered here that, while talking about the four ritual tasks to be discharged during festivals, Hemen Sarma rated the Pujari’s first, by plainly admitting that “theirs [the Pujaris’] is the main duty”\textsuperscript{170}. However, the custom evoked above does not produce any relevant outcome on people’s lives. Nothing changes for the Hota or the Bidhipathak whose pālā is shifted to the next day. Nor can having one extra-day significantly alter the life of the Pujari concerned.

Kamakhyans affirm that the Brahmās’ pālā-rights have been distributed among the four surviving groups. The lawsuit of a Deka Bardeuri dated

\textsuperscript{169} Evans-Pritchard 1968: 147.

\textsuperscript{170} It is significant too that the \textit{rota} for the daily worship starts with the Burhas and Dekas and that they are invariably named first when the five groups are mentioned. I sometimes recited the list in a different order on purpose; my interlocutors corrected me, as I expected them to. Formerly the Dalais (heads of the temple complex) were selected among one Burha family and one Deka family. This custom was modified following a dispute (see below) which took place among the Bardeuris in the 1930s and resulted in the opening up of dalai-ship to all Bardeuris. In chapter 7, § 4 it will be shown how Bardeuris tend to attach no significance to the asymmetry existing between Pujaris on one side and Hotas and Bidhipathaks on the other. Instead, being confronted by a common enemy (Kamakhya Debutter Board), they usually speak of themselves as a homogeneous, united group.
1931\textsuperscript{171} affirmed that the Pujaris got two thirds of the Brahmas’s rights, while the Hotas and the Bidhipathaks share the remaining third. Mishra’s statements (2004: 75) fit with this. In other words, the Pujaris had the lion’s share of the Brahmas’ pālā-rights. However, this does not mean that every single Pujari has a larger number of pālā-days compared to any other Hota or Bidhipathak - if anything, some Hotas have a larger number of pālā-days than many Pujaris. The number of pālā-days every single individual has depends on other factors which will be analysed in § 4.

Bardeuris have no pālā-rights in the calantā. Instead, Athparias and Duris have their own pālās in this chamber. On each day two people, belonging to Ahparias and Duris’ groups, sit in front of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī’s idols and are entitled to the money donated to these idols on that day. The statue of Manasā too, located in the pañcaratna\textsuperscript{172}, is taken care of by non-Brahman Shebaits throughout the day\textsuperscript{173}.

For their part, pilgrims do not have the means to detect that the individuals sitting by the idols of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī are non-Brahmans. Similarly, pilgrims cannot make out that the man taking care of Manasā’s idol in the pañcaratna is a non-Brahman too. In fact, Brahmans and non-Brahmans are dressed in the same way. When at work in the temples, Bardeuris, Nanabanbardeuris and non-Brahmans wear a dhoti\textsuperscript{174}, a kurtā and a

\textsuperscript{171} On this lawsuit and the related dispute see chapter 7, § 4.

\textsuperscript{172} The pañcaratna leads eastwards to the calantā, but the door connecting these two chambers is blocked by an iron grill. Pilgrims usually glimpse the Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī’s idols through the grill. A Shebait is strategically placed on the other side of the grill, that is, inside the calantā. He gives tilak to the pilgrims through the grill; he sometimes gives also some water or petals of flowers which have been used in the worship and always asks for donations. According to Hemen Sarma this man can be either a Bardeuri or a non-Brahman and is appointed by pālādāra: “The owner of the pālā for the day is also the owner of the grill”. Hemen Sarma affirmed that money donated at the grill is distributed among the three pālādāras. Hemen Sarma’s words regarding the activities taking place around the grill were not entirely clear. Further research may alter the picture given here.

\textsuperscript{173} In chapter 2, § 1 it has been shown that non-Brahman Shebaits have particularly close access to the idols of the Kāmāhyā Temple. It is the task of various groups of non-Brahmans to carry and handle the materials used in the worship. Also, the śṛngāra (bathing and dressing) of the three idols enshrined in the sanctum is carried out by the Athparias who are non-Brahmans.

\textsuperscript{174} The dhoti is a single long piece of cloth which is tied around the waist and then passed between the legs. The kurtā is a loose shirt-like garment.
shawl on their shoulders. Sometimes, the kurtā is replaced by a shirt or a T-shirt. They mostly wear red, the colour universally linked to śakti. Saffron is also worn to a lesser extent. Bardeuris, Nananbardeuris and non-Brahmans wear a certain amount of gold jewellery, such as rings, bracelets and chains, which contain the rudrākṣās (the eyes of Rudra), namely the seeds of Elaeocarpus ganitrus, connected in the Hindu world-view to Śiva.

Both Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris of course wear the sacred thread (Assamese, lagun) and non-Brahmans Shebaits do not. However, as both Brahmans and non-Brahmans wear kurtās (or shirts), most of the times it is not possible to detect who wears the sacred thread and who does not 175.

If the pālādāra of a certain day is not a pujārī he cannot perform the daily rituals. He appoints a pujārī in his place and remunerates him. The right to the pālā is heritable and completely independent of the profession of the pālādāra. I know a number of Bardeuri pāṇḍās who enjoy their pālā-days, although they are not pujārīs. Several Bardeuris who do not practise any form of priesthood and did not take any dīkṣā176 (initiation) hold their pālā-days too. Suresh Sarma (a pseudonym), a Bardeuri in his fifties, has a shop for pilgrims and runs a newly opened guesthouse for pilgrims. His livelihood come from these activities as well as from the money he gets from his pālā-days. When his pālā-days come, Suresh does not go the Temple, nor, of course, does he allow his college-going son to do so. To my curious questions, he said plainly “I don’t like this job”. Instead he appoints a pujārī to have the daily rites performed, as well as two or three fellow Bardeuris to spend the day in the sanctum (see § 4). However, during his pālā-days, he is regarded as the legitimate pālādāra. That he does not practise any form of priesthood does not in any way disqualify him from holding his pālā-days. Suresh, now in his fifties, took the first level of dīkṣā few years before the time of writing. Even before that he was regarded as the legitimate holder of his pālā-days.

175 At the beginning of my first period of fieldwork, I took it for granted that that all the individuals in charge of the idols would be Brahmans – later on I realized that that the situation was rather different.

176 On the three levels of initiation imparted by the guru families linked to the Kāmākhya temple complex see chapter 2, § 2.
Bardeuris (as well as Nananbardeuris and non-Brahman Shebaits) are the owners of lands which, according to them, were granted to their ancestors by the former kings in return for their services in the Temple. What kings used to grant to the Bardeuris was the right to a share of the produce of these lands, which were cultivated by other people. Today Bardeuris are the legal owners of these lands, no matter what their occupation is. Suresh Sarma, for instance, is the owner of some land in Assam.

According to Fuller the Mīnākṣī Temple priests too were granted by the kings rights to the produce of some pieces of land, in exchange for services they gave in the Temple. Fuller affirms that modern law, introduced by British rule, altered the way Mīnākṣī Temple priests conceive of their rights:

Over the last one hundred and fifty years or so, the devolution and transfer of priests’ rights in the public worship, and in the lands formerly linked to them, has been subject to modern law. This has almost certainly affected the way in which priests conceive of their rights. Today they regard them as property, which accords with the modern legal opinion, but is improbable that this was exactly the traditional view177.

According to Fuller, priests today think of their rights as “property, strictly comparable to other types of property, such as lands and houses”. He further states that:

It has been clearly established in the courts that whenever rights in a temple involve significant economic benefit for managers or officiants, as normally they do, the rights are in law not merely those of office, but also of property. Therefore they are generally governed by the appropriate rules of inheritance, partition, etc. At the same time there is always a limitation on the proprietary rights, because that right is

177 Fuller, 1984: 84.
inseparably bound up with the duty to discharge the obligations attached to it\textsuperscript{178}.

The Mīnākṣī Temple priests strongly uphold the validity of heredity to defend their rights. However, Fuller argues, heredity was not the only rule in play. Kings did intervene in the temples’ affairs:

It seems quite probable that the British, keen to discover, record and codify the ancient hereditary rights that they thought were ubiquitous in India, were partly responsible for the contemporary insistence on their vital importance [...] Certainly, there is little evidence that [...] rights historically had the inviolable quality with which they are now thought to be invested. The development of the law [...] probably partly reinforced the weight attached to heredity [...]. Almost certainly the law's influence has contributed to the priests’ belief that their rights in the Temple are ’property’ in the modern sense\textsuperscript{179}.

According to Presler:

The court is implicitly connecting the south Indian of urimai or “shares” with the English concept of “right”. The translation is imprecise, however, since ”rights” add a dimension of permanence [my italics] which urimai lacks. But the translation is accepted by those who gain from it. A priest or trustee, for example, finds little reason to argue with a court’s judgement that his “share” is a property-like right, inheritable by his children. The same is true for any other individual or group with an already well-established place in the temple\textsuperscript{180}.

Courts have crystallized, so to speak, the priests’ rights. The latter, of course, did not oppose this process, which represented an unexpected advantage for them. Instead, they internalized the courts’ view and, when

\textsuperscript{178} Ibidem: 106.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibidem: 110. Good (1989) has shown how much a living rājā can interfere in the rights of the priests in charge of a temple existing in his kingdom.
\textsuperscript{180} Presler 2008: 61.
required, can voice it proudly. However, as Fuller argues, they usually say that it was the kings, not the courts, who gave them hereditary rights.

Just like the priests of the Minākṣī Temple, the Bardeuris of the Kāmākhyā Temple too insist on the inviolability of their “hereditary rights”181. Most probably in the past the enjoyment of the rights and of the land grants was subject to the condition that the Bardeuri rights-holder actually discharged his duties in the Temple, namely the performance of the daily rituals on his pālā-days. It is tempting to see in this evolution a parallel to the one described by Fuller and Presler.

At the same time, it emerges from fieldwork that several Bardeuris maintain that in each family there should be at least one pujārī. In chapter 2, § 2 it has been shown how Hemen Sarma was pushed by his father to undertake priesthood. “One member of my family must be related to this [priesthood]”. Similar affirmations have been heard frequently throughout the period of fieldwork. As will be shown in chapter 4, § 1, many Bardeuris proudly affirm that they were brought from Kannauj (Uttal Pradesh) to the Kāmākhyā Temple by the kings of the past to carry out the worship of the Goddess.

I know of some cases in which a father (or an elder brother) pushes his son (or younger brother) to undertake priesthood, in the name of the entire family. However, I have the feeling that many of the individuals who proudly affirm that they press on their sons (or siblings), in order to push the latter towards pujārī-hood, somehow pretend to be concerned about it. In other words, I assume they were displaying to me what, according to them, should be their ideal posture. But I doubt that outside our conversations they would be as firm as they presented themselves as being. In some cases I was informed that the (more or less firm and sincere) insistences of a father result in the son getting initiation, a quick training and performing few daily pūjās, under the guidance of some expert pujārī. In this way, the parental will is (at least) partially met and the son has shown to the community that he is

181 The position of the king and the way the Bardeuris construct and make use of what they consider their glorious past will be analysed in chapter 4, § 1.
(at least officially) entitled to perform the pūjā for the Goddess. The practice is usually soon discontinued. Notwithstanding all this, like Suresh Sarma, several Bardeuris simply live with the fact that neither they, not their children or siblings are pujārī and do not seem to be troubled by this state of things.

Today Bardeuris are the legal owners of their lands and can dispose of them, that is, they can sell them, which they frequently do. The impressive number of new, fancy, concrete buildings rising up in Kamakhya Dham day by day is (partly) fuelled by the sale of the Bardeuris’ lands. In 1959 the Assam Government passed the “Assam State Acquisition of Lands Belonging to Religious or Charitable Institutions of Public Nature Act, 1959”. The Act constitutes the first move made by the Assam Government trying to control the religious institutions existing on its territory. The Act allows the Assam Government to freely dispose of the lands donated to religious institutions by kings of the past or by devotees. Kamakhyans maintain that the Assam Government acquired many of their lands along with those of the Goddess and invariably express bitter contempt about these facts. Some Bardeuris told me that the acquisition was not systematic and that the Government only acquired the more profitable lands. However many Bardeuris still own their lands and it seems that the Government has discontinued the practice of acquiring the priests’ lands. Many Bardeuris complain that in the preceding years, that is, they can sell them, which they frequently do. The impressive number of new, fancy, concrete buildings rising up in Kamakhya Dham day by day is (partly) fuelled by the sale of the Bardeuris’ lands.
decades they sold their lands at “nominal prices” and that the same plots nowadays have a much higher value. It is probable that many Bardeuris hurriedly sold their lands, during the land acquisition wave: it is comparatively better to sell one’s land at a low price, than to have it confiscated without any profit. During the last two to three decades land values in Assam have risen tremendously and Bardeuris justly regret having already sold their lands. To sum up, as far as land is concerned, a general sense of having being deprived of something which was rightfully their own is widespread among the Bardeuris (although many of them still own land).

3.4. **What do the Bardeuris who have few pālā-days do?**

For each Bardeuri the interval of time between one pālā and the next is invariable. Hemen Sarma told me that his pālā returns every third month. He said that he is able to calculate his own pālās, but he is unable to calculate someone else’s pālās. The number of pālā-days a man has “depends upon the number of persons in his family”, said Hemen Sarma, adding:

> In a smaller family they get more pālās. In a larger family pālā comes after four months, five months. Somebody has pālā after one year [...]. If in one family there is only one son, he will get a lot of pālās.

All the Bardeuris I asked are consistent with Hemen Sarma on this point. Usually, when asked about the number of pālā-days they have, Bardeuris point out the interval of time after which their pālā returns and

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184 According to Hemen Sarma, there is one Deka Bardeuri who is able to calculate not only his own pālā, but every other Bardeuri’s pālā as well. Hemen told me that he relies upon this Bardeuri when he has some doubts about his pālā.
then name their male relatives who inherited a portion of their grandfather’s pālā-days.

The group one belongs to makes a difference too, because the number of individuals included in each of the four surviving groups varies. In other words, the two days every group has in the ten-day rota are divided among an uneven number of individuals: the larger the group, the smaller the average number of pālā-days each person has. In 2011 the Daleis (heads of the temple complex) were elected among the Bardeuris. For that reason a list of the male adult Bardeuris was compiled. The list included 466 individuals: 71 Burhas, 119 Dekas, 87 Hotas and 189 Bidhipathaks. The greatest disproportion clearly involves the Bidhipathaks.

In the past some Bidhipathak families migrated to Sualkuchi (a village in Kamrup District) and still live there today. They acknowledge kinship relations with some families of the Bidhipathaks residing in Kamakhya Dham and visit them from time to time. I heard from Bardeuris (including Bidhipathaks) that these families migrated to Sualkuchi because they were not able to maintain their families in Kamakhya Dham. However, I have no means to ascertain if it was precisely the small average number of pālā-days that encouraged them to migrate.

Shankar Sarma (a pseudonym), a Bidhipathak of my acquaintance, repeatedly complained about the difficulties Bidhipathaks have to go through. He is very much aware that the comparatively high number of Bidhipathaks results in a smaller average number of pālā-days per person. At the same time he has a second explanation of the present situation. He told me that the Bidhipathaks’ ancestor was kind-hearted and a little bit naïf. He

185 I know of the existence of an article written by Adhikary titled “Sale and Mortgage of the Right of Worship by the Priests of the Kamakhya Temple”. The article was presented in 1988 at the North East India History Association of Shillong. While on fieldwork I never came across conversations regarding the sale and mortgage of pālā-rights. The sale and mortgage of priestly rights is reported by Fuller (1984) regarding the Minākṣī Temple priests and by Parry (1994) regarding the Mahabrahmans (funeral priests) of Benares. Parry affirms that at the time of his fieldwork one single priest owned almost one third of the total rights for each year. I did not find a similar situation among Kamakhyan. The number of pālā-days held by different Bardeuris is significantly different, but no single individual owns such a high percentage of the total rights.
was satisfied with whatever the other Bardeuris were giving him. When collecting money donated by pilgrims, the latter would hand him only a small amount, asking him “Hobo?” (Will this much be enough?) He used to answer “Hobo, hobo” (Yes, it will do). Ruined by the other cunning Bardeuris, he became poor. That is why, Shankar Sarma concluded, “we have less facilities [number of pālā-days per person].”

Frequently those Bardeuris who have a small number of pālā-days, like Shankar Sarma, are employed by other Bardeuris to spend the day in the sanctum on the latter’s pālā-days. The pālādāra, in fact, is not only responsible for the performance of the daily rites; he must also guarantee that two Bardeuris be present in the sanctum throughout the day. As soon as the morning rituals are over, the Temple is opened to pilgrims, who have already been lining up for a couple of hours. Access to the sanctum is stopped when bhoga is served to the Goddess, roughly at 1 pm and is reopened at around 3 pm. During the hours of the day when pilgrims enter the sanctum to have darśana, there are two Bardeuris there: one sits besides the Goddess Kāmākhyā’s idol, while the other one sits besides the idols of Kamalā and Mātaṅgī. The pālādāra can either spend the day himself in the sanctum (with the help of a second Bardeuri), or he can depute two Bardeuris to do it in his place. The appointees do not need to be pujārīs; if anything, a pujārī will not accept work as an appointee. On his pālā-days Hemen Sarma, who is a pujārī, performs the daily rituals himself186; he employs someone else to spend the day in the sanctum, in order to be able to attend to his own pilgrims:

Actually we [I] may take seat in the garbhaṅkara, but we are busy with the pūjās [required by his own pilgrims]. After performing the main pūjā [the daily worship], many clients, devotees come; somebody demands the bali-pūjā, somebody else demands another pūjā. We are busy with them. We have no time to take seat in front of the Goddess; then we appoint two or three people to look after everything inside the Temple. We appoint them to take care of our own business [laughing].

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186 See chapter 2, § 2.
After the pālādāra counts his money, he pays those whom he has employed. The rate is not fixed and it is up to the pālādāra to establish it. Hemen Sarma said that if the income of the day is comparatively high, the pālādāra should give more to his appointees, compared to what he would give on a less profitable day. The pālādāra pays the appointees a couple of days after the day they were in charge of. "We cannot do it [count the money] in one day", he added. Appointees, on their side, are not stupid. Hemen Sarma told me that, when the day turns out to be a profitable one, during the following days his appointees usually approach him to enquire about the amount of the pranāmī he got.

In the local parlance, the English word “duty” is employed to say that someone is spending the day in the sanctum. Alternatively, the Assamese verb bahai “to sit” is used to convey the same meaning. The sentence “āji bahi-āchu” (today I am sitting) is employed to say that one has been appointed to spend the day in the sanctum. In fact the Brahman sits on the floor of the sanctum, with the idol on his right side. As explained in chapter 1 (§ 1), the floor of the sanctum is some thirty centimetres above the idol, so it would be uncomfortable for the Brahman to stand. When he needs to give a pilgrim a flower garland or a piece of cloth which has been previously donated to the idol, or if he needs to do tilak to someone with the red power sprinkled on the idol, he just needs to stretch his right arm to reach these items.

The person in charge of the sanctum is supposed to observe some food restrictions. Some Bardeuris say that he should fast for the entire day, although chai and some snacks can be taken. Other Bardeuris affirm that a person can also eat a meal on the day when he is “sitting”. However, everyone agrees that the person who is in charge of the sanctum should not on any account eat rice. This rule shows his significance, considering that

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187 In the house of Pramesh Sarma, notes coming from the sanctum were washed and then left on the balcony to dry. I also happened to observe Pramesh Sarma’s wife washing coins in a large aluminium bowl. In answer to my questions, she said that when money is brought home from the sanctum, it is encrusted with vermilion, flowers petals and pieces of sweets, which have been donated to the idol. Thus, she concluded, it needs to be washed, in order to be used in regular exchanges.
Kamakhyans (and Assamese, in general) eat rice twice a day, at both lunch and dinner. I observed Himagshu Sarma’s wife preparing luci (a kind of small fried capātīs) for her husband on a day when he “was sitting”.

The pālādāra can in theory offer the employment to any Bardeuri. In practice, he will only offer it to those who will most probably accept it. He will not offer the employment to Bardeuri pujārīs or to Bardeuris who are known to have a relatively high number of pālā-days. The latter, in fact, do not see any good reason to work as employees for other Bardeuris. A Bardeuri told me (my translation from Assamese):

Why should I [work as an appointee for someone else]? My father had no brothers. Nor did my grandfather. Mother [the Goddess] gave us enough, we don’t need to work for others.

Working as an employee is not ritually demeaning. However it is physically tiring, especially during the most auspicious days: the sanctum is a tiny room with no ventilation at all and is almost always overcrowded. If the day is expected to be crowded, the Bardeuri right-holder may appoint three or four Bardeuris, who will interchange throughout the day. Also, it is not unusual for an employee to himself appoint a second employee to hold the post while he (the original appointee) takes breaks throughout the day.

Clearly, guarding the sanctum is a marginal activity in comparison to the worship of the deities inhabiting that shrine. The Bardeuri who sits in the sanctum does not need any qualifications, not even the lowest level of initiation. He only needs to be a Bardeuri. Significantly a pālādāra who is not a pujārī cannot perform the worship of the Goddess on his pālā-days, but is allowed to spend the day in the sanctum. If he does not do so, it is only from choice.

According to Reiniche, similar dynamics take place among the Gurukkals of the Tiruvannamalai Temple (Tamil Nadu). The Gurukkals are divided into four groups: the Arccakars (arccakar), the Stanikars (stānikar),

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188 It is not clear if it is the pālādāra or his employee (or both) who needs to undergo food restrictions.
the Paricarakars (paricarārakar) and the Parivarars (parrivārar). Only the Arccakars are entitled to perform the daily worship of the deity inhabiting the sanctum. To be allowed to do that, the Arccakar needs to receive the initiation (three levels of dīkṣā) and the ācārya abhiṣeka, the “consecration” (as Reiniche renders the term) which makes him a master (ācārya). The Arccakar who has been recognized as ācārya is equivalent to the Bardeuri pujārī: the worship of the deity of the sanctum requires both the highest possible bloodline and ritual training. The pūjā murai (worship) is allotted to the two branches of the Arccakars through a rotation system, equivalent to the pālā. Reiniche (1989: 86) reports that apart from the pūjā murai, there exists a canniti murai. The canniti murai too is organized through a rotation system and ensures that each shrine, including the sanctum, is guarded by a Gurukkal throughout the day. Two elements need to be highlighted for our purpose. First, whereas only the Arccakars are entitled to the pūjā murai, all Gurukkals can take part in the canniti murai; second, Gurukkals tend to delegate this service to their younger relatives. In other words, for the canniti murai bloodline restrictions are looser and there is no need of ritual training.

“Sitting” in the sanctum has practical consequences as far as priestly activities are concerned. A Bardeuri who spends the day in the sanctum is unable to approach new pilgrims on that day, and can only with the greatest difficulty attend to his own ones. That is why Hemen Sarma prefers to appoint some one else to “sit” in the sanctum during his pālā-days (see above). During my 2011 fieldwork, on a single day Himangshu Sarma was appointed by a second Bardeuri “to sit” in the sanctum and had to take care of one of his pilgrims who came to the Temple to be married. To ease the situation Himangshu appointed a younger Bardeuri to assist him in the attendance of the sanctum and spent the day going in and out of the sanctum. At the end of the day he told me frankly that he was exhausted.

As stated in the introduction, some Bardeuris (partly) earn their living by activating marginal images. Having had darśana, pilgrims climb up the stairs, thus returning to the calantā. Here they walk through the corridor formed by the back of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvari’s throne and the south-
eastern corner of the *calantā* and finally leave the Temple through the southern gate\(^{189}\). The walls of this corner of the chamber bear five stone bas-reliefs: Maṅgala Caṇḍī, Kali Avatāra, Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhira, Rāma Candra and Bāṭuka Bhairava. According to Hemen Sarma, these bas-reliefs (except Maṅgala Caṇḍī) "reflect" the four ages. Usually three to five Bardeuris stand by these bas-reliefs, take care of the burning lamps and ask for donations from the pilgrims who have just had *darśana*. Not being able to locate the activities of these people in the frame built upon my data, I enquired about them. Hemen Sarma:

They belong to our Bardeuri families. Athparia and Duaris have their own rights, but these ones don’t. [They’re] unemployed persons, unemployed boys. They’re sitting there. They have no *pālā* [presumably he means to say that they have very few *pālā*-days]. *Pālā*-persons [the three *pālādāras* of each day] have rights, they can send these ones away. If they send them away, no one will call upon them [the *pālādāras*]. Only Athparias, Duaris and Bardeuris can take sit. *Pālā*-persons can send away anyone else. “This is my *pālā*, I’ll take sit here, you have no right to sit here, you must go away”.

At this, I asked him whether any *pālādāra* did actually send away the Bardeuris standing by Maṅgala Caṇḍī and the other bas-reliefs\(^{190}\), to which Hemen Sarma replied in the negative, with a smile on his face. According to him and to my observations, the activities of the Bardeuris standing by Maṅgala Caṇḍī are tolerated by the rights-owners.

According to Hemen Sarma, on each day, the only three legitimate rights-holders are the Bardeuri *pālādāra* in the *garbhasthāna* and the Athparia and the Duari *pālādāras* in the *calantā*. The Brahmans standing by

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\(^{189}\) The arrangement I just described is comparatively recent and had provoked protests from many Kamakhysans (including a number of Bardeuris). Many of them in fact consider it improper that the pilgrim exits from the southern gate, because South is linked to Yāma and to death in general. Previously all pilgrims used to enter the *calantā* through the northern gate.

\(^{190}\) In order to avoid repetition, I will use the expression “the Brahmans standing by Maṅgala Caṇḍī” from now onwards.
Maṅgala Caṇḍī are Bardeuris who (presumably) have very few pālā-days. In the eyes of Hemen Sarma, Maṅgala Caṇḍī and the other bas-reliefs are “statues” or “figures”. They do not enjoy the same status as the idols of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī have. According to Hemen Sarma, Maṅgala Caṇḍī and the other bas-reliefs do not need to be worshipped and actually do not receive any service during the daily rites\(^{191}\).

In the eyes of Hemen Sarma, an unbridgeable difference divides the significant activities of the three pālādāras of each day from the out-of-pālā activities of the Bardeuris standing by Maṅgala Caṇḍī. It is revealing that Hemen Sarma did not spontaneously mention the Bardeuris standing by Maṅgala Caṇḍī; he only talked about them after I raised the topic\(^{192}\). At the same time, it should be highlighted that the very first thing Hemen Sarma pointed out is that the Brahmans standing by Maṅgala Caṇḍī are Bardeuris. The out-of-pālā activities of the Bardeuris standing by Maṅgala Caṇḍī are not illegitimate; rather they are secondary or marginal in comparison to the activities of the rights-holders.

These data can be framed in a centre-periphery model. The statues of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī constitute the ritual centre of the calantā, while the bas-reliefs in the same chamber are the peripheries. The distribution of the idols in the space is symptomatic: the statues of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī occupy the very centre of the chamber. What is of interest for the present purpose is that hereditary rights guard the centre, but overlook the peripheries: the latter are affected by a veritable vacuum of rights. In other words, no pālā-rights are attached to the bas-reliefs. The existence of these rights-free zones within a larger, highly profitable area (the calantā) naturally incites the intervention of those who have few rights on that area. It should be stressed that each pilgrim needs to walk down the corridor formed by the back of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī’s throne and the south-eastern

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\(^{191}\) See chapter 2, § 1. Baṭuka Bhairava’s bas-relief is the only one in the calantā which is served daily. It is tempting to assume that the Bardeuris standing by Maṅgala Caṇḍī render some sort of daily service to these bas-reliefs. Some of Hemen Sarma’s words seem to suggest that they do so.

\(^{192}\) Mishra (2004) too is silent about the Bardeuris standing by Maṅgala Caṇḍī.

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corner of the calantā to leave the Temple. This is indeed the only way in which pilgrims can leave the Temple. The number of pilgrims visiting the Temple being high nowadays – thousands each day - this passage results in a strategic position.

Just like the Bardeuris employed to “sit” in the sanctum, those who stand by Maṅgala Caṇḍī are not pujārīs and have a comparatively smaller number of pālā-days. In other words, the former and the latter use the only qualification they have, namely the fact of being born from a Bardeuri father. In fact, these two marginal activities do not require any other qualification than the Bardeuri bloodline.

On each wall of the calantā there are bas-reliefs which depict various deities\(^{193}\). The winding queue inside the calantā obliges pilgrims to pass by the side of each bas-relief in the room. It is significant that the out-of-pālā activities orbit around Maṅgala Caṇḍī and the other bas-reliefs which are at the very end of the pilgrims’ route. That is, the Bardeuri standing by Maṅgala Caṇḍī demand donations from the pilgrims after these have already been demanded by the Athparia and Duari pālādāras in the calantā and by the Bardeuri pālādāra (or his appointees) in the sanctum. It is tempting to assume that the choice of this position is dictated by their awareness that they should not in any way damage the three pālādāras’ interests, lest the latter may “send them away”.

For his part, the pilgrim is unaware of this distinction. Any pilgrim will surely sense that the bas-reliefs are peripheral in comparison to the central idols of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvari; but a pilgrim does not have the means to know that these bas-reliefs do not receive any daily service from any pujārī and that no pālā-rights are attached to them, these two things being strictly intertwined. Also he cannot distinguish a Brahman who has his pālā on that day from his appointees and from the Brahmans taking care of Maṅgala Caṇḍī. As stated in § 3 all Brahmans (and non-Brahmans) working in the temple are dressed in the same way and behave in a similar manner. A pilgrim who, during his visit to any temple, meets on his way a Brahman who

\(^{193}\) See chapter 1, § 2.
asks him for a donation for what he takes to be an idol, simply takes it for granted that it is worth doing so.

From fieldwork the following emerges: when the number of pilgrims is large, particular images or parts of the sacred area, which do not otherwise receive any cult, can be reactivated and become (at least in the pilgrims' eyes) worthy of devotion. To put it into market terms, the demand on the part of the pilgrims stimulates a consequent offer of images presented (by certain actors) as worthy of worship.

According to Fuller (2003: 37-42), from the beginning of the 1980s the Minākṣī Temple’s administration has not only increased the price of tickets for pre-existing, regular forms of worship, but also introduced new, grandiose forms of private worship (like the pulling of the golden car and the re-enactment of the divine couple’s marriage) in order to satisfy the increasing demand of Madurai middle-class devotees. The process described by Fuller was a much more systematized one, compared to the unplanned dynamics taking place in the calantā. It also should be noted that the former entails the introduction of new forms of worship, where as the latter concerns the reclamation of idols. However, in both temples the same mechanism is at work. Just like any other business, that of religion is sensitive to demand and adjusts its offer accordingly.

The centre-peripheries model can be extended to two more recurrent activities taking place respectively at the Temple’s southern gate and in one of the minor shrines located within the Temple campus, namely the shrine of Śītalā. Since I have already tried to analyse the dynamics at play, I will not comment any further on them.

At the southern gate, just outside calantā, there is a small corridor, which communicates with the bhoga-ghar by means of a door. The latter is invariably closed at darśana-hours. One person (sometimes two) usually stands there asking for donations for the bhoga-ghar. Some flowers are placed on the ground before the door. In 2013 during one of my most recent darśanas I met a non-Brahman Shebait of my acquaintance there, asking donations for the bhoga-ghar.
Śītalā’s shrine stands in the southern portion of the campus; pilgrims doing parikramās (circumambulations of the Temple) cannot but notice it – however, the area is wide and pilgrims may also walk several metres away from Śītalā’s shrine. The shrine consists of a tiny concrete pavilion and contains a stone statue, similar to the one of Manasā in the pañcaratna. One Brahman is always sitting in the shrine. Every day a number of coconuts are offered to Śītalā, who, being the Goddess of smallpox, needs to be cooled down. The coconuts are cracked outside the shrine, on the back of it and from there the coconut milk is poured onto the statue. Then pilgrims come to the front of the shrine, where they are given tilak by the Brahman and are allowed to pass their hands over the flame burning in front of the statue, before kneeling down to it. Pilgrims undertake these activities either under the guidance of their pāndā or of the Brahmans sitting inside the shrine. The shrine, according to Hemen Sarma, has not always been there.

Śītalā temple was constructed by some donors. Before there was no such Śītalā temple. Śītalā was in a post; She was near to pigeon-market. No one was asking for money there, when She was in the post.

Noticing my interest, he went on:

Then when the temple was constructed, these people went there and started asking for money. They are Brahmans but they are not pujārī; they don’t know how to offer pūjā to Śītalā. They have no rights, they have no pālā there.

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194 Its surface does not exceed 4 square metres.
195 I once happened to observe a pilgrim enthusiastically cracking a coconut inside the nāta-mandira. A Kamakhyan, who was sitting there, told him that he should have offered the coconut to Śītalā and pointed out the shrine with his finger.
196 On the Goddess of smallpox see Neog (1984, chapter 6).
197 On quiet evenings, when only few people were around, I frequently saw a bull there, patiently licking the back of the shrine, which was impregnated with the coconut milk.
3.5. **The Nananbardeuris' rights.**

In § 1 I discussed the designation bardeuri, “the great priest”. The adjective nānā is translated by Bronson (1867: s. v.) as “of many kinds, various” and by Barua (2011: s. v.) as “various, many, divers”. From their part, bilingual Kamakhyans translate nānā as “other”. In the local parlance the term tends to be pronounced and written as nānān; in accordance with my desire to keep as close as possible to the way of speaking of Kamakhya Dham, I adopt this form in the text\(^{198}\). It needs to be noted that when referring to Nananbardeuris, Bardeuris tend to reduce the term to nānāndeuri, omitting bara.

While the majority of Nananbardeuris have rights over the minor temples (collectively called nānāndevālaya), two groups of Nananbardeuris have specific rights in the Kāmākhyā Temple: the Supakars (sūpakāra) who are in charge of preparing the bhoga for the deities in the garbhashṭāna and in the calantā and the Candipathaks (caṇḍīpāṭhaka) who are entrusted with the reading of the Caṇḍī. The latter, also known as Devīmāhātmya or Durgā-saptaśatī\(^{199}\), is part of the Mārkaṇḍeya-purāṇa. The text describes the battle and final victory of the Goddess Durgā over the buffalo-demon Mahiśāsura. Although they serve the Kāmākhyā Temple, Supakars and Candipathaks do not take part in the Bardeuris' pālā and cannot under any circumstances perform the pūjā for the Goddess Kāmākhyā. The Supakars and the Candipathaks each observe a distinct pālā. None of the groups has any share in the pranāmi donated in the Temple; most probably this is why they tend to give up their traditional tasks\(^{200}\).

According to Mishra (2004: 75-76) a third class of Nananbardeuris, the Saleis (śālei) would be entrusted with the preparation of sweets to be

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198 On the singularity of Kamakhya Dham’s parlance see the Introduction. The adjective nānān survives almost exclusively in the term nānānbardeuri, while the meaning “other” is usually conveyed by adjective beleg.

199 Devīmāhātmya can be translated as “[describing] the greatness of the Goddess”. Durgā-saptaśatī means “the seven-hundred [verses] for Durgā”.

200 I heard that the Supakars delegate the task of preparing the bhoga for the Goddess Kāmākhyā to other Brahmans coming from outside. As I am not allowed to enter the bhoga-ghar I cannot back these assertions with solid data.
presented to the Goddess Kāmākhyā at ārati. I never met any individual belonging to this group, so I cannot say whether any Salei is still active in the Kāmākhyā Temple. As will be shown in chapter 6 § 6 for sometime during my fieldwork, a Brahman from outside Nilachal was entrusted with the preparation of the sweets to be presented to Goddess Kāmākhyā at ārati.

Apart from the Supakars and the Candipathaks, all the other Nananbardeuris have rights in one or more minor temples. The kind of rights they hold are equivalent to those the Bardeuris hold over the Kāmākhyā Temple: every minor temple is run through a pālā. However, in several minor temples there are only a handful of pālādāras, who thus have almost unrestrained control over their temple. If the minor temple happens to be visited by many pilgrims and is a rich one, the pālādāras show up frequently in the temple and take good care of it.

On the other hand, several minor temples, situated in the jungle, are difficult to reach and pilgrims hardly know of their existence. The pālādāras of these temples tend to lose their relation to their temples and show up only if pilgrims demand a private pūjā.

As far as the pālā is concerned, everything that been said about it in relation to the Kāmākhyā Temple is valid for the minor temples too: pālā-days are heritable, and exclusively follow the bloodline, no matter what the pālādāra actually does to earns his living. The number of pālā-days is uneven and depends upon the number of members in every family. I will not comment further on these issues as I already did so in relation to the Kāmākhyā Temple.

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201 The most impressive example is the Bagalā Mukhi temple, which is said to be the site of lavish ritual activities, demanded and sponsored by rich businessmen, VIPs and politicians of Lower Assam. See chapter 6, § 4.
3.6. Concluding remarks.

By virtue of his bloodline, each Bardeuri is the holder of a certain proportion of rights over the Kāmākhya Temple. A major difference between the two sets of rights has been highlighted. The rights relating to the festive worship result in an obligation to perform the related rites: the vratī is bound to observe the vrata during the festivals which follow under his turn and to carry out the rites allotted to the group he belongs to. If he is inexpert he can ask for the assistance of more experienced members of his group. The custom regulating daily worship is the opposite to this: the pālādāra who has not been trained to perform the daily worship needs to appoint a second Bardeuri (who has been recognized as pujārī) as his deputy to have the daily worship performed on his pālā-days; this arrangement is current among Bardeuris. On the other hand, many Bardeuris insist that in each family there should be at least one pujārī. Clearly a gap exists between what people do and what people think that it would be proper to do.

§ 4 has suggested broadening the analysis to include activities which are not based on any right. A number of Bardeuris who are not pujārīs and do not have a large number of pālā-days are anyway active in the Temple. Some are employed by fellow Bardeuris to "sit" in the sanctum; others have carved a niche for themselves “activating” the marginal bas-reliefs of the calantā. Their bloodline is the sufficient condition that enables them to undertake these marginal activities. Those Bardeuris who are qualified as pujārīs avoid these activities, because they are entitled to the essential activity of the Temple, namely the worship of the Goddess. They do so on their own pālā-days as well as on other Bardeuris' pālā-days, when the latter appoint them. Bardeuri pujārīs also undertake the private worship of the Goddess (and of any other deity inhabiting the Nilachal) which will be analysed in chapter 6.

Because of their bloodline – the fact that they are born of a Nananbrdeuri father – Nananbardeuris are marginal in comparison to Bardeuris. Their rights are confined to the minor temples they are linked to. That, however, can result in a profitable occupation, if the minor temple
concerned receives large numbers of pilgrims. By contrast, several minor temples are scarcely visited and by very few pilgrims; in these cases the Nananbardeuris concerned tend to lose their connection to their temple.
It is a fact that the Bardeuris hold exclusive rights over the Kāmākhyā Temple. And it is a fact that Nananbardeuris do not try to overturn the Bardeuris' rights; for instance, I have never observed or heard of a Nananbardeuri attempting to perform the ājā for the Goddess Kāmākhyā in Her Temple. In other words, everyone is aware of his group's rights and behaves accordingly. On the other hand, the ideas that people hold regarding theirs and others' rights and standing differ sharply from each other. And it is precisely these ideas which the present chapter aims at analysing.

In § 1 I analyse the way Bardeuris collectively build their sense of superiority by claiming that they originated in North India; this is indeed what several groups of Brahmins based in South Asia claim. These statements are predicated upon a strong local/North Indian opposition: the legitimate religious authority invariably comes from North India. For their
part, Nananbardeuris tend to bypass the ideological encumbrance of the Bardeuris’ pre-eminence (§ 2). The majority of Nananbardeuris claim to originate in North India and treat themselves as equal to the Bardeuris (by contrast, Bardeuris deny any authority to these claims). Other Nananbardeuris tend to stress the “weight” of the deity that they serve. Similarly, non-Brahman Shebaits too tend to stress the significance of the ritual tasks they are entrusted with, thus playing down the Bardeuris’ pre-eminence. The rules regulating the choice of one’s own life-partner are analysed in § 3. The latter also includes a survey of the daily interactions taking place between Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris. As will be shown, affectionate relations exist between Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris, as well as between Brahmins and non-Brahmans.

4. 1. How the Bardeuris build their sense of superiority.

Bardeuris maintain that they were brought to Assam from present-day Kannauj (Uttar Pradesh) by some kings of the past, in order to worship the Goddess Kāmākhyā and that they have been granted revenue-free lands by those kings. Bhaskar Sarma, a Bardeuri in his thirties, said the following, during an interview:

Bardeuris are the oldest here, they have at least fourteen generations [...] We were not originated from this place. Kannauj in U.P., right now it’s near Kanpur. From there we were, you know, brought here, taken here by the kings, at that time, to perform pūjā only.

On the Brahmins’ lands see chapter 3, § 3.
Bhaskar Sarma does not practise priesthood; rather, he is in business. His father and grandfather did not practise priesthood either; nor does his elder brother. Both he and his brother are educated and conversant with English. Bhaskar Sarma lives in a joint family along with his wife; he and his brother have constructed and inhabit one of Kamakhya Dham’s tallest and finest buildings. The interview, held in June 2011, took place in Bhaskar Sarma’s own residence. It needs to be noted that statements similar to those of Bhaskar Sarma have been made by (almost) all the Bardeuris I spoke to, including many priests. In other words, Bardeuris whose lifestyle differs in many ways from Bhaskar Sarma’s one hold the same view. I quoted his words as an example of what Bardeuris’ claims sound like, but I could have selected other individuals’ statements as well. For instance, another Bardeuri of my acquaintance described Bardeuris as “the genuine pujārīs”, opposing them to the “nānān pujārīs, who came after the Bardeuris”.

Several Bardeuris spontaneously gave me a similar account of their supposed arrival in the Kāmākhyā Temple and many of them showed a sense of pride while talking about it. Variations do exist in the accounts of different Bardeuris; nevertheless different adaptations of the story do not reduce the impressive homogeneity of the Bardeuris’ claims. Such consistency suggested to me the expression “the Kannauj account”, which I will use from now on in order to refer to the Bardeuris’ claims. The uniformity shown by their claims sharply contrasts with the lack of a similar posture on the part of the Nananbardeuris, a point I will come back to in § 2.

The inviting king is invariably present in all the variants of the Kannauj account. Only a few Bardeuris mentioned a particular king’s name or indicated one specific dynasty, but all of them anyway stressed that it was a king who brought them to the Kāmākhyā Temple. In the Hindu worldview, kingship is not only based on the sovereign’s role as ruler and administrator

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203 For instance, the Bardeuri I just quoted affirmed that Bardeuris have been settled in Kamakhya for “at least fourteen generations”, whereas, according to another Bardeuri, Bardeuris have been settled there for the last four generations. Apart from the number of generations claimed Bardeuris, many other minor details vary according to the person who is speaking.
of law; it needs to be grounded in the role of the king as *yajamāna*, as well. The king, as *yajamāna*, is expected to take care of the temples situated within the territory under his rule, and thus to provide the temples’ priests with what is needed for the worship and for their subsistence. If the priests keep the temples in a good state, the deities, pleased, will protect the king and his kingdom. Since a masterly description of the "triangle of indirect exchange relationships" between kings, priests and deities does exist (Fuller 1984: 105), it is appropriate to quote it in its entirety:

Priests make offering to and perform services for the gods; the gods preserve the king, the kingdom and his subject; and the king protects the temples, provides the wherewithal for rituals and rewards the priests with gifts [...]. As it is represented in the orthodox picture, the king does not pay the priests as his own servants, but instead donates to the gods’ servants. Hence there is no direct exchange relationship between king and priests, and the relationship between them is only comprehensible if the deities, the third party to the exchanges, are also incorporated into the scheme. We can thus see that the legitimacy of particular priests’ rights in a particular temple does not depend simply on the fact that they were granted by the king *qua* head of the state. Rather, that legitimacy is logically contingent upon the relationship between king and deity that can only be properly established by the insertion of the priests into the network of exchanges.

It is not my aim to test the historical accuracy of the Kannauj account\(^\text{204}\). Rather, my concern is how the Bardeuris use it in order to build their sense of superiority in relation to the Nananbardeuris.

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\(^{204}\) As Kakati (1948: 31-32) puts it: “in all periods of Assam history there is mention of Brāhmaṇas and other twice-born people having been imported into Assam from different part of Northern India [...] by several reigning monarchs”. At the same time, no historical evidence exists which can firmly establish that the ancestors of the present-day Bardeuris actually originated in Kannauj. As will be shown in chapter 7, § 1, the oldest documents I came across concern a dispute which arose in the 1830s. These and further legal documents enabled me to retrace the genealogy of the Bara Dalai Ghar (the house of the Major Dalai, head of the temple complex) from the 1830s to the present. Ganga Prasad Sarma, the Dalai in charge in the 1830s, produced a list of his ancestors and claimed that they were Dalais at the
When asked about the latters’ origins, a Bardeuri priest in his forties said: “They don’t have that much of a history”. Another Bardeuri affirmed (my translation from Assamese) “We have called them [here]”. An old priest answered me with a gesture of contempt, adding just a few careless words. The general picture that emerges from the Bardeuris’ statements about Nananbardeuris is the following. At some time in the past, Bardeuris were not able to handle all the tasks they were entrusted with; thus, they called other Brahmans (the Nananbardeuris) from somewhere else. In the course of time, Nananbardeuris have been given some plots of land on the Nilachal by the Bardeuris in order to build their houses and settled down there. This last point, relating to residence, needs to be commented on.

At the time of writing, Bardeuris, Nananbardeuris and non-Brahman Shebaits all live in the village around the Temple, namely Kamakhya Dham. They are the owners of the houses where they live and understand these houses to be their ancestors’ ones.205 Owning the house where one lives or renting a place from someone else generally makes a big difference in the eyes of Kamakhya (as well as in the eyes of many other Hindus) - when I said to Himangshu Sarma that my mother’s house in our home town in Italy is a rented one, his face immediately became shadowed by a feeling of surprise and disappointment. The fact that Bardeuris maintain that they have given land on Nilachal to some Nanabardeuris implies that, in the eyes of the

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205 See chapter 1, § 1, for the Kamakhya’s sense of belonging and their relation to the ancestors’ house.
Bardeuris, it is they who allowed the Nananbardeuris to become, so to say, legitimate citizens of Kamakhya Dham. The relevance of this point will become clearer when the activities and self-understanding of the outsider Brahmins working in the temple complex are analysed (chapter 6, § 6).

To sum up, I detect the following four key elements in the Kannauj account: royal legitimacy (it was a king who brought the Bardeuris to the Kāmākhyā Temple); authority over rituals (Bardeuris were brought to the Kāmākhyā Temple because they were believed to be competent to worship the Goddess properly); certainty of their origin in Kannauj; and priority in time (Bardeuris were the first Brahmins who ever came to the Kāmākhyā Temple). On the other hand, none of these elements is present in the account the Bardeuris hold about the Nananbardeuris. It was not a king who summoned the Nananbardeuris, but the Bardeuris themselves. It is not clear where they came from. The Nananbardeuris were not summoned because of their authority over the rites; rather they were summoned because the Bardeuris needed some help in dealing with their different tasks. The Nananbardeuris, of course, came to the Blue Hill only after the Bardeuris had settled there. As will be shown in § 2, the picture the Nananbardeuris hold of themselves sharply differs from the one just depicted.

A negative element in the Bardeuris’ statements needs to be highlighted. No Bardeuri I talked to ever felt the need to speak about what was going on on the Nilachal before their arrival. The myth of Satī implies that Her yoni fell on the Nilachal from time immemorial: thus, the divine presence on the Hill is taken for granted. No Bardeuri, however, showed any interest in knowing, from any source whatsoever, whether there was a temple on the Nilachal for the Goddess Kāmākhyā. Bardeuris do not voice ideas or even hypotheses on a possible precedent cult, prior to their arrival. The Kannauj account invariably starts with the arrival of Bardeuris at the Kāmākhyā Temple. When I realised this, I asked a Bardeuri of my acquaintance who was worshipping the Goddess Kāmākhyā on the Nilachal before their arrival. He rapidly and carelessly said that priests from the
Khasis\textsuperscript{206}, a population they label as “tribal”, used to worship Her, but later on moved to Meghalaya. The annoyed expression on his face clarified his lack of interest in the entire affair. For him and for all the Bardeuris, the “true story” starts with their arrival from Kannauj.

Numerous groups of Brahmans settled in different regions of South Asia claim to have originated either in Kannauj or in Benares\textsuperscript{207}. These two towns are generally considered by Hindus to be the centres of Brahmanic orthodoxy and thus have a strong legitimating power, as far as priestly rights are concerned. The claims of one section of the priesthood of the Mīnākṣi Temple (Madurai, Tamil Nadu) are noteworthy as far as the local/North Indian opposition is concerned.

According to Fuller (1984), the Brahmans of Mīnākṣi Temple understand themselves to be divided into two broad groups, the Vikkīra Pantiyas and the Kulacekaras. The former enjoy higher rights in the Mīnākṣi Temple rituals; for example, only they can perform the daily worship and only they can touch the two main images of Mīnākṣi and Her husband, Sundaresvara\textsuperscript{208}, whereas Kulachekaras cannot. The Vikkīra Pantiyas’ pre-eminence is grounded on a claim, which includes three of the four key elements of the Kannauj account\textsuperscript{209}. Before proceeding one point needs to be clarified. The asymmetry between the Bardeuris’ rights and those of the Nananbardeuris is played out in the context of a temple complex, whereas the asymmetry between the rights of Vikkīra Pantiyas and of Kulachekaras is

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{description}
\item[\textsuperscript{206}] The vast majority of Khasis dwell in the eastern hills of Meghalaya and are Christian; a small percentage of Khasi people follows the Khasi religion to the present day. Kamakhyans label Khasis as “tribals” and have a very bad image of these people. On the Khasi see Chittattukalam (2002: 153-155) and for a discussion of the Khasi identity see Ramirez (2014: 53-56).
\item[\textsuperscript{207}] During my latest period of fieldwork I visited the Navagrah Temple in Guwahati. Nine \textit{liṅgams}, representing the nine celestial bodies (\textit{nava-graha}, see chapter 6, § 2) are worshipped in the main chamber. One priest was in service, when I arrived along with other six Italians. The priest escorted us in our \textit{darśana}, uttering the \textit{mantra} of each \textit{graha}. Being almost obsessed by the issue of the Brahmans’ origins, once the \textit{darśana} concluded I asked the priest about the (supposed) original place of his ancestors. As per my expectations, the priest proudly affirmed that his ancestors came from North India. He spontaneously went on to say that in former times there were no Brahmans at all in Assam.
\item[\textsuperscript{208}] Fuller 1984: 32-35.
\item[\textsuperscript{209}] \textit{Ibidem}.
\end{description}
\end{footnotesize}
framed within a single temple. Thus, in order to draw a comparison between the two priestly communities, the Kāmākhyā temple complex in its entirety needs to be equated to the Mīnāḵṣī Temple. It is reasonable to do this, because the Mīnāḵṣī Temple includes various shrines, among which two are considered to be the main ones. Thus the pre-eminence of the Kāmākhyā Temple within the Kāmākhyā temple complex stands for the pre-eminence of the main shrines of Mīnāḵṣī and Sundaresvar in the Mīnāḵṣī Temple.

According to Fuller, after a period of political turmoil, during which the Mīnāḵṣī Temple was abandoned, in 1378 it was again reopened by the newly confirmed rulers, namely the Vijayanagara emperors.

Legend has it that when the Vijayanagara commander entered the Minakshi Temple, one Kulacekara Peruman opened Sundaresvara's sanctum, whereupon it was discovered that the lamp left inside nearly seventy years before was still burning, the silk cloth round the linga was still clean, and the sandal paste and flowers were still fresh. Seeing this miracle, Kumāra Kampana [the army officer who annexed the Madurai area to the Vijayanagara empire] appointed Kulacekara Peruman the Temple's [...] 'chief priest' [...]. Kulacekara Peruman was also granted lands and, having been consecrated as a priest, began with other members of his family to perform the rituals.

After a few years, however, the Vijayanagara regent of Madurai, Kumāra Kampana's son, became dissatisfied with the conduct of Kulacekara Peruman and his family (i.e. the Kulacekara group), only one of whom was still working in the Temple, and so invited one Sadāśiva to work there. Sadāśiva was consecrated, given the title Vikkira Pantiya and appointed the chief priest of the Temple. Kulacekara Peruman became the second chief priest. Sadāśiva then invited priests from five other nearby villages to assist him in the Temple, and the putative descendants of these priests, together with those of Sadāśiva himself, form the Vikkira Pantiya group.

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210 Ibidem.
In a note Fuller says that Sadāśiva is said to have come “from the north” and adds that:

... the priests maintain [...] that they all originated in Benares, and similar claims are widespread in South Indian Śiva temples [...]. These claims obviously have to be interpreted as assertion of priestly legitimacy, as given by the link with the Aryan Brahmans’ northern homeland and its holy Śaiva city, Benares211.

Sadāśiva’s legend shares with the Kannauj account the following elements: royal legitimacy (Sadāśiva was summoned by a regent, that is, a position comparable to that of the king); authority over rituals (he was called because he was thought to be able to worship the Goddess Minākṣī properly); and certainty about his origin in the North. However, unlike the Bardeuris, Sadāśiva is not said to be the first priest of Minākṣī Temple: when he arrives, Kulacekaras are already running the Temple. It is the arrival of Sadāśiva itself which places the Kulacekaras in a second-ranked position - afterwards, the priests called by Sadāśiva are incorporated into his first-ranked group. Sadāśiva’s legend implies that the local priests who were running Minākṣī Temple before his arrival did not constitute a legitimate religious authority. That is why the ruler felt the need to entrusting the Temple to some new religious authority, namely Sadāśiva. The local priestly group is played down and religious authority is claimed to come from “the Aryan Brahmans’ northern homeland212”. In both these legends, as well as in other similar claims, the legitimating North Indian “original” town of the Brahmans is opposed to the place where they live nowadays. The external force comes from North India and penetrates the local context. Its undisputed superiority cannot but be accepted by the local actors.

Similarly, the groups of Brahmans who claim to originate in North India show the tendency to distance themselves from the populations which are believed to originate in the areas concerned. Toffin detects a similar posture

211 Ibidem: 187
212 Ibidem.
regarding the Rājopādhyāya Brahmans, who are “the domestic priests of high-caste Hindu Newars” and also work as the temple priests in several public and private temples of the valley. According to Toffin, “The Rājopādhyāyas claim to originate in Kanauj [... a city with a prestigious history]”. Although they are “very involved in Newar culture and follow its most specific customs”, the Rājopādhyāyas are very attentive in stressing the gap which, in their eyes, exists between themselves and the Newars:

The Rājopādhyāyas do not consider themselves to be altogether like Newars. They prefer to place themselves outside this ethnic group. The Rājopādhyāyas can only really claim the full status of Brāhmaṇs by distinguishing them from the Newars. Like all self-respecting Brāhmaṇs, they embody the transcendental values of religious life. As such they are opposed to the local values represented by the [...] Newar castes. The fact that they belong to the Brāhman caste prevents them from being too closely attached to any tribal group, whatever it may be.

Toffin stresses that, on the other hand, Newars “regard the Rājopādhyāyas as their Brāhmaṇs”.

Vidal compares the diverse auto-legitimating techniques of the pujārīs and the mediums of local deities in Himachal Pradesh. The intention of his article – studying the diverse forms of the relationships between villagers and deities and the corresponding diverse professionals who render this communication possible – is very interesting in itself, but touches only lightly on the present purpose. However, what he says about his pujārīs’ claims can be usefully compared with the Bardeuris’ claims.

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213 Toffin 1995: 188. The Newars are “the ‘traditional’ inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley” (Gellner 1995: 4).
214 Toffin 1995: 188.
217 Ibidem: 207.
...les brâhmanes, qui font office de pujârî, tiennent par dessus tout à affirmer dans leur généalogie le souvenir d’origines étrangères à la localité, y voyant le meilleur des gages pour attester de leur identité de caste\textsuperscript{218}.

The claims of the Brahmans studied by Vidal share one main point with the Kannauj account: the legitimate religious specialists do not originally belong to the locality where they exercise their authority. Although kings are not named and a specific town is not mentioned, the local/external opposition is used to establish the Brahmans’ legitimacy and authority. I find the use of the word gage (guarantee, proof, token) remarkable. The groups of Brahmans dealt with in this paragraph all need to persuade the other people they live with of their standing. Whether Bardeuris are successful or not in convincing their fellow villagers of their standing will be examined in the next paragraph.

4.2. The Nananbardeuris’ diverse responses.

Having perceived the importance the Bardeuris attribute to their alleged origins in Kannauj, I started asking Nananbardeuris where their ancestors came from. The first individual I wish to quote is Mahesh Sarma (a pseudonym). At the time of writing, Mahesh Sarma is in his early thirties. He is unmarried and lives with his family in Guwahati. He is educated and does not practise priesthood. Five years ago, he opened a restaurant for pilgrims near the Temple on the ground floor of a building owned by his mother. His elder brother and his father do not the practise priesthood either. Since I used to have snacks at Mahesh Sarma’s restaurant, we became familiar. He

\textsuperscript{218}Vidal 1989: 65.
has always shown an interest in my research and spent hours talking to me about different topics. Talking about himself, he once said: “I'm not a very religious person”. By this he was not at all downplaying his faith; rather he was pointing out that in his daily life he spends most of his time at work or involved in family matters, that is, in activities which are not connected with the religious sphere; this does not allow him to focus on his spiritual improvement which would demand a congruous and sincere effort\textsuperscript{219}. Asked about his family's origins, he said the following:

I told you earlier that I may not be correct everywhere, but I have heard from my grandfather that we are from Ajmer. Pritivi Raj king, I have heard that he took us here, almost around seven generations ago. Even before that, some people, some families were called, means, asked to come here and worship Mā Goddess, because there was very lack of people to worship Mā Goddess. Even then the Temple was there, but there was lack of people, lack of priests, to worship Goddess. That's why king have called some people, some families and gave them the responsibility that "you must worship Mā Goddess during those days". Those families now have spread, but those people who were asked to worship Mā Goddess, they are the families of Bardeuris. Right now what happens, that those families who were called to worship Goddess [the Bardeuris], they are facing some problems, like, some must have to clean the Temple inside, some has to prepare bhoga prasādi [the daily meal offered to the Goddess]. For that purpose they have called some other people, means "You please come to us and help us in serving Mā Goddess". Ok? Then that families have also spread and their generation have got the authority accordingly.

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked him where in his opinion Bardeuris came from.

I don't know that. So you must ask to Somesh [Mahesh’s cousin, who is a Bardeuri], because they are the perfect families, the perfect Bardeuris.

\textsuperscript{219} On this widespread idea see chapter 6, § 5.
Like Mahesh, several Nananbardeuris affirmed that their ancestors came from North India. As shown in § 1, Brahmans invariably need to state that their ancestors came from a place different from their present place of residence – and possibly from North India- as the local context is always played down as being devoid of any legitimate religious authority. By claiming to originate in North India, the Nananbardeuris, aware of the Bardeuris’ Kānauj account, smooth the distinctions between the two groups.

By contrast, Gaurav Sarma (a pseudonym), a Nananbardeuri I know said the following about the Bardeuris’ Kānauj account and the other similar claims:

It is not that they [the Badeuris] can claim that they are from Kānauj. There are no records. No one can claim anything. There were no Brahmans here, we all came from somewhere else, but no one can say from where.

At the time of writing, Gaurav Sarma is in his early thirties. He is highly educated. He lives in Kamakhya Dham with his wife and child. He is a pujārī and feels very committed to his priestly activities. He frequently told me that his engagement in pujārī- hood hardly leaves him any time to spend with his family.

To sum up, Mahesh Sarma affirms that his ancestors came from North India, as do (almost) all the Brahmans of the Kāmākhyā temple complex. Asked about the Bardeuris, he says that he is not able to answer my question and suggests that I should ask one of them directly. He asserts that Nananbardeuris have been called by Bardeuris, as the latter also affirm, but also names an inviting king. Mahesh Sarma does not rank Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris in any hierarchical way. At the same time, his words do not underplay the authoritativeness of the Bardeuris’ claims. On the contrary, Gaurav Sarma attacks this very point: the Bardeuris’ claims and other similar claims are not defensible. He dismisses them as something which clearly appears to be unsound and consequently does not deserve much attention.
Consistently he does not advance any similar claim. Gaurav’s posture is quite unusual; and in fact many other of his ideas differ from the recurring ideas which circulate among Kamakhyans. For instance, he does not express any contempt regarding the “tribals” of North-East India, as almost all Kamakhyans do. In my opinion, it is his high level of education which makes the difference. Gaurav distances himself from ideas which he understands to be unsound and backward.\(^{220}\) Notwithstanding this difference, neither man ranks the Bardeuris and the Nananbardeuris in any hierarchical order, which is a subtle way of denying the superiority which the Bardeuris claim to have.

Why are the Nananbardeuris not engaged in the building of a collective identity? This is striking, if one takes into account that the Bardeuris, who live “next door”, do show a strong sense of cohesion when they talk about their group. This question encourages two sets of considerations. First, the Nananbardeuris are attached to different minor temples, which does not at all encourage the building of a sense of common identity. Also, as argued in chapter 3, § 5, some among the minor temples of the complex have greater economic weight, compared to others, because they are visited by more pilgrims. Second, as shown in chapter 7, a dispute concerning the management of the temple complex has been going on for the last seventeen years. The fact that the Dalais (heads of the temple complex) are to be selected among the Bardeuris – as was the custom beforehand – is at stake in the dispute. That explains why Bardeuris, notwithstanding their internal frictions, do hold a compact posture in the trial. The Nananbardeuris, on the other hand, do not actually need to build a collective identity in order to position themselves in the trial, because it is not their rights which are at stake.

Some Nananbardeuris tend to stress the importance of the deity they serve. I once asked a Brahman of Bagalā Mukhī temple (my translation from Assamese): “Are you a Nananbardeuri?” He initially replayed “Yes, Nananbardeuri”, but immediately after added “Bagalā deuri!” with emphasis.

\(^{220}\) His posture is comparable to the one that Bharati Prasad Sarma holds regarding sacrifice. See chapter 5, § 2.
As will be shown in chapter 6, § 4, a young Brahman of this temple strongly and proudly affirmed that the pūjā for Goddess Bagalā Mukhī is “dangerous”, while that for the Goddess Kāmākhyā is “easy” – the two English adjectives were used by the Assamese-speaking Brahman\textsuperscript{221}.

Some non-Brahman Shebaits support their standing in a way similar to that of the Bagalā Mukhī Brahman. In order to undermine the claimed superiority of the Bardeuris, they tend to stress the importance of the ritual tasks they render to the Goddess Kāmākhyā. The following examples will probably clarify the point. As shown in chapter 3, § 3, on his pālā-day, a Bardeuri is bound to serve the Goddess throughout the daily rights, that is from the rites to be performed at dawn up to the ārati, which is performed in the evening. He can leave the Temple after ārati is completed. Non-Brahman Shebaits, on their side, have their own pālā and their own duties. Among them, the Athparias observe 24-hour turns (chapter 2, § 1). One day I was talking with an Athparia of my acquaintance about his duties in the Temple. Suddenly he told me with pride that they – the Athparias – serve the Goddess more than the Brahmans, because they actually spend more time with Her. He repeated his point several times, with emphasis. Another similar episode may be mentioned. As shown in chapter 2, § 1, one of the duties of the Athparias is to bathe and dress the idol of the Goddess at dawn (śṛṅgāra). A second Athparia I am acquainted with once observed to me that the Athparias offer the very first service to the Goddess during Her day. It is only after they have bathed the Goddess that the Brahmans can perform the pūjā for Her.

A major difference needs to be highlighted. Bardeuris and Nananbareuris are both Brahmans and regularly intermarry (see § 3). Their diverging ideas regarding their relative ranking operate within the mutual acknowledgment of Brahman status. By contrast, the Athparias show the tendency to overlook the significance of caste hierarchy, stressing the importance of the ritual tasks which they alone are entrusted with. To put it

\textsuperscript{221} On the conceptions regarding the Goddess Bagalā Mukhī and the dynamics (allegedly) taking place around Her nightly, secret worship see chapter 6, § 4.
another way, the Nananbardeuris are ranked second by the Bardeuris within the wider group formed by Kamakhyan Brahmans, while the Athaparias, a separate non-Brahman caste, are understood to be inferior to all Brahmans. What the Nananbardeuris and non-Brahmans share is that they are both ranked second (within two different frames); and that both are inclined to deny that they rank second.

With this in mind, the ideas of a deodhāi I am familiar with are worth quoting. Now in his late forties, this man has been possessed since his adolescence. During one of our long conversations, he told me that during the month preceding possession he has *darśana* in the Kāmākhya Temple. There is no surprise in this, as several deodhāis have *darśana* almost every day in the month preceding the festival (śāon, July/August). He described to me the way he scoops up the water from the spring, to drink it; he seemed to attach a particular significance to his gesture and stressed that Brahmans do not interfere with his operations in the sanctum.

Several deodhāis took the *dikṣā* from Tarini Prasad Sarma – one of the most famed gurus of the temple complex – or from his father. The deodhāis are not bound to take the *dikṣā*, but many of them actually do. Unlike them, the deodhāi in question did not. He spontaneously mentioned Tarini’s father, Ambika, and stressed that he did not take any *dikṣā* from this guru. The expression on his face and the gesture of his hand clarified that he does not acknowledge that this guru-line has significant religious authority. While talking, he shook his right hand in the gesture which is precisely used to diminish the value of the topic debated. In chapter 6, § 5 it will be shown how bitter are the criticisms of the Kamakhyan Brahmans by this deodhāi.

It needs to be clarified that I never heard any Kamakhyan openly making statements similar to the ones quoted in this § and the preceding one; ideas about hierarchy are not publicly debated. I never came across a Bardeuri giving the Kannauj account in front of a Nananbardeuri, for

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222 As shown in the Introduction and in chapter 2, § 3, in this period of time prior to the festival, *deodhāis* are understood to be quasi-possessed, but are not yet worshipped by devotees, as happens during the three days of the festival.

223 See chapter 2, § 2.
example. Nor did I ever hear a Nananbardeuri openly discrediting the Kannauj account in front a Bardeuri or an Athparia openly playing down the role of the Bardeuri pujārī. The quotations contained in this § as well as those of § 1 come from conversations between the interlocutor concerned and myself alone. I am convinced that the words these people said to me represent their sincere understanding of the hierarchical order. I do not think that they somehow forced themselves to express a position which would otherwise be alien to them. They are simply diplomatic enough to avoid speaking about hierarchy in front of one another.

Clearly, the Athaparias of Kamakhya Dham are not the only caste which challenges the hierarchical order in which they find themselves. In the Introduction to Contested Hierarchies – an emblematic title, indeed – Gellner affirms that:

...caste societies’ systems of ranking are indeed contested and not given, both within and between castes\textsuperscript{224}.

Shortly afterwards, he sketches how several Newar castes claim for themselves a status superior to that which the other Newar castes attribute to them:

Most Newar castes have a myth of origin claiming provenance from the plains to the south […]. For some castes, those which enjoy kṣatriya, or not to far below kṣatriya status, later arrival within the Valley correlates with higher status. These castes claim to have been kings of an earlier dynasty, or to have been courtiers of incoming kings. Other, artisanal castes, such as the Rājkarṇikārs (Sweet-Makers) of Lalitpur, claim to have been brāhmaṇs in India. The Ḫaḍgī, Butcher, caste, also claims relatively late, kṣatriya, origin\textsuperscript{225}.

\textsuperscript{224}Gellner 1995: 4.
\textsuperscript{225}Ibidem: 5. An excellent article which shows well how hierarchy can be shaped in different ways by different actors is that of Caroline and Filippo Osella (2002). Berti (2001, chapter 3) shows how the different specialists involved in rituals in Kullu Valley have diverging opinions regarding their and others’ ritual know-hows.
Similarly, the Athparia show the ability to question the pre-eminence which Bardeuris attribute to themselves. However, they do it in a different way, compared to the Newars observed by Gellner. The Athparias of the Kāmākhyā Temple do not affirm that in the past they had a status superior to their present one; rather, they stress the significance of their present status (through a discourse concerning ritual tasks).

4. 3. Marriage and everyday life.

A Bardeuri man can marry a Nananbardeuri woman, no matter which minor temple her family is attached to. The opposite is also possible: a Bardeuri woman can marry a Nananbardeuri man\textsuperscript{226}. Besides this, many Bardeuri and Nananbardeuri men marry Assamese Brahman women, residing outside the Nilachal\textsuperscript{227} - Non-Brahman Shebaits observe the same custom. The majority of these women come either from Kamrup District – the District whose capital is Guwahati – or from nearby Districts. In other words, they come from the so-called “Lower Assam”, that is the south-western part of the State. I know women of all ages (elderly ones, as well as newly married ones) who came to Kamakhya Dham as brides either of Bardeuris or of Nananbardeuris. There is a peculiar expression used to refer to these women: Kāmākhyār bovārī, “daughter-in-law of Kāmākhyā”. Many women used this expression while talking with me about their settling in Kamakhya Dham after marriage. On the other hand, women belonging to a Bardeuri or a Nananbardeuri family and married in Kamakhya Dham frequently used the expression “Kāmākhyāt janma, Kāmākhyāt biyā” (born in Kamakhya [Dham], married in Kamakhya [Dham]).

\textsuperscript{226} In chapter 7, § 5, it will be shown how a Nananbardeuri stressed the fact that Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris regularly intermarry to smooth the gap between the two groups.

\textsuperscript{227} And, in turn, Bardeuri and Nananbardeuri women marry out to Assamese Brahman men.
Unions of this kind are perfectly accepted in Kamakhya Dham\textsuperscript{228}. The required conditions are that the woman concerned should be a Brahman – that is, she belongs to a group which understands itself and is understood by Kamakhynes as being a Brahman one\textsuperscript{229} – and that she should be Assamese\textsuperscript{230}. The children belong to their father's group. For example, the son of a Bardeuri father is a Bardeuri, no matter whether his mother is a Bardeuri, a Nananbardeuri or a Brahman Assamese woman from outside Kamakhya Dham.

The marriage customs followed by the priests of the Mīnākṣī Temple show great similarity with the customs obeyed by Kamakhyan Brahmans. According to Fuller\textsuperscript{231}, Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras regularly intermarry; and marry into Ādiśaiva Brahman families, who have no rights in the Mīnākṣī Temple. Reiniche (1989) too describes a similar arrangement regarding the Gurukkals of Tiruvannamalai Temple. Gurukkals, who understand themselves to be divided into four groups, marry among each other. In addition, Gurukkals marry into Gurukkal families from outside Tiruvannamalai. However, Reiniche goes a step further; through the analysis of a vast number of marriages, she points out that the Gurukkals, who marry outside Tiruvannamalai, actually marry into three specific areas of Tamil Nadu. According to her:

Sur 149 mariages, 28 (Presque 19\%) sont des répétitions (ou des retournements) de l'alliance conclue (ou renouvelée) à la génération

\textsuperscript{228} That Brahmans from Kamakhya Dham marry women from outside means that they have in-laws in the villages. These in-laws frequently show up when a saṁskāra or a pūjā is performed in the house of their out-married daughter.

\textsuperscript{229} Further research would be needed in order to ascertain to which specific groups of Assamese Brahmans Kamakhyan Brahmans marry.

\textsuperscript{230} I know of a Bardeuri man who married a Brahman woman from outside Assam some fifteen years ago. He told me that his marriage provoked some comment, because the bride was not Assamese. I also know of a Bardeuri man who married a non-Brahman woman from Kamakhya Dham some ten years ago. This union of course provoked major opposition. I have been told that the marriage was performed in secrecy, in a temple outside the Nilachal. Since these issues are extremely sensitive ones, I avoided enquiring further about them.

\textsuperscript{231} Fuller 1984:26.
The Gurukkals’ habit of marrying into these localités privilégiées shows great similarity with at least one case I am informed about regarding the Kamakhyan Brahmans. Anupam Sarma, a Nanbanbardeuri friend of mine, married in 2012 Supriya, a Brahman woman from Sualkuchi, a village some fifteen kilometres distant from Guwahati. As he told me of his marriage, I asked him how he met Supriya first. Anupam Sarma told me that he and Supriya has known each other since childhood. Anupam Sarma’s mother (who died before the marriage was performed) was from Sualkuchi; thus as a child, Anupam Sarma used to go to Sualkuchi from time to time with his mother in order to visit his maternal grandparents. The latter were the neighbours of Supriya’s family. That is how Supriya and Anupam used to play with each other as children. Once in his late twenties, Anupam Sarma decided that it was time for him to get married and thought of Supriya. Since both his parents were already dead, he approached Supriya’s father himself. The latter knew Anupam Sarma’s mother’s family well and must have known his father to some extent as well. He agreed with the proposal. Most probably Supriya’s family did not need to gather information about Anupam Sarma’s, before considering the marriage proposal. In other words, it is very probable that the familiarity between the two families smoothed the entire process. Further research will clarify whether Anupam’s case is an isolated one or not in Kamakhya Dham.

As far as daily life is concerned, many Bardeuris and Nanbanbardeuris maintain easy relationships with each other. The diverging ideas regarding hierarchy concern the relations between these two groups, and not those between individuals. For instance, Gaurav Sarma, the Nanbanbardeuri I quoted in § 2, plainly dismisses the Kannauj account as an unfounded

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233 I am acquainted with this woman, but I do not know her name; I chose to give her a pseudonym, in order to make the account flow better.
assertion. But that does not prevent him from having comfortable relationships with a number of Bardeuris. Moreover, he maintains strong friendly relations with at least one Bardeuri. It seems to me that ideas regarding hierarchy hold good in the ritual sphere, but are not really significant in relations between individuals.

Kamakhyans have the notion of “best friends” or “crony friends”. “Best friends” are not simply individuals who know each other and have easy-going relationships. The notion implies a particularly tight bond linking two individuals belonging to the same gender and being of similar age. During several conversations, I have been told about my interlocutors’ best friends. What is relevant for the present purpose is that best friends frequently belong to different castes. For example Mahesh Sarma, the Nananbardeuri I quote in § 2, is the best friend of a Bardeuri priest. I also know of a non-Brahman Shebait who was the best friend of a Bardeuri man, now deceased. Best friends spend time with each other and share time-pass activities, such as games for example. They sometimes travel together. Best friends do not put one another in a hierarchy. For instance, even if Mahesh Sarma’s best friend, who is a Bardeuri, thinks that Bardeuris, as a group, are above Nananbardeuris, he would never think of himself as being above his best friend.

It needs to be noted that almost every Brahman I talked to expressed an ambiguous, sometimes openly negative, judgement about the large majority of his fellow Brahmans. “The others” are not conversant with rituals, and are

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235 This man, now in his fifties, talked to me about his best friend at length. He had some photos of his best friend’s marriage and showed them to me - it may be considered significant that he had these photos; as far as my knowledge goes, Kamakhyans only keep the photos of their own marriages. He talked in a very moving way and touched his heart while talking several times.

236 A Bardeuri man and his non-Brahman best friend used to go on vacations together when they were bachelors. The Bardeuri has been the first to marry and went on his honeymoon, where he was alone with his bride. Except for that, when going on vacations after his marriage, he used to go with his wife and his best friend. The latter married a few years later. Now, the two best friends travel together, bringing their respective wives with them.

237 I employ the term “above”, to render the way difference in ranking is generally expressed by Kamakhyans. A Kamakhyan would say that he (or his group) is above – uparod – or below – talat – another individual (or another group).
only running after money. The same applies to non-Brahmans. Several Kamakhyans threw these general accusations and similar ones at the entire community of Kamakhyan Brahmans, or even at all Shebaits taken together, without any further specification. Of course, every person would be particularly bitter about a few specific individuals with whom he had some major issues, but this is a different attitude. What I want to underline is that Kamakhyans have the habit of suspecting almost everyone. When narrating the myths to me or talking about some aspect of the temple complex religious life, several people said (my translation from Assamese): “No one else except me can tell you how things are”; this is a sentence I heard endless times. This is not surprising, as envies and jealousies do exist in every small village, where everyone knows everyone else. What is relevant is that the notion of “best friends” shows its relevance in the frame of this widespread habit of doubting one another. The best friend is detached from the homogenised “they”, because he is thought to be a very good human being. In a setting where it would be advisable to doubt almost everyone, the best friend constitutes an exception and can be fully relied upon. An episode from my most recent period of fieldwork may clarify the point.

One evening I visited a non-Brahman family I am acquainted with and was invited to have a chai with them. While the conversation was going on freely, the twenty-year-old son of the householder started to prepare the table for what I would call “Assamese billiards”. As the young man was testing the inclination of the table, his aunt told me that the other players would arrive in a few minutes. She pointed out that the same three individuals used to play with her nephew every evening. As she had predicted, the three men soon showed up. One of them, a non-Brahman in his late forties, arrived few minutes before the others and this fact gave me the opportunity to exchange a few words with him. I asked about his custom of playing Assamese billiards in that house. He said (my translation from Assamese):
I come to this house every evening. Every single evening. Only here. I don’t go to other houses!

While saying so, he made a wide gesture with his hand, pointing to “the other houses” around that of his friend.

Before concluding it needs to be noted that there exist no visible signs through which one can distinguish whether a man is a Bardeuri or a Nananbardeuri, as they are dressed in the same way when at work in the temples\(^{238}\). As shown in chapter 3, §, when at work in the temples, Bardeuris, Nananbardeuris and non-Brahman Shebaits wear red and dress in the same way. Both Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris call themselves “Sarma”\(^{239}\). Many of them use visiting cards, which they give to pilgrims. Besides their name and surname (Sarma), Bardeuris usually print on their cards “Barpujari”\(^{240}\). Instead, Nananbardeuri print the name of the Goddess they are linked to, followed by the word “pujari”, as for example “Kali pujari”.

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4. 4. Concluding remarks.

There is a gap between what people do in accordance with common rights-based rules and what people think of what they do. Groups who are supposed to rank second (within the caste or in the relations between castes) tend to deny the pre-eminence implied by the point of view of the groups who rank themselves first. It is as if the second-ranked groups vent their feelings through rhetoric because, on the plane of actions, they are bound to follow the rules dictated by hereditary rights.

\(^{238}\) See chapter 3, § 3.
\(^{239}\) Normally “Sarma” appears in both Bardeuris’ and Nananbardeuris’ official documents as their family name.
\(^{240}\) On different cards the term is written in different ways, as for example “Borpujari” or “Barapujari”.

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Belonging to a caste allows (and restricts) someone to the ritual tasks allotted to his caste: Brahmans worship the deities, while non-Brahmans have other tasks. As far as the Brahmans are concerned, it is not only the caste that matters, but also the group, or sub-caste (to put it differently) one belongs to. Caste also rules over the choice of a life-partner: Brahmans and non-Brahmans do not intermarry. Outside these two spheres, however, belonging to a caste or to a specific group within a caste is of less importance. Bardeuris, Nananbardeuris and non-Brahmans do indeed maintain easy-going relations with one another. Also, they are often “best friends” with each other. I have tried to show that, while ideas over hierarchies concern castes or different groups within a caste, the “best friend” tie concerns individuals. While castes and, within the caste, sub-castes contest each other’s position, someone’s “best friend” is singled out from the mass. He or she is special and very good.
PART II

The private worship
Every day thousands of pilgrims visit the Kāmākhyā temple complex; their number dramatically rises during major festivals. Pilgrims come from several distinct areas of South Asia, speak different languages and frequently dress in specific ways which mark their geographical origin. Some of them are extremely poor and sleep in the Temple campus at night, while others are rich enough to travel by air in order to spend a few hours in the temple complex. Some pilgrims go to the temple complex with a specific thing in mind they want to ask the Goddess, while others just want to be in Her presence. Some sponsor lavish rites, while others are content enough to have Her darśana. Some have been going to the temple complex for decades, while many pilgrims I met were on their first (or second) visit.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, the present chapter aims at giving some idea of the vast variety of pilgrims, the motivations which lead them to
the temple complex and their ideas about the Goddess. Recurring notions about Assam will also be highlighted. The term “pilgrim” will be used throughout the chapter to refer to any visitor, leaving to the descriptions the task of highlighting the recurrent trends and similarities which can be detected in this multiform mass.

As has been clarified in the Introduction, I choose to restrict my observations (almost exclusively) to the activities taking place on the Nilachal. Thus I only interacted with pilgrims while they were in the temple complex. The time I spent with specific individuals lasted from a few minutes to some days. On the other hand, many pilgrims visit the temple complex repeatedly and I happened to meet the same individuals several times throughout my periods of fieldwork.

§ 1 surveys the most recurrent ideas circulating about Assam as a land of sorcery and witchcraft, which perturb many Hindus; it tentatively explains the reasons behind Assam’s dubious fame and considers the (alleged) rise in pilgrim numbers compared to the past. § 3 considers the variety of pilgrims visiting the temple complex – geographical origin, economic conditions and social status. In § 4 the different purposes pilgrims have in mind while paying homage to the Goddess are analysed. The pilgrims’ conduct, ideas and moods will be taken into account too. The chapter closes with an examination of the flow of pilgrims during the major festivals (§ 5).

As was pointed out in the Introduction, this thesis is devoted to the Brahmans of the temple complex. I choose to describe the pilgrims in some detail because relations with pilgrims constitute one of the most significant activities undertaken by Kamakhya Brahmans. Kamakhyan pāṇḍās, who take care of the pilgrims’ religious demands and practical needs, frequently appear in this chapter. However, the pāṇḍā and its manifold relation to pilgrims will be the subject of chapter 6; the latter will also analyse the rites pilgrims sponsor under the guidance of their pāṇḍās.
5. 1. “A very naughty place”.

In 2012 my mother travelled from New Delhi to Guwahati in order to spend some time with me in Kamakhya Dham. After queuing outside New Delhi domestic airport for some time, her turn came to gain admission into the departures hall. She gave her ticket to the policeman at the entrance so he could check it. What follows is the conversation between them.

Policeman: Madam, you are going to Assam?
My mother: Yes.
P: Why are you going to Assam?
M: Because my daughter is there.
P: Madam, you’re going to a very naughty place!

The policeman at New Delhi domestic airport was not the only one to warn my mother. A few days prior to her departure, she was in Pahar Ganj – the marketplace where many Western businessmen buy their stocks of Indian handicrafts - and happened to go to her moneychanger, a long-term acquaintance of hers. While the man was counting the money, my mother told him: “You know, I’m leaving tomorrow.” - a perfectly common affirmation to be heard from a Western passing through Pahar Ganj. Without stopping counting, the man asked her: “Where are you going to travel, Madam?” My mother replied: “I’m going to Assam”. At that, the man immediately stopped counting the money, raised his eyes, gazed at my mother and exclaimed: “You are brave! Why are you going there?” At my mother’s answer – that she was going to Assam to meet me – he repeated: “You people are brave!” The expression on his face, my mother told me, displayed a mixture of surprise and concern. However they resumed their transaction and the man again started to count the money. A few minutes later, the moneychanger’s brother entered the shop. He did not have the time to say a single word: his brother immediately pointed at my mother and told him in a scared voice: “She is going to Assam!” At this the moneychanger’s brother opened his eyes wide and stared at my mother in search of some
explanation. The only way they could make sense of her plan to visit Assam was that, since I was there, she was going to meet up with me.

Kāmākhyā temple complex. One day in August 2012 I was sitting on the terrace of Koṭilimā temple (see photo 14) in the early afternoon, waiting for the prasāda to be distributed. A group of Bihari pilgrims (three adult couples and a child), having just had darśana, came and sat around me. I had come to know these people a couple of days earlier, because they were all staying at Pramesh Sarma’s place, where I also used to stay. We started chatting and, as usual, the conversation soon turned to religious matters. One of the pilgrims was a Brahman in his early forties. He and I were the main actors in the conversation, while the others were mostly listening, making just the occasional remark. I asked him when he had first came to the temple complex; what follows is our conversation (my translation from Hindi):

Brahman: I first came here six years back.
I: How did you decide to come?
B: I had known about the Kāmākhyā Temple for a long time and had heard scary things. I had heard that a man who comes here risks being transformed into a goat by the women who live here.
Others: …into a parrot, or into an elephant…
B: Then during the night they’ll change him back into a man. Women here can trap men [using the English verb “to trap”]. They won’t let them go. To make it short, what I knew was that the anyone who goes [to Assam] cannot be sure that he will come back home.

The other people in the group kept nodding and saying repeatedly that they used to hear similar things.

I: Then how did you decide to come here? Weren’t you afraid?
B: I was afraid (dar lagtā thā).
I: So…
M: After my son was born [pointing out his seven-year-old child, sitting in the group] I came here for the first time. I said to myself, even if I
don’t come back to my place, my son is there. I have passed on my name. I can go.

The attitudes evoked above have many common points, which will be for the time being summarized into very simple words: going to Assam is dangerous. The most relevant difference – and probably the one which is likely to strike someone’s mind first - is that the Bihari Brahman actually went to the Kāmākhyā temple complex, while the New Delhi policeman did not seem to be inclined to visit Assam at all. That is to say, the Bihari Brahman thought that, notwithstanding the risks he was exposing himself to, it was worth trying to go to the temple complex; his wish to pay a visit to the Goddess Kāmākhyā went overcame his fears; clearly, it is the power attributed to the Goddess which motivated him. However, I concede that the way he told his story may have been somewhat exaggerated for the audience, which included a Westerner.

Like the policeman of New Delhi airport, the people about whom I have information in New Delhi and in Jaipur - where I went in 2011 - had a generalized fear about Assam (and North-East India), as a dangerous land of weird, occult practices. These people were not aware of the existence of the Kāmākhyā temple complex and did not tell stories about sex-addicted women capable of trapping men through magic; what they stigmatized was the entire region of Assam.

By contrast, Bengalis and Biharis know of the existence of the Kāmākhyā temple complex and share the fear of what I will call the feminine-magic-sexual danger intrinsic in Assam. The impressively wide variety of forms this idea takes intrigues the anthropologist. In some versions the magic aspect is played down and more practical issues are brought to the fore. In 2012 I met a Bengali pilgrim who had been living in Assam for eleven years. He and his family have been visiting the temple complex since their arrival in Assam:

There are 3 Ws which attract people here: Weather, Wine and Women.
The weather is much too good here; people love this place, they love the
greenery. This is the magic. Wine is cheap, easy available. If you go Kolkata, it's much more tough to find foreign liquor. Women here are hot, hotter than anywhere else. If a man has some extra money and comes here, he'll find himself in trouble. She [the Assamese woman] will try to keep him with her. With or without magic. People become addicted to staying here, they try to forget their past, they start a new life here. So this is the magic.

As these words show, it not easy to disentangle magic treats from more material ones. Assamese women are sometimes portrayed as sex-addicted single women willing to keep male strangers with them; in other accounts (like the one just quoted), they seem to be interested in the material advantages the relationship with men from elsewhere can bring them as well. Sometimes the people and activities in the temple complex itself constitute a threat to the pilgrims. The Bengali pilgrims went on:

Beforehand sādhu-māhātma used to come here in number for their studies [demanding meditative practices]. People used to think that the sādhus here would transform them into statues. People were scared.

There are two main types of discourse about Assam circulating in North India. The first one concerns Assam (and the North-East) in general. The latter has a bad reputation and is seen as something that is situated at the margins of Hindu orthodoxy. People living in Assam are odd and their practices are bizarre, if not dangerous and immoral241 (the policeman, the

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241 Kamakhyans never admitted that other Hindus hold harsh prejudices concerning Assam. Instead, they report similar prejudices regarding a specific place in Assam, named Mayang. According to the Italo-Indian Nath couple (see below, in the text), who travelled there, in Mayang old temples lie in the jungle and a quiet village has grown surrounding them. From the time of my first fieldwork I heard about Mayang from words gleaned here and there from conversations. I soon started feeling that there was scope for investigation. One evening after ārati, as usual, Himagshu Sarma and I were sitting outside the northern gate of the Temple, chatting in a relaxed mood. I purposely mentioned Mayang. At this, Himangshu Sarma opened his eyes wide and stared at me silently. I asked for some explanation. As I was soon to realize, for him, Mayang is the land of every sort of sorcery and witchcraft; the most absurd and immoral practices one can imagine happen there. It is tempting to assume that Mayang serves as the scapegoat for Kamakhyans. This technique sounds to me like a
money-changer). The second discourse concerns the Goddess Kāmākhyā. Her Temple lies in an incomprehensible, weird region and occult practices are devoted to Her. However, Her image is detached from this and Her standing is unassailable. For those who are aware of the existence of Her Temple, the Goddess is extremely powerful. She needs to be approached with the greatest care - in Her pranāma-mantra She is called ṭāna-devī, the adjective ṭāna being translated by Bronson (1867: s. v.) as "hard, difficult, severe, cruel, inflexible, stingy, dear, tense, rigid" – but She is never blamed. To put it another way, in the discourse of the Bihari Brahman and in similar ones, the Goddess Kāmākhyā and Her Temple are singled out and set apart from the rest of Assam. That Her Temple lies on a hillock, easily distinguished from the rest of the landscape, can only strengthen this line of thought.

Householder pilgrims are not the only ones to be afraid of the feminine-magic-sexual danger connected to Assam. As has been described by Bouillier242, the story about “the kingdom of the women” circulates among the Naths. During my 2012 fieldwork I became familiar with an Italian woman belonging to the Nath (nātha) saṃpradāyā243, married to a Nath from Madhya Pradesh; this unusual couple were on their second visit to the temple complex. One evening the three of us were chatting in the Temple campus; I mentioned what the Bihari Brahman had told me that day. My words instantly drove the Nath to give me his version. “I will tell you how it is”. In a vigorous, uninterrupted flow of words he told me the following story (my translation from Hindi).

Subliminal message: “The naughty place you heard about is not the whole of Assam, it is this specific place I’m telling you about”. Kamakhyans are not the only ones to blame Mayang. Ramirez, who has been working on North-East India for several years, was warned in the same way by his interlocutors (personal communication): “In Assam you can go anywhere; there is no problem. But never go to Mayang!”. An Assamese friend of mine from Tezpur (central Assam) once told me that she had heard strange stories about Mayang. She is now in her thirties and recalls that in her childhood her uncle used to tell stories about Mayang to her and her siblings. The uncle used to say that those who marry to people from Mayang will suffer on the day of the marriage. The entire party will not be able to digest the food offered in the feast and will have to endure severe stomach pain for the entire day.

242 See Bouillier 2008: 90. The author also describes different versions of the story (note 33).
243 On the Nath saṃpradāyā see chapter 1, § 3.
In Assam there were only women; Rānī Maināki was ruling there. When the women got pregnant, they used to pray to Hanumān, who, with his scream, would help them aborting. In this way only the female foetus were saved. But they had no mokṣā and the place was full with bhutas. One day Rānī Maināki prayed to Hanumān to find her a man who would live with her permanently. After some time Matsyendranātha [the guru of the mythical Gorakhnāth, the founder of the Nath sampradāyā] happened to arrive in Assam [a reason for the guru’s journey was not given] and Hanumān asked him to live with Rānī Maināki. At this Matsyendranātha objected that he was a sādhu. Hanumān insisted. In the end Matsyendranātha settled down with the queen, became king and had children.

After some time rumours reached Gorakhnāth. People started to blame him, “Your guru is married, he has children!” One day Gorakhnāth thought that was enough: he would go to Assam in order to rescue his guru. When he was just approaching Assam, he protected himself through some mantras and other operations. As soon as he saw Gorakhnāth, Hanumān screamed out loudly. Gorakhnāth did not get injured. Instead, Hanumān was hurled away by the echo of his own scream. Hanumān was surprised and wondered who that man could be. Informed of Gorakhnāth’s arrival, Rānī Maināki sent girls of exquisite beauty to seduce him. But Gorakhnath resisted them. He turned all the women, including the queen, into statues [at this the Nath pointed at the stone bas-reliefs embedded in the Temple outer wall]. In this way they all got mokṣā. Gorakhnāth and Matsyendranātha left Assam and founded many temples throughout India.

With the same immediacy with which he had started to talk, the Nath stopped. He remained silent for few seconds and then suddenly left.

The main themes implied in the Bihari Brahman’s words are there in the Naths’ story about “the reign of the women” as well: there is danger in going to Assam; and that danger resides in the Assamese women, who, through their magic power and/or their unrestrained sexuality, are able to keep with them men who are supposed to be involved in other activities:
family life, as far as the householders are concerned, or asceticism for the Naths.

The data described in the preceding pages are only a few examples of a vast set of stories about Assam I heard while on fieldwork; throughout my travels in North India I made a point of mentioning Assam and the Kāmākhyā temple complex to virtually every Indian I came into contact with (and I gave my mother a basic training to do so as well); several colleagues working on different regions of South Asia[tex]
\text{244}[^{244}]	ext{told me the stories about Assam they heard from their interlocutors. All these materials are consistent with one another in attributing to Assam an ambiguous reputation. In an exquisite article, Kar (2008) surveys several distinct stories relating to the “erotic excess and magical prowess of the Assamese women” and says that these stories “were commonplace in British India, particularly in British Bengal[tex]\text{245}[^{245}]. He mentions that the colloquial expression ““Kāmākhyā’s sheep” continues in the daily conversation to convey the image of an enchanted, docile male who is

\[\text{244}[^{244}]\] Jürgen Schlaflechner, who at the time of writing is preparing his PhD thesis about the Hīṅglāj Temple (one of the devi-pithās of Pakistan) at South Asia Institute (Heidelberg University), heard stories about Assam from the Ghorava Devipujaks (a Vagri community) of Karachi. According to the latter, their ancestor Kanva Dada and his elder brother were kidnapped by a Bengali flute-player and brought to Kamrudeh, “the land of fairies [partyā] and black magic in Assam”. There the two brothers were sold to the Tantriks, transformed into buffalos and forced to work in the fields. At night, they were transformed back into men. Kanva’s elder brother soon died because of the hard life they were suffering. Only after fifteen years and with the greatest difficulty, was Kanva able to come back home, with the help of his kula-devi, Goddess Kālī, and a local Goddess, “the Mother with a white sārhī”. It is tempting to see a link between this Goddess and Dhūmāvatī, one of the Daśamahāvidyās (The Ten Great Wisdoms, see chapter 1, § 3). Dhūmāvatī is thought to be an old widow and is depicted wearing a white sārhī. “The Mother with a white sārhī” brought Kanva back to his village in Gujarat, after he had promised to worship Her along with his kula-devi. This story evidently serves the purpose of settling at least two main strands of the Ghorava Devipujaks’ identity: the origin of their ancestor in Gujarat and the deity they worship. What is of interest for our purpose, however, is the recurrence of the following elements: the transformation-into-animal theme linked to Assam, the presence of weird figures (the tantrics and the fairies) and the great difficulty one who has been in Assam has in leaving the region - Jürgen Schlaflechner kindly gave me his unpublished manuscript regarding Kanva’s story, on which the present summary is based.

\[\text{245}[^{245}]\] Kar 2008: 288.

\[\text{246}[^{246}]\] Ibidem. Notwithstanding what I have said, this expression suggests that the Goddess may be implicated in the danger inherent in Assam. It is possible that in some people’s eyes the Goddess somehow participates in the ambiguous reputation of Assam. However, in the discourse I heard, as has been shown, this is not the case.
entirely under the control of a seductive woman”\(^{247}\). To set the premises of his article, Kar says:

...by the seventeenth century a number of cognate tales in the non-Sanskrit narrative networks spread along the entire Gangetic Valley appear to have been in circulation\(^{248}\).

In fact, the range of examples he quotes is impressively wide and stretches from “the broadly shared narrative network in the precolonial Gangetic Valley usually classed as Bengali Nath Literature” – different versions of the story just described are mentioned - up to twentieth-century Bengali savants and novelists. Some among the several sources Kar mentions are: “the seventeenth-century janam-sākhīs or biographies of Nānāk, the first guru of Sikhism\(^{249}\)”, the oral traditions of the Santals of Chhotanagpur who, under British rule, were forced to migrate to Assam to work in the tea plantations \(^{250}\), the so-called “fake tantras”, spread in Kolkata in the nineteenth century, along with “the interdependent market of aphrodisiacs and amulets”, and so on.

In the following pages I intend to give a tentative answer to the same question Kar asks himself: why Assam\(^{251}\)? The first element that came to my mind when I approached these wide issues is Kāmākhyā Temple itself, which

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\(^{247}\) Kar 2008: 288.

\(^{248}\) *Ibidem*: 289. On the ideas about Assam circulating in North India see also Das (1972, chapter 3).

\(^{249}\) Kar 2008: 291. The guru’s disciple was turned into a lamb by the women of Kāru (an ancient name of Assam, according to Kar). Guru Nānāk went to Kāru and turned his disciple back into a human. At this the queen and all the women tried to subjugate him, both through magic and sexual temptations. The guru showed himself to be invincible and the women finally submitted to him.

\(^{250}\) Kar 2008: 293. These traditions were collected by a Christian missionary in the nineteenth century.

\(^{251}\) Like Assam, several other regions in South Asia have an ambiguous reputation in the eyes of many Hindus. For instance, Sax (1998: 295) reports that villagers in the eastern district of Garhwal warned him not to travel to the Tons basin area: there local women not only used to enslave men “for their pleasure”, but even sacrificed them to the supernatural beings they worshipped. It should be noted incidentally that the figure of sexually unrestrained women, unmarried or with husbands who are somehow absent from the story, who subjugate men, exploit them sexually or kill them, are to be found also outside South Asia.
is – if it needs to be recalled - the most famous Assamese temple. Kamakhya, pilgrims and the scriptures largely agree in affirming that it is the yoni (vulva) of Goddess Satī which is enshrined in the sanctum of the Temple. And indeed it is on this basis that Kamakhya and pilgrims affirm the pre-eminence of the Kāmākhyā temple complex over the other śākta pīthas. This belief clearly links the Kāmākhyā temple complex with feminine sexuality; the latter, the sexual appeal exercised by women on men and the loss of semen are problematic in the Hindu worldview. The ascetic should never lose his semen, because with the semen he will lose his tapas (“heat”, ascetic power accumulated through spiritual practices) too\textsuperscript{252}. For the householder too, extra-marital sexual activity and the loss of semen (especially when the intercourse is not aimed at procreation) are problematic. Padoux clearly describes the two sides of the woman’s image:

Elle [la femme] détient la puissance que l’homme peut puiser en elle, mais qu’il risque toujours de perdre en laissant échapper sa semence. D’où une approche ambiguë de la femme : source de puissance, mère, protectrice, elle est aussi dangereuse – affaiblissant ou redoutable\textsuperscript{253}.

Extolling the role of the mother in the family, a male Assamese friend of mine argued (my translation from Assamese):

Who is the father? No one. The father will see a beautiful girl passing by and will run after her. But the mother will always be there for her children. She’ll take care of them. ‘Did you eat?’ she’ll ask; ‘are you all right?’

These words clarify well how vulnerable men are supposed to be female sexual appeal. They also clarify the opposition between the two images of the female: the caring mother and the dangerous single woman.

\textsuperscript{252} See Tarabout 2005: 146-150.
\textsuperscript{253} Padoux 2010: 147.
According to the tales which I mentioned, the threatening side of feminine sexuality has projected onto the Assamese women. Also, I contend that the feminine-magic-sexual danger inherent in Assam serves the purpose of attaching a greater significance to the journey itself. Although (or because, or even both) it is difficult to reach the pilgrimage site, it is worth going there. This is consistent with the immense power attributed to the Goddess.

Many Hindus, who do not know of the Kāmākhya temple complex, associate Assam with what they understand to be “Tantrism”, a set of incomprehensible, weird, indecent practices: the tantrics have sex freely and are engaged in many other odd practices. Also, many Hindus simply associate Tantrism with black magic – typically, people with prejudices do not try to differentiate. Assam is the place where these things take place. Knowing about my research, a Marwari friend of mine from Rajasthan in his early twenties genuinely asked me “Tantrism is black magic, isn’t it?”

Another element to be kept in mind is constituted by the so-called “tribal” population inhabiting North-East India. Some of them, like the Khasis and the Garos, transmit the name and the property through matrilinearity and are matrilocal. These customs, distorted by hearsay, can contribute to shape the image of a dominant (even dangerous) femininity. Apart from this, however, the populations of North-East India observe other habits which would sound at least extravagant, if not repellent, to other Hindus: for instance, they eat the meat of various animals (pork, dogs, etc...). To those Hindus who are aware of the head hunting once practiced among the Nagas, this custom must really sound like an aberration.

In a second extremely rich article, Kar (2004) explores the way the image of Assam was built by the colonial intelligentsia, engaged in bringing to light “the great Indian tradition”. In the XIX\textsuperscript{th} and XX\textsuperscript{th} centuries, British intellectuals – Cunningham and Pargiter, to name just two among the most eminent – thought that it was their task to extract a reliable topography of

\footnotesize{254 On matrilinearity and matrilocality among the Garos see and Momin (1995). This article is part of a volume (Sangma 1995) which explores various aspects of the Garo culture. On matrilinearity and matrilocality among the Khasis see Bhattacharyya (1999: 272-275).

India from Sanskrit texts; a solid, unassailable mapping of India was needed in order to study its “true” history and culture. It is relevant for our purpose that within this framework Assam received the attention of British intellectuals and, according to Kar, was soon dismissed as “a Mleccha kingdom” and a “frontier zone inhabited mostly by head-hunting savages and the opium-eaters idlers256”.

Assam was ejected from the authoritative discourse regarding Indian civilisation. As is easy to imagine, Indian intellectuals engaged in research on Assamese history soon reacted to this posture: the second part of Kar’s article explores the stances of the most famous Indian historians writing on Assam in the XIXth and XXth centuries. Their efforts to win Assam a place in the “ancient Indian civilisation” is impressive. For instance, in 1921 Agarwala affirmed that:

> Aryan families came down from Thibet [sic] through the passes of the Eastern Himalayas into Upper Assam and settled there. It was from Assam [that] they migrated to other places in Burma and Northern India257.

On the basis of very imaginative etymologies, Agarwala stated that:

> The Aryan civilisation dawned in Assam, the land of the rising sun of India. It was justly called Prag-jyotish [Prāgjyotiṣa], i.e. the light of the East. This light travelled towards east and west and illuminated Burma and eastern Peninsula and the whole of northern India258.

The echo of Agarwala’s ideas spread quickly. One year later, in 1922, Vasu affirmed, again supporting his argument with creative etymologies, that Assamese traders “over four thousands years back, carried the torch of civilisation to Assyria, Babylon, Greece and other ancient countries259”. What

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258 Agarwala, quoted by Kar (ibidem: 19).
259 Vasu, quoted by Kar (ibidem: 22).
is relevant for the present purpose is that such hyperbolic glorifications of Assam and the reversal of the British intellectuals’ paradigm – civilization proceeds from Assam to Northern India and not the other way round – betrays the awareness that Assam was indeed considered marginal, in comparison to Northern India. Kar does not go so far as to affirm that Assam’s marginality is a product of British intellectuals’ understanding of this region. And, probably, such a statement would be an exaggeration. As has been shown, discourses on Assam and on the feminine-magic-sexual danger inherent in it seem to have spread before and independently from the leading discourses of the British intelligentsia.

Notwithstanding everything that has been said, it should be kept in mind that the myth of Satī’s body getting dismembered results in the network of the pīṭhas (seats [of the Goddess]), allegedly founded on the places where Satī’s body parts fell; and that several Sanskrit texts\textsuperscript{260} count the Kāmākhyā temple complex among the pīṭhas, thus incorporating it in this network.

Since his first visit, the Bihari Brahman has been visiting the temple complex twice or three times every year. When I met him in 2012, a group of some seven individuals were with him. All were somehow connected to him: his neighbours, the milkman serving the area where he lives and so on. What I suddenly realised and what they confirmed is that all these people decided to undertake the pilgrimage because he had gone to the temple complex and had told them that it was worth doing. Enquiring from other pilgrims, I detected numerous similar dynamics. Indeed, it seems to me that the word-of-mouth is a significant force pushing people to the temple complex.

A middle-class woman in her fifties from New Delhi told me that she had long been hearing about the Kāmākhyā temple complex and was willing to arrange her trip to it [my translation from Hindi]:

I kept on asking myself “Why is the Mother not calling me? Why?” Then one day I received a call. It was someone I didn’t know. This man told

\textsuperscript{260} On Satī’s myth and on the texts containing it see chapter 1, § 1.
me he had been to the Kāmākhyā Temple and that the place was incredibly powerful. I was excited to hear his words, but asked him how he came to know about me and my desire to go. Actually this man and I have a common friend, whom he had recently met. He said: “When I said to my friend that I went to the Kāmākhyā Temple, he immediately named you and asked me to talk to you. So that’s how I called you”. When I hung up, I said to myself “That’s a sign. Mother is finally calling me!”

The woman somehow persuaded her daughter, her son-in-law and the latter’s mother to go with her and the party left.

One of the commonest ideas among pilgrims is that no one can decide when to go to the Kāmākhyā temple complex, because it is the Goddess who actually decides for them. “If She doesn’t call you, you can never reach here”. The fact that the very people who say so actually plan their pilgrimage, reserve tickets and undertake other practical steps in order to make the pilgrimage possible does not in anyway undermine the idea that it is only thanks the Goddess’s grace that they finally reach Her Temple.

In the eyes of the woman from New Delhi, this friend of her friend calling her was a clear sign of the Goddess’s will. The man calling her actually put her in touch with his Kamakhyan paṇḍā, by giving her the latter’s telephone number. That paṇḍā was Deep Sarma, the younger brother of Pramesh Sarma in whose house I lived. The woman called Deep Sarma and introduced herself to him before planning the journey. The fact that a paṇḍā was there to await them must have encouraged the woman and her party to undertake the pilgrimage: they now had someone to rely on. Deep Sarma was then informed about the details of their journey and was there at their arrival to take care of them. The woman and her party were hosted and fed by Deep Sarma, who guided them throughout the rituals. In other words, they automatically became Deep Sarma’s pilgrims.

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261 This idea eventually supported my position in the temple complex. If the Goddess wanted me to come to Her Temple from so far away, there was a meaning to why I was there, argued several pilgrims and Kamakhyans. That only a few Westerners visit the temple complex simply reinforced their argument.
If this woman was willing to go to the Kāmākhyā temple complex, word-of-mouth shows the capability of reaching even further, that is, to people who are unaware of the existence of the temple complex and have a generalised fear about Assam. During my 2011 fieldwork, I went to Jaipur for one week and stayed at the house of an old friend of my mother’s. Om Goyal is now in his forties and belongs to a big, rich Marwari family of Jaipur, dealing mainly in precious stones and jewels. During my stay, they were going to celebrate the silver anniversary of Om Goyal’s uncle. The day before, the *mehandi* ceremony was held. When I arrived in the hall of the hotel which had been reserved for the purpose, some twenty women dressed in sumptuous *sāḍhis* were there. Some of them had already their hands and feet decorated with *mehandi*, while others were waiting for their turn. Five skinny female *mehandi*-appliers were at work, wearing cheap *sāḍhis*. After some time my turn came. While one of them was decorating my hands, I suddenly realized that the *mehandi*-applier next to me was talking about the Kāmākhyā temple complex to the Marwari woman, whose hands she was working on (my translation from Hindi):

My guru has been there. He said the Temple is so powerful! So powerful! After the Mother has Her periods, you may get a piece of that cloth which has been used for Her [see § 5 of the present chapter]. The priests give only a tiny bit of the cloth [making with her right hand the gesture signifying an extremely small quantity of whatever], it’s so hard to get it! My guru has a tiny bit of that cloth and gave some to me. I preserve it at home.

The *mehandi*-applier was talking in a very passionate, enthusiastic way and the Marwari woman, listening attentively, was evidently impressed by her words. Although no one in Om Goyal’s family ever visited the Kāmākhyā temple complex, word-of-mouth shows the capability of reaching even further, that is, to people who are unaware of the existence of the temple complex and have a generalised fear about Assam. During my 2011 fieldwork, I went to Jaipur for one week and stayed at the house of an old friend of my mother’s. Om Goyal is now in his forties and belongs to a big, rich Marwari family of Jaipur, dealing mainly in precious stones and jewels. During my stay, they were going to celebrate the silver anniversary of Om Goyal’s uncle. The day before, the *mehandi* ceremony was held. When I arrived in the hall of the hotel which had been reserved for the purpose, some twenty women dressed in sumptuous *sāḍhis* were there. Some of them had already their hands and feet decorated with *mehandi*, while others were waiting for their turn. Five skinny female *mehandi*-appliers were at work, wearing cheap *sāḍhis*. After some time my turn came. While one of them was decorating my hands, I suddenly realized that the *mehandi*-applier next to me was talking about the Kāmākhyā temple complex to the Marwari woman, whose hands she was working on (my translation from Hindi):

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262 In this occasion *mehandi* – a vegetable colouring cream – is applied to the bride’s and her female relatives’ hands with very complex designs. Once dried, the *mehandi* is removed; the designs remain visible on the skin for a few days.
temple complex\textsuperscript{263}, this episode clarifies quite well how word-of-mouth can work.

While it contributes to dissolving the fear for Assam as a dangerous land of witchcraft, word-of-mouth also spreads (or reinforces) the idea that the Goddess Kāmākhyā has a terrific power and that a visit to Her Temple is worth undertaking. All the Kamakhys I asked confirmed that the number of pilgrims visiting the temple complex has been rising considerably over the last two decades. Bharati Prasad Sarma (a Brahman) recollects that during his childhood, some sixty years ago:

\textit{….hardly 200-300 persons used to visit Kāmākhyā [Temple], per day. Before 1 o’ clock \textit{darśana} is closed, finished. There was no transportation, so people preferred to go in the morning. That rush was not there, they could easily go and easily come. After 1 clock \textit{darśana} is finished, everyone started coming down. Some people have their lunch in the pāṇḍā’s house; then immediately they would come down.}

Old-time pilgrims too repeatedly told me that the number of householder pilgrims has been rising considerably. Many Kamakhyans stressed that beforehand ascetics used to visit the temple complex in large numbers, to engage in demanding meditative practices.

Bharati told me that in his childhood he used to descend the hill on foot every day, in order to go to school. Kamakhys younger to him, who are now in their fifties, told me that they had the same habit. The road which presently links the hilltop with Guwahati was constructed in 1956. However, Kamakhys affirm that even after the road was constructed the number of vehicles going up and down the hill was small – nowadays many vehicles connect the foot of the hill with the village. It seems that electricity reached

\textsuperscript{263} Om Goyal himself was very suspicious when, arriving at his place, I gave him the \textit{prasāda} I brought for him from there.
the Blue Hill some forty years ago and the arrival of mains water seems to be even more recent\textsuperscript{264}.

It seems to me that at present a conjuncture of several interrelated dynamics is taking place. Pan-Indian macro-factors are at play at the same time: the enrichment of the middle-class; its desire to spend money in the religious sphere; the improvements in transport and of the organization of pilgrimages\textsuperscript{265}. Pilgrims who visit the temple complex once tend to continue going there regularly and to bring other pilgrims with them. The high number of pilgrims, in turn, stimulates Kamakhyans to become more professional in meeting the pilgrims’ needs\textsuperscript{266}. Consequently, the pilgrimage to the temple complex becomes easier to undertake.

One last example may be revealing regarding the “advertising” function of word-of-mouth - since I have already tried to expose the dynamics at play, I will not provide any further comment. On my visit to Jaipur in 2011 I went to visit another old acquaintance of my mother’s. Rambabu Agarwal and his family are Marwari wholesale dealers in silver and stones. He is in his early fifties and has two teenaged children: a son and a daughter. Unfortunately, his daughter has been unable to walk since birth. When I visited Rambabu Agarwal I brought him prasāda from the Kāmākhyā Temple. He passed it on his head. On that day he had just been to a temple with his family and was still wearing an impeccable pajāmā and a kurtā\textsuperscript{267}. He was in a relaxed mood and inclined to know more about the place I was arriving from. I told him the myth of Satī. After listening attentively, he asked me with a very serious expression on his face:

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{264} Kamakhyans often told me that the water supply was a big problem in the past. I heard that in the old days Kamakhyans invited to a marriage in Kamakhya Dham were expected to bring with them a small quantity of water, in order to wash their mouths and hands. Water was so scarce, that the hosts were not expected to offer it to their guests.

\textsuperscript{265} Travel agencies may play a significant role too in driving pilgrims to the temple complex. While on fieldwork I met some pilgrim groups which had gone to the temple complex with the help of a travel agency and was able to leaf through some extremely colourful brochures, giving the price of the various available rituals. The Brahmans I know better, however, have no established links with any travel agency.

\textsuperscript{266} See chapter 6, § 5.

\textsuperscript{267} Pajāmās are loose cotton trousers. A kurtā is a loose shirt-like garment. Usually he and his male relatives wear western-style clothes while at work.
You know my daughter cannot walk. If I bring her there, do you think she will be cured?

5.2. Pilgrims’ origins and their economic status.

Kamakhyans, both Brahmans and non-Brahmans, broadly agree that among the pilgrims Bengalis outnumber the others. My observations accord with this. Large numbers of Biharis and of Assameses are to be found as well. As shown in chapter 1, § 2 a vaishnava movement arose in Assam in the XVth century, founded by the saint Śaṅkaradeva. Several Ahom kings supported and financed the monasteries (satras) affiliated to this movement, which grew influential. What matters for the present purpose is that today a number of Assamese are vaishnava and that these people usually do not visit the Kāmākhyā temple complex268, precisely because they are vaishnava.

Several Marwari businessmen are settled in Guwahati and have been active in its main markets for some generations. Marwaris are numbered among the devotees of the Goddess; as shown in chapter 1, § 3, the terrace of the Koṭiliṅga temple (see photo 14) has been built by an organization of Marwari businessmen who have their shops in the Fancy Bazaar. Pilgrims from North India do visit the temple complex too. I met pilgrims coming from New Delhi, from Uttar Pradesh, from the Himalayas and from Rajasthan, for instance. However it seems to me that these pilgrims are not part of large

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268 In 2012 Shamal Sarma, a pāṇḍā of my knowledge (see chapter 6, § 2) supervised the marriage of one of his pilgrims. After the rite was over, a small reception was organized at Shamal’s house. I talked to the cousin of the groom, an Assamese man in his thirties. He pointed out spontaneously that he is a vaishnava, while his cousin (the groom) is a śaiva. He went on to say that he usually does not visit the Kāmākhyā Temple, and that on that day he went there because of his cousin’s marriage. His words conveyed the sense of an aloof, respectful posture due to a place which is understood to be sacred. A posture which is very distant from the passionate enthusiasm shown by the devotees of the Goddess Kāmākhyā.
networks of people who know about the Kāmākhyā temple complex and exchange information and ideas about it. Rather, their devotion to the Goddess Kāmākhyā is traceable to a specific source: their guru or an informing friend, for instance (see § 1). Instead, Bengalis, Assamese and Biharis generally know about the temple complex and, unless they are vaisṇava, it is very probable that they would be eager to visit the abode of the Goddess Kāmākhyā.

Pilgrims from Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal visit the temple complex as well. I happened to observe huge groups – fifty to sixty individuals – of uneducated Nepalis coming from villages. Kamakhyans usually hold these people in contempt and a remark I happened to hear about them is ganda (stinky).

As far as the populations of North-East India are concerned, Bodos visit the temple complex, as well as people from Manipur269. The women of the former are recognisable by their extremely long sārhī, which is wrapped around the body in several turns and ends in a horizontal, tight band on the breasts. Bodo women wear a colī (blouse) under this sārhī and a dupaṭṭā (shawl) on top of it. Manipuri women wear long skirts with horizontal stripes, a colī and a very fine, transparent piece of cloth, tied to the skirt, which is intended to hide the breasts. In fact, it is easy to detect the origin of a group of people by observing the women’s clothes and jewellery. I spent long hours with a non-Brahman friend of mine in his shop on the stairs leading to the Temple. Mooni Tamuli has a keen interest in clothes (as I do) and, while we were observing the pilgrims going up and down the stairs, he taught me how to distinguish the various traditional looks. As I soon realized, Kamakhyans are able to do so and can with no hesitation detect the origin of a group of people, just by glancing at them. Women’s appearance plays an important role in showing geographical origin, whereas it is much more difficult to understand where a man comes from, just by considering his dress270. Other elements too, like the language one speaks are revealing of

269 On the Manipuris see Pemberton (2012: 19-58) and Singh (1993).
270 These observations pushed me to formulate the idea that women are, in many cases, identity-bearers. I leave the development of this concept to further research.
one’s origin. There is something more, however. Kamakhyans detect whether people come from villages or from towns and during my latest fieldwork I found myself somehow able to do so. In these cases, I think, it is the behaviour of a person that marks the difference.

Being a Bengali, a Bihari or an Assamese, etc. plays a very important part in the make-up of someone’s identity\textsuperscript{271}. I have been invited to Marwari houses by devotees living in Guwahati and been offered (to my delight) what they called “Marwari food”. Assameses, on the other hand, have their own delicacies, such as pigeon and duck. Differences however do not only concern food, clothes and language: a festival or a vrata\textsuperscript{272} (vow) can be observed by one community and ignored by another one. It needs to be clarified that the members of a family understand themselves (and are understood) to be Biharis or Marwaris or Bengalis, etc. even if the family has been settled in Assam for several generations. At the beginning of my first period of fieldwork, I was unaware of the significance of these distinctions. Following Himangshu Sarma in his priestly activities, and talking with him about his pilgrims, I noticed that he almost always mentioned to me the geographical origin of each specific pilgrim.

The words of Pomi Baruah, an Assamese friend of mine, will probably clarify the feelings which may be inspired by these distinctions. Pomi Baruah is in her thirties and comes from Tezpur (central Assam). She studied in New Delhi and is now Program Officer at the Finance Department, Government of Assam; a position which Himangshu Sarma defined “khub bhāl” (very good). One day, Pomi and I were talking about a phenomenon which deeply agitates Hindus in Assam: the continuous flow of Bangladeshi Muslims across the porous Bangladesh-India border. This is not the place to comment further on this issue (which would definitely deserve much more attention). What struck me and what is relevant for the present purpose is the way Pomi Baruah perceives and explains the Hindu-Hindu relationship, as compared to the Muslim-Muslim relationship:

\textsuperscript{271} By saying so, however, I do not wish to underplay the significance of other factors: caste, social stratum, etc.

\textsuperscript{272} On the significance of vrata\textsuperscript{s} see chapter 3, § 2.
You see, these people come from Bangladesh, they have nothing, OK? But once they cross the border they'll meet other Muslims here. You know, a Muslim is a Muslim, and that's it. The ones on this side will think of the immigrants as their brothers. They'll help them out. They'll easily mingle with each other. It's not like us. We're all Hindus all right. But then we're Assamese, these ones are Marwaris, those ones are Bengalis, then people from U. P. are completely different. We're all divided.

With a certain degree of generalisation it can be said that at the highest strata of society (people having high positions in the service sector or very large businesses) these differences matter less. Pomi Baruah, an Assamese, has friends belonging to all the communities just mentioned, including Muslims. With her words Pomi Baruah is not subscribing to the feeling of apartness she describes. Rather, she is pointing out that feelings of this kind tend to colour relations among Hindus with different geographical origins.

The social and financial status of pilgrims is widely diverse. Extremely poor pilgrims visit the Kāmākhyā temple complex, as well as very rich ones. The poor ones usually travel by train, settle themselves in the campus of the Kāmākhyā Temple and sleep there at night. To do darśana poor pilgrims spend hours waiting in the “general queue” which is free of charge. Usually poor pilgrims have no pāṇḍā and sponsor no rites. Kamakhyans generally do not interact with these people. The major festivals are the periods of the year when a large mass of destitute pilgrims rushes to the temple complex.

On the other hand, rich pilgrims frequently travel by air; some rich pilgrims I met avoided being lodged at their pāṇḍā’s in Kamakhya Dham. They either stayed only few hours at the temple complex and went back home the same day they arrived (see § 3), or rented a room in a hotel in Guwahati (see chapter 6, § 2). In order to have darśana many rich pilgrims buy the 501 Rupees tickets. The following example constitutes an exception, however.

In 2011 I met a Marwari man in his forties on the flight from Guwahati to New Delhi. We were sitting next to each other and started to chat.

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273 For the five available queues leading the pilgrim to the sanctum see chapter 6, § 2.
mentioned my PhD research; he told me he used to visit the Kāmākhya Temple every Sunday. Somehow the conversation turned to the different queues leading the pilgrim to the sanctum. His view was quite interesting.

I'm a journalist so I could ask for the pass in the office, but I don't do this.

Indeed, the Kamakhya Debutter Board allows journalists to directly enter the Temple from the southern gate and issues passes to them for this purpose. I must have looked surprised, so he went on to clarify his point further.

I don't ask for the pass, I don't want it. I stand in the general queue. How long it will take...doesn't matter! On Sundays I’m free, I go there [to the Temple] in the morning. I can go there and I can wait.

Before concluding I would like to develop some considerations regarding the effect the (alleged) rise in pilgrims numbers may have on the life of the temple complex. The following episode will supply the ethnographic basis for my remarks. Bharati Prasad Sarma is the eldest son of the last Dalai (head of the temple complex, see chapter 7). A Bardeuri now in his late seventies, he is a retired civil engineer. Thanks to his brilliant carreer he has been able to enter the high strata of Assamese society. During his father's tenures, Bharati Prasad Sarma promoted the constructions of several pieces of infrastructure in the temple complex; “development” is a term which came frequently to his lips during interviews. When I first talked to Bharati Pras Sarma in the Kālī temple, he had just had a pūjā for the Goddess Kālī performed. He would then proceed to the Chinnamastā temple and then to a third to offer pūjā there. These three pūjās were intended to erase an equal number of connected doṣas (problematic position of the planets, see chapter 6, § 2) the astrologer had detected in his daughter's horoscope. When I met him, he was sitting in the temple veranda, wearing a dhuti and a shawl. He immediately showed great interest in my research and
started to talk to me about the influence of the sun and the planets; he is a great speaker and I was listening with great attention. As far as religious matters are concerned, he understands himself to be positioned astride two different worlds. In his eyes, his high educational level differentiates him from his uneducated Kamakhyan fellows; at the same time he made a point of saying that he does have regard for the beliefs and practices he understands to be significant:

Although we are educated in the Western style, we believe in these things, the influence of the planets [...] Every planet has a certain influence on every living being.

While we were talking, the Kālī pūjāri who had performed the pūjā requested by Bharati Prasad Sarma asked him whether he was going to offer a sacrifice as well - many people do so, including Kamakiyans. Bharati’s face immediately contracted into one of those extremely eloquent Indian expressions of disdain: with few words he informed the pūjāri that he was not going to offer any sacrifice. Pushed by my curious questions, he said that he had dropped the practice long ago; he did not add anything else and quickly came back to the influence of the planets. I understood that, according to him, the topic of sacrifice did not deserve any further comment. To sum up, Bharati Prasad Sarma dropped sacrifice because he sees this practice as a backward one.

One Bardeuri priest told me repeatedly that he does not really enjoy eating meat, which however is a regular part of Assamese cuisine. There are significant differences in the two postures, though. Bharati Prasad Sarma does not want to offer a sacrifice, but eats meat at home. On the other hand, the Bardeuri priest makes a point of saying that the meat which reaches his kitchen invariably comes from a bali and that that is the only way he feels comfortable eating (although his practice may actually vary from these statements). “It’s the prasāda of the Mother”, I have been told.

The Kāmākhyā temple complex is now faced with a large number of pilgrims coming from various regions of South Asia. Many of these newly
recruited pilgrims are vegetarian and I often heard harsh comments about the practice of sacrifice. However, the number of non-vegetarian pilgrims is also substantial and sacrifices occur daily in the Kāmākhyā Temple. The same priest who told me that he does not enjoy eating meat once explained to some pilgrims that Kamakhyan priests eat meat precisely because the Goddess Herself does so.

5.3. Purposes and attitudes.

In few sentences Eck summarises some of the main ideas regarding pilgrimage in South Asia:

In part, of course, it is because the tīrtha, reached only after a long journey, is difficult to access (durlabha) that its rewards are multiplied. For instance, the sight (darśana) of Amarnāth, high in the Kaśmīr Himālayas, is enhanced by the sheer effort of the long way, an effort, which is rightly compared with the tapas of the ascetic. In part, however, it is the power of the place itself which is transforming. Ordinary acts of worship (pūjā), almsgiving (dāna), and listening to the ancient lore (śravaṇa) are charged by the extraordinary power of the place and its deity. So significant is this power that it is sometimes claimed that the place transforms even the inadvertent visitor.

The pilgrim is frequently understood to be a temporary ascetic; pilgrims indeed observe some restrictions - most frequently sexual abstinence and some sort of fast - before and during the pilgrimage. Several pilgrims I met had been fasting before going for darśana, while other ones

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274 The desperate screams of the young goats being pulled to the sacrificial pavilion is a significant strand of the Temple’s soundtrack.

275 Eck 1981: 337.
kept the fast for days together (see below). I heard that the stretch of earth where a pilgrim sleeps on his way to the pilgrimage place is considered to be sacred, because it has been purified by the extraordinary energy of the pilgrim himself. Some pilgrimages involve objective difficulties or dangers, as in the case of Amarnath or other mountain pilgrimage sites\textsuperscript{276}. However, even when a pilgrim is travelling in quite a comfortable way (for example by air), he may be inclined to understand his journey to be full of difficulties. I vividly recall the words of Gautam Sarma, a Nananbardeuri who in 2011 visited the shrine of Vaishno Devi (Jammu and Kashmir) with his family, his brothers and the latters’ families. Gautam Sarma is Professor of English Literature at Cotton College, in Guwahati. He had almost always lived in town, with his family. In April 2011 I went to visit him in his office in Cotton College, as I have been doing for years. Gautam had returned from his pilgrimage just a few days earlier. With his incredibly catchy way of narrating things, he told me of the various difficulties he and his party encountered during the journey, including delayed planes, the loss of some pieces of luggage and so on. His comments on the issue sounded particularly revealing to me: he said that he was actually \textit{expecting} similar incidents to happen to him during the journey, because “pilgrimage cannot be easy”\textsuperscript{277}.

Talking to pilgrims in the temple complex I frequently had the feeling that these women and men were actually in an unusual state of mind. Some

\textsuperscript{276} See among the others Daniel (1984), who took part in the for men-only pilgrimage to the Ayyappan Temple on Sabara Malai (Kerala); Sax (1990) on the pilgrimage of Nandādevi. In these two cases the physical difficulty of the very fact of going to the pilgrimage sites is stressed as an essential component of the experience.

\textsuperscript{277} Like other educated, English-speaking Hindus I encountered, Gautam Sarma lives astride two worlds, so to speak. His mind-set is in many regards different from that of uneducated Kamakhyans; for instance, listening to his narrations of the Temple myths, I realized that he distinguishes historical figures from mythological ones, while several Kamakhyans I know do not do so. At the same time, Gautam Sarma does not diminish the significance of these myths, nor does he feel the need to classify characters as being either historical or mythological. Let us now bring these remarks to the present issue. Does he sincerely believe that difficulties cannot but happen during a pilgrimage? Or is he conforming to a common belief, which he respects, but nevertheless sees from a more secular viewpoint? However he deals with it, the idea that “pilgrimage cannot be easy” is part of Gautam Sarma’s inventory. This idea has reached him via all his familial and social relations.
were delighted and extremely relaxed, while others were absorbed in their practices. Others were jubilant and had shining eyes.

Pilgrims are driven to visit the Kāmākhyā temple complex by a wide range of different purposes. Some simply want to be in the presence of the Goddess and have Her *darśana*, while others want to ask Her blessing for a specific reason: finding a suitable husband for one’s daughter, having children, advancing in one’s career and so on. Some pilgrims visit the temple complex to ask the blessing of the Goddess for one of their children; they frequently bring the latter’s photo with them. In 2011 I observed a well-off woman in her fifties from outside Assam sponsoring a *pūjā* at Bagalā Mukhī temple. Before the ritual started the woman explained to the Bagalā *pūjāri* that she wanted to ask the Goddess to help her son, employed in the service sector, to get a promotion. She gave a photo of the young man to the *pūjāri* and told him her son’s name and *gotra* (patrilinear discent line) - I observed similar behaviour several times. However, it should be immediately pointed out that not all the pilgrims have a specific things in mind they want to ask the Goddess for. I remember how firm were the criticisms of a Marwari towards this custom.

God knows what is good for me. I don’t need to tell him “I want this, I want that”. He knows and he’ll take care of it, *hai nā?* I don’t understand these people who go to temples and keep on asking this and that.

Some pilgrims go to the temple complex to have a specific *saṃskāra* performed for themselves or for their children (see chapter 6, § 6). Others visit the temple complex regularly every year on a specific festival. For instance, a Bihari family of my acquaintance – a husband and wife in their forties and two sons - visits the temple complex every year during the Durgā- *pūjā* of the month of *chat* (March/April, see below). On each visit the lady

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278 Bagalā Mukhī is one of the Daśamahāvidyās (the ten great wisdoms), a group of Goddesses having their temples on the Nilachal. See chapter 1, § 4. On the discussed practices taking place at night in the Bagalā Mukhī temple see chapter 6, § 4.

279 See chapter 2, § 1.
observes a nine-day fast throughout the festival; during this period of time she cooks food for her husband and children, but does not eat anything. For his part, on each of the nine days of the festival, her husband goes to the Temple, sits down and recites the Durgā-saptaśati.

Whatever their origins, social and economic condition and purpose, the vast majority of pilgrims who visit the temple complex have the darśana of Goddess Kāmākhyā at least once during their stay. The Naths constitute the only relevant exception I have encountered; since they are (supposed to be) chaste, unmarried ascetics, they think they cannot see and touch the yoni of the Goddess. I tried to extract some further explanations from them, but the answer was a firm denial which did not give way to any further reasoning on the issue. Fuller reports similar conduct by an influential Tamil ascetic, the Śaṅkarācārya (head) of the monastery of Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu). When in 1977 the Śaṅkarācārya in charge went the Mīnākṣī Temple in Madurai, he visited all the shrines of the Temple campus, including, of course, the main ones of Mīnākṣī and Her consort, Sundareśvara. What is relevant is that the Śaṅkarācārya took the ashes from the Sundareśvara’s shrine, but did not take any red powder from that of Mīnākṣī.

Several pilgrims do seva, literally “service”: they provide other people with something the latter may need, free of charge. Usually food giving is understood as seva, but other goods can be given as well: during the 2012 Ambuvācī-melā, some people were distributing plastic fans to the pilgrims troubled by the terrible heat. In 2011, on the aṣṭami of the Durgā-pūjā of chat I met an organization of Marwari women distributing “drinkable” water among pilgrims. They had set up a small stand in the Temple campus, with huge bottles of water. Some of them stayed by the stand, while others were going around the campus with trays full of glasses of water. They asked me to pose for a photo, while one of them was giving me a glass of water.

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280 “The seven-hundreds [verses] for Durgā” is a text describing the fight and final victory of Goddess Durgā over the buffalo-demon Mahiśāsura. See chapter 3, § 5.
281 I do not know whether the Saṃnyāsins go for darśana or not.
282 See Fuller 1984: 58.
Many devotees of the Goddess, resident in Guwahati, go to the Temple in the evening, after their working day is over. They do some parikramās (circumambulations of the Temple) and then sit for some time outside the northern gate. Some of them sing various sorts of devotional songs for the Goddess, while others meditate. Others simply sit and relax for a while. Many of these pilgrims know and show their respect to Himangshu Sarma, who attends almost every ārati to sing devotional songs for the Goddess (see chapter 1, § 3). Going nearly every evening to the ārati, I too became familiar with some of these devotees. Once ārati is over, they frequently chat freely with Himangshu about personal and familiar matters. For instance, I once observed a Marwari in his thirties, who has a deep affection for Himangshu, talking to the latter about the issues going on within his family regarding their lands back in Rajasthan. Now, this man was of course quite upset while discussing such an important, complicated issue. However, while in the Temple he is usually in a much more ecstatic mood; like other devotees, he has the habit of staring at the dome and calling out loudly “Mā!” Many people told me that the moment they start climbing up the Hill all their concerns and worries disappear. In the presence of the Goddess, their divine Mother, they cannot but feel peaceful and contented.

On the other hand, even those pilgrims who have been visiting the temple complex form many years may feel somehow uneasy regarding the tantric secret side of the cult rendered to the Goddess. The following episode will hopefully clarify this point. During my first period of fieldwork I was staying at Himangshu Sarma’s place and used to follow him throughout his daily activities, both at home and in the temple complex. In this way I came to know many of his pilgrims. In February 2011 a well-off man in his forties came from New Delhi to the temple complex along with his wife and college-going daughter. The daughter was shortly to take her exams and her parents wanted to ask the blessing of the Goddess for that reason. The family arrived in the morning by flight directly from New Delhi. They drove by taxi to the Nilachal and met Himangshu Sarma at the Temple entrance (they had previously informed him of their visit by phone). The three had darśana
escorted by Himangshu Sarma and then were taken to the latter’s house. They were offered a snack and spent some time talking to Himangshu and his wife. Thereafter they gave the dakṣiṇā to Himangshu and left his place. They returned to the airport by taxi and caught their flight back to New Delhi.

I joined them at Himangshu Sarma’s place and listened to their conversation for some time. They were talking in Hindi, and the conversation revolved mainly about the miraculous gifts granted by the Goddess to their relatives and friends. After sometime the man and I started to talk in English. He asked me the purpose of my visit and I told him about my research. He said that recently the Goddess had given him the chance to open a travel agency in Guwahati, which in turn would allow him to be in Guwahati often and to visit the temple complex easily. The extraordinarily short span of time he needed to set up the agency – three days – and the absence of any obstructions on his way was indeed the result of the Goddess’s will: She wanted him to visit Her frequently. Noticing my interest in his words, he went on spontaneously:

Belief is the only important thing. Without belief everything else is useless. Mantras come after. The only important thing is whether you believe or not. You can just say: “Mā namaste”. That’s enough. But without the belief, nothing is there. It’s just a bare piece of rock.

He went on:

Here there are no mantras. In Kāmākhyā everything is hidden. The only thing is the belief. Do you want to know mantras?

I replied positively to this. I was eager to hear more in order to grasp his point.

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283 In the veranda they met the then five-year-old son of Himagshu and gave the little boy a 500 rupees note.

284 As shown in chapter 1, § 1, the idol of the Goddess Kāmākhyā in the sanctum is a natural rock furrowed by a long slit from where waters rises spontaneously. The rock filled with water is understood to be Sati’s yoni (vulva).
Then you must go to Benares [stopping for a few seconds]. OK, these guys here [Kamakhyan pāṇḍās] know few mantras, but, I told you, here everything is hidden.

How to interpret these words? I was at the beginning of my first period of fieldwork and did not have any clue, but was pretty sure that the words of the New Delhi pilgrim deserved to be considered further. I kept them at the back of my mind and eventually they resulted in the following interpretation.

The pilgrim from New Delhi has been visiting the Kāmākhyā Temple several times a year, always under the guidance of Himangshu Sarma. The pilgrim never wanted to gain access to the tantric practices and never took any dikṣā from the gurus of the Kāmākhyā temple complex. However, as with many other pilgrims, he is aware that tantric practices do take place in the temple complex. I am not sure what he exactly imagines the tantric practices to be like, but when he says “here everything is hidden”, he is pointing out exactly this. In his eyes, there are momentous things going on in the temple complex, but they are kept away from the eyes of the “general public” – to quote the expression of another pilgrim. Kamakhyans as a group jealously keep the esoteric side of their knowledge secret. During their demanding, secret practices, they use mantras which they do not disclose to anyone; the mantra they invite the pilgrim to listen and repeat is the pranāma-mantra, the only one which can be communicated to people who are not initiated. The pilgrim from New Delhi positions himself apart from this dangerous area; what he feels he can do is to warmly venerate the Goddess, who, as his evidence implies (the opening of the travel agency), accepts his way of worshipping Her. No challenging ritual technicalities are needed, “belief is the only important thing”. As the reader has probably already noticed, this posture is reminiscent of the idea of bhakti.

These remarks pushed me to rethink the role of rumours. The pilgrim is convinced that occult, arduous tantric practices do occur in the temple complex. Whether the practices actually taking place have something in

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285 On the gurus see chapter 2, § 2. Devotees from outside the Nilachal (as well as a few Westerners) do take dikṣā from the gurus of the temple complex.
common with the image he has of them does not really matter. The present analysis focuses exclusively on the pilgrim’s ideas. Now, my assumption is that his ideas add extra worth to the temple complex. Although he does not want to mingle with this side of the cult, he nevertheless does not deny its merit. The Kāmākhyā temple complex is the place where these things happen.

5.4. The flow of pilgrims during festivals.

Ambuvācī is the most famous and crowded festival in the Kāmākhyā temple complex and probably the biggest event in the whole of North East India. It is celebrated in the month of āsār (Sanskrit āśāḍha, June/July). Unlike the majority of festivals, the beginning and duration of Ambuvācī is not calculated upon the thiti, a lunar day, that is one of the thirty days constituting a full rotation of Moon. Instead, it is calculated upon the tārikh286: the Ambuvācī starts on the 7th day of the month of āsār and ends on the 10th.

The Goddess Kāmākhyā is believed to menstruate during these days. Bronson (1867: s. v.) renders ambubāci as “The three days in the month of Ahar believed by the Hindoos to be unclean”. During the Ambuvācī, Kamakhyan widows observe a vrata which allows them to have only fruit, milk and water. Many widows reported this, with slight variations. Other Kamakhyans, including men, told me that they observe some restrictions as

286 The term tārikh is rendered by bilingual Kamakhyans as “date”. And in fact the dating based on the tārikh works very much like the Roman calendar; it is calculated on the basis of the saṅkrānti, namely the very auspicious day of passage between two months of the Hindu calendar. The first day after the saṅkrānti is the first tārikh, and so on. The tārikh and the thiti (lunar day) are independent from each other; every single day is both a tārikh and a thiti. That the Ambuvāci is calculated upon the tārikh, means that it is independent of the position of the Moon. For instance, in 2014 Ambuvāci took place within the kṛṣṇa pakṣa (dark fortnight) of āsār, while in 2013 it fell astride the śukla pakṣa (bright fortnight) and the kṛṣṇa pakṣa of the same month.
well – a Nanabanbardeuri showed me his three-day long beard; a non-Brahman affirmed that he does not use soap while bathing. However, the most substantial restrictions remain with the widows.

The precise beginning of the Goddess’s periods and thus of Her impurity is determined by the moment when the sun enters Ārdrānakṣatra, that is the lunar mansion (naksatra) connected to the star Ārdra. Hemen Sarma, a Bardeuri, who explained this to me, spontaneously commented on it:

Time is not fixed, sometimes the Goddess may menstruate in the morning, sometimes in the evening. Just like a woman: she may menstruate in the morning time or in the night time.

Kāmākhyā Temple and all the minor temples of Nilachal are closed to the public during Ambuvācī and the daily rituals (see chapter 2, § 1) are suspended. On the fourth day the Goddess is given a “grand bath” (mahāsnāna) and the Temple reopens. Devotees believe that having darśana on this day is particularly auspicious. The rush is impressive: people in the general queue may wait up to twelve hours, if not more and, from the accounts I heard, the atmosphere in the sanctum is terribly tense. The clothes used in the Temple during the festival, that is, during the Goddess’s menstruations, are believed to be extremely powerful because they are impregnated with Her energy. Kamakhyan families receive some clothes and pāṇḍās tie tiny strips of this cloth around their pilgrims’ wrists (see chapter

287 According to Monier-Williams (2005: s. v.) adjective ārdra means “wet, moist, damp...” Star Ārdra is represented by a teardrop and is presided over by Rudra. According to an Australian man versed in Hindu astrology I met in the Temple, the star Ārdra is connected to strong emotions, suffering and destruction. Türstig (1985: 92 and 96) affirms that ārdra is among the terrible (ghora) lunar mansions and that the latter are the perfect periods of time to conduct abhicāra(sorcery)-rites.

288 The Italian Nath (§ 1) I met in the temple complex tried to have darśana on this day. She told me that she bought a 501 rupees ticket and that she waited six hours in the rain (in normally crowded days people in this queue wait half an hour to one hour). Once she entered the Temple from the northern gate, she said, it was impossible to move due to the crowd and people were almost treading on each other. Himangshu Sarma, who accompanied me several times to the sanctum (see chapter 6, § 2), advised me not to do darśana on the day when the Temple reopens.
6, § 2). At present the clothes used in the Temple during Ambuvāci are red. I have been told that formerly the clothes employed in the sanctum were white and used to become reddish by themselves; in fact, it seems that during the monsoons the water of the spring contains particles of some reddish mineral. Of course, the reddish colour of the water was assimilated with the Goddess’s menstrual blood. Also the water level in the sanctum varies according to seasons; in the summer it becomes much higher because of the rains.

The festival is called Ambuvāci or Ambuvāci-melā. Ritually speaking, the term ambuvāci indicates the days when the Goddess is considered to be impure and the daily rituals are suspended. On the other hand, both Kamakhyans and pilgrims use the terms ambuvāci or ambuvāci-melā to designate a longer period of time, which precedes and includes the days of pollution. Ascetics start to arrive at the beginning of June and the temple complex gets more and more crowded day by day. The Bengali śākta sādhus (ascetics), dressed in red, are to be seen. The majority of them sit everyday in the same specific place in the temple complex; they set a tiny altar before themselves and ask for alms. The buffalo horn is invariably part of their equipment; they play it during particular auspicious times of the day (and at the demand of pilgrims wishing to give alms). The Bhairavis (bhairavī), female Bengali śākta ascetics, visit the Temple too. In 2011 and 2012 (when I observed the festival) they were spending most of the time amongst themselves, occupying the same corner of the Temple campus. They usually dress in red and have long dreadlocks. As is a custom with ascetics,

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I will conform to this use.

The Telegraph of Kolkata (19th June 2014) stated that “the Assam tourist department is expecting congregation of about six lakhs devotees”.

A śākta is anyone who is particularly devoted to Śakti, the divine feminine creative principle, taking shape in the variety of Hindu Goddesses.

I heard that Bhairavis often have a sort of temporary marriage with Bengali śākta sādhus. That is, for a period of time in her life, a Bhairavi can understand herself to be linked to a particular sādhu. However, the link can be (or has to be?) broken and once this is done the Bhairavi can build up another similar relationship. I was told that the Bhairavis wear two shell bangles (one for each wrist) for each relation of this sort they had in life. I heard this from a pilgrim who every year, just after Ambuvāci-melā is over, worships the Bhairavis and presents them with various offerings (see below). I do not know if the Bhairavis would subscribe to their patron’s theory, but they all wear several pairs of bangles. This custom is
they smoke the *cilama* (the Indian pipe) and ask for alms. I also met some Bengali Yogis (*yogi*); they set up small stalls where they show their set of vegetable roots and healing human bones. A Yogi explained me that these items are used to cure different diseases.

A number of Naths are to be found. Many of them accommodate themselves in the Temple campus. Among them, I observed some Aghoris (aghori) too. I had the chance to meet Hari Nath, an incredibly lively Aghori Nath in his fifties or sixties (difficult to say). I was told that he used to have some thousands of disciples throughout India. Younger Naths and devotees paid homage to him;

294 Kamakhys knew him and showed respect to him as well. Hari Nath was a living legend.

He used to occupy the platform under a big tree in the Temple campus and would spend much of his time there. During calm times of the day I saw him praying with the greatest concentration. During the nights of the Ambuvācī the Temple is crowded with devotees busy in all sorts of activities: praying, singing, doing *parikramās*, chatting, sleeping, eating, and so on. The atmosphere in the Temple campus is ecstatic. People are intoxicated with joy and not even the heavy rains (which break out frequently in June) can stop them from expressing their enthusiasm. Large groups of young boys come to the Temple sporting their fancy new clothes, looking as though they are ready to go out clubbing. I was spending long nights in the Temple chatting to pilgrims. Hari Nath, sporting his cheap plastic sunglasses, was standing on his tree platform screaming, dancing, collecting *dakṣinās* from the people bowing to him and blessing them with energetic slaps on their backs. His flamboyant

better understood when one knows that Bengali married women wear one single pair of conch-shell bangles throughout their lifetime.

293 The original meaning of the term *aghora* is “not terrific” (*a-ghora*); it is “an euphemistic title of Śiva” (Monier-Williams 2005: s. v.). Aghori ascetics frequently live in cremation grounds and smear themselves with the ashes resulting from cremations; they are said to consume human corpses and to be involved in other practices involving corpses. They frequently wear black, although this is not a rule and, on the other hand, other ascetics who are not Aghoris wear black as well. On the Aghoris of Benares see Parry (1994, chapter 8).

294 I heard that Hari Nāth was a (direct) disciple of Doctor Rām Nāth Aghori, a famed, extremely influential Bengali ascetic, who lived between the XIXth and XXth centuries.
presence was, in my eyes, the quintessential example of the inebriated atmosphere of the Temple.

Several Samnyasins (saṃnyāsin) visit the temple complex during Ambuvācī. Most of them occupy the upper area of the Temple campus. When I visited it in 2012, each of the eldest Samnyasins had arranged a thin mattress in a pavilion around a huge hearth. The place looked very tidy: young ascetics and lay devotees were entering the place behaving very respectfully, to bow down to the elder Samnyasins or to talk to them.

My wanderings took me to the campus of the Chinnamastā temple, where the atmosphere was somehow dark. Young Naths had arranged a sort of camp in the campus of the temple, tying large plastic cloths here and there. They were playing drums, singing and getting drunk on cheap alcohol.

Several Hijras (hijdhā, transvestite) visit the temple complex during the Ambuvācī; many of them wear colourful, festive sārhīs. Some Hijras dress up as deities; I observed some of them wearing huge (fake) ornaments on their heads and poking a red-coloured metal tongue out of their mouths, to imitate Goddess Kālī’s famous posture. Dressed in this way, they ask for and receive alms from devotees.

Innumerable householder pilgrims visit the temple complex during Ambuvācī. According to Kamakhyans and to my observations, large numbers of Bengalis visit the temple complex during this festival. Pilgrims from other parts of South Asia are present as well. Those who can afford it rent a room from Kamakhyans - the price of any room becomes at least three times higher during Ambuvācī. Pilgrims undertake a wide variety of activities during Ambuvācī, but usually sponsor no pūjās while the temples are closed. The following two examples aim at giving an idea some of the activities undertaken by pilgrims during Ambuvācī.

For some fifteen days – before and after the festival- hundreds of people accommodate themselves on the terrace of the Koṭiliṅga temple and nearby areas (see photo 28). They sleep, eat and stay there most of the time. The terrace actually looks like a big poorly-equipped campsite. In 2012 three rich

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295 I heard that it is a custom among Bengalis to observe a vrata during Ambuvācī.
businessmen sponsored the preparation of huge quantities of *prasāda* to feed these people. The preparation and distribution of *prasāda* was organised and presided over by Himangshu Sarma. He had arranged a team of cooks, the cooking utensils (huge pans, gas cylinders and so on) and the raw foods to be cooked. One of the businessmen, dressed in an immaculate white *pajāmā* and a *kurtā*, told me that offering *prasāda* was a meritorious action. According to him, it was Himangshu who first suggested that he sponsor the preparation of *prasāda* at the Koṭiliṅga temple during Ambuvāći-melā. Following Himangshu’s advice, he and his associates had been doing so for several years. He also told me that they sponsor the preparation of *prasāda* for five days every year, which Himangshu confirmed. The preceding and following days were taken care of by other devotees, not connected to Himangshu. On the day I met them, the three businessmen were observing the preparation of the *prasāda*. They were relaxed – the responsibility for rite was with Himangshu – and were not doing anything special. The businessman I approached stressed that they should only eat after all the other people have been fed.

In 2012 I met an educated woman in her thirties from North India, who works with women who are pregnant and giving birth. She is not a physician; rather she gives psychological help to women during these delicate moments. Her clients all rank in the upper strata of society and she herself was quite well-off. She rented a beautiful, huge room just near the eastern entrance of the Temple from a Kamakhyan *pāṇḍā* and brought her own cook with her. I was told by both her and the *pāṇḍā* that she invariably rents the same room every time she visits the temple complex. When I first met her in 2012 she told me that, after the Temple’s reopening, she would worship the Bhairavis, as she had been doing for some years. I had never heard about a similar custom and marked the date in my diary, in order to observe it. When the day came, I went to her *pāṇḍā’s* house and met on the way a couple of Bhairavis rushing through the crowd. The unusual rite took place in the basement of the *pāṇḍā’s* house. When I arrived the Bhairavis were sitting in a circle – all of them, that is, some fifteen individuals, were there. The woman (symbolically)
washed the Bhairavis’ feet, offered them some food as well as a bottle of whisky. One of the Bhairavis was clearly acknowledged by the others as the head and was administering alcohol to them. The head-Bhairavi was ecstatic and kept on shouting out auspicious sentences. As far as I know no one else adores and serves the Bhairavis as this lady does. Once they had eaten, the Bhairavis were offered each a sāṛhī, a set of cosmetics and daksinā. One by one they blessed the woman and left.

Not all the pilgrims who visit the temple complex during Ambuvācī are as affluent as the ones just described. Instead, thousands of poor pilgrims flock to the temple complex during Ambuvācī. The poorest among the poor are the people from Koch Bihar (West Bengal). They settle down in very precarious conditions wherever they find some empty space and “protect” themselves from the rains with huge sheets of plastic. In 2011, at the beginning of June, I saw a number of huge stalls being arranged on the way to Bhuvaneśvarī temple. Kamakhyans explained me that during Ambuvācī, several private organisations set out stalls in this area giving out free food to poor pilgrims. I went back to the area a few days later, when the Ambuvācī was at its peak. The scene was apocalyptic. When I reached the place in the evening, thousands of poor pilgrims were packed in endless queues to get the evening meal. Upset and tense, they kept shouting at each other till they got the food. The road was slippery, covered with used plastic plates and food leftovers. On the side of the road stood enormous heaps of rubbish and men were using the area to urinate.

Kamakhyans dislike the poor people coming from Koch Bihar and call them “refugees”. The latter are labelled as adharma; an old priest flatly told me that “refugees” are beā mānuh (wicked people). The recurring charge Kamakhyans vehemently voice is that the “refugees” go to the Temple only because the food is free, not out of devotion, and disrupt the place with their presence. “One will eat here, and another one will shit, next to him” I have been told. Kamahyans complain about the conditions in which the Ambuvācī-melā takes place. My friends invariably advised me to avoid being in the temple complex during the festival. Kamakhyan women often complained
about the feelings of discomfort they have to endure during Ambuvācī (nausea, allergies, diarrhoea, etc.) On the other hand, Kamakhyans acknowledge the significance of Ambuvācī and of the rites taking place in the Temple and (almost) all the Kamakhyans I know wear some of the red cloth around the wrist or the forearm. That is, they differentiate between the momentous importance of the festival – the Goddess menstruates, it happens only once a year – and the practical consequences of the influx of many poor pilgrims.

In the cricket field near the car park a market takes place during Ambuvācī. Artisans and businessmen come from as far away as New Delhi to sell their goods, including items connected to the cult and objects of everyday use. In addition to this, a number of individuals spread cloths on the ground and sell various items. Bhanjara women sell mainly ornaments and sandalwood. A few men I observed were specialised in preparing and selling *rudrākṣas* (the seeds of *Elaeocarpus ganitrus*, worn and used in connection to the cult of Śiva).

Whereas during Ambuvācī a number of Bengalis visit the temple complex, the latter are much less numerous during the Durgā-pūjā of āśvina (September/October). The Bengalis living in West Bengal tend to celebrate it there, setting up magnificent, eye-catching *panḍāls* (pavilions made out of perishable materials), containing the temporary clay images of Goddess Durgā and her four children: Gaṇeśa, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Kārtikeya. Some of the Bengalis who have been settled in Guwahati for generations set up similar *panḍāls* in the Assamese capital. According to Himangshu Sarma’s wife “for Durgā-pūjā, Kolkata is number one”.

The period of time between the first and the tenth days (*thiti*) of the bright half of āśvina is celebrated with different names (Durgā-pūjā, Navarātri, Daśaharā) and different connotations throughout South Asia. In contrast, in the eyes of many Hindus (including the Bengalis) the Ambuvācī is strictly linked to the Kāmākhyā temple complex. As far as the Durgā-pūjā is concerned, Kamakhyans do not content themselves with ranking theirs second to the magnificent one celebrated in Kolkata. They proudly point out
that in the Kāmākhyā Temple, Durgā-पूजā is celebrated from krṣṇā nauvami (the ninth day of the dark half of ṛṣini) up to śukla nauvami296 (the ninth day of the bright half of ṛṣini); thus their Durgā-पूजā lasts fifteen days, not only nine as in other parts of South Asia.

The Durgā-पूजā of ṛṣini attracts large numbers of pilgrims from different parts of South Asia (see photos 25 and 27). Several hundred people settle themselves in the Temple campus and spend the nights there. However the festival is far from comparable to the Ambuvācī.

During the Durgā-पूजā of chat (March/April) too huge numbers of pilgrims come to the temple complex. This festival is generally understood to be second to the homonymous one held in ṛṣini. It is significant that Kamakhyian pāṇḍās generally raise the price of the rooms they rent out to pilgrims only during the Ambuvācī and (to some extent) during the Durgā-पूजा of ṛṣini.

The Manasā-पूजā attract thousands of pilgrims, mainly from Guwahati and nearby areas297. This festival is much smaller compared to the Ambuvācī and the two Durgā-पूजās, but invariably makes the front page in the local newspapers because of the spectacular deodhāni dance, which is held over three days, while the पूजā is in progress.

As in Bengal, Manasā is worshipped especially during the rainy season, that is, the period of the year when snakes become more dangerous. Several Kamakhya households possess manuscripts called Manasā-gitā (songs of Manasā), containing Her myth298. The manuscripts are open on the saṅkrānti between chat (March/April) and baśākha (April/May); men gather and sing loudly the entire manuscript during the night. In the Kāmākhyā temple complex Her worship is tightly connected to the deodhāni dance. During the month of śāo (July/August) several Kamakhyan households perform Manasā-पूजा� in their residences; those who do not do so usually contribute to other households’ Manasā-पूजās. Manasā-gitā is sung at each Manasā-पूजā. During the same stretch of time, the deodhāis (possessed dancers) observe a

296 The rites taking place during Durgā-पूजā are described in chapter 3, § 2.
297 I met some pilgrims from outside Assam during the Manasā-पूजा�, for example Hari Nāth.
298 For the myth of Manasā and Her statue in the Kāmākhyā Temple see chapter 1, § 2.
set of restrictions which are aimed at making them fit to be possessed and are believed to be day by day closer to the divine. They frequently show up at the Manasā-pūjās and are served prasāda by the Kamakhyan households. All this culminates in the grand, public Manasā-pūjā which is performed before the statue of Manasā in the pañcaratna on the saṅkrānti between śaon (July/August) and bhāda (August/September) and the first two days of bhāda. During the same three days, the deodhāni dance takes place: the deodhāis are believed to be possessed by various deities inhabiting the Nilachal (including Kāmākhyā) and dance to the sound of drum. Kamakhya and devotees from outside the Nilachal worship them and beg for their blessing. On the night of the third day, after a frenetic dance, deodhāis fall one by one at the feet of the statue of Goddess Manasā, inside the Kāmākhyā Temple. The fact that a deodhāi falls is understood to be the sign that the deity has left his body. Consequently devotees stop worshipping him. On the occasion of Viśvakarmā-pūjā, namely the saṅkrānti between bhāda (August/September) and āśvina (September/October) deodhāis fully

299 Like the Ambuvāci, the Manasā-pūjā is calculated upon the tārikh (see note 46).
300 On the deodhāni dance see Goswami M. C. (1960).
301 The list of the deities possessing human beings may vary from year to year. In 2012, when I first observed the festival, there were twenty-one deities “participating” in the dance. Among them there was Gaṇeśa, who had been possessing the same man for some twenty years (if not more). Some time after the festival, this man, who was well known in Kamakhya Dham, was injured in a car accident. He did not take part in the 2013 festival. Another man showed up just before the 2013 festival and started claiming to be possessed by Goddess Bhairavī. He was allowed to dance. The common view is that the deities who have chosen a human keep possessing that human as long as the latter is alive. At the same time other deities, due to their inscrutable wish, are currently not possessing any human. I heard several stories about the deodhāi of Goddess Bhuvanesvari, who danced for many years until he died. Since then, no one else claimed to be possessed by this Goddess. In the month preceding the dance, Kamakhya and devotees keep saying that newcomers may show up before the festival starts: “Nije nije aibo” (They will come on their own).
302 The Goddess Kāmākhyā has three rūpas (forms) and has been possessing tree men for many years. One deodhāi, now in his sixties, has been possessed by Calantā, the Goddess inherent in the movable image in the calantā chamber. This deodhāi has some sort of command over the others, who frequently ask for his permission before dancing on the swords (see below). A second deodhāi, now in his late forties has been possessed by Buri Kāmākhyā (the old Kāmākhyā) for some thirty years, if not more; he dances in a very fierce way. A third deodhāi, now in his thirties, has been possessed by Kumārī Kāmākhyā (the Goddess in the form of a girl). His dance is comparatively cooler.
303 The verb employed is pari which literally means “to fall”.

203
recover their ordinary human status. On the very same day the manuscripts of the Manasā-gita are closed; they will only be re-opened the following year.

As shown in chapter 2, § 3, the common view is that the deity enters the body of the individual She or He chooses and pushes out the individual’s identity. The deodhāi acts accordingly to deity’s features, but actually, from the believers’ point of view, it is the deity who acts, according to His or Her nature, within the human body He or She takes. The dance, a display of the Goddess’s terrific power, is thought to be bhayānak (dreadful): the deodhāis often dance in a frenzied way and scream loudly. According to the common view, the deodhāis possessed by ferocious (tāna) deities (like Kālī and Chinnamastā, for instance) dance in a particularly frantic and wild way, while those possessed by cooler deities (mainly male ones) dance in a comparatively calmer way.

The drummers are at the service of the deodhāis, who frequently order them through gestures to speed up the rhythm of the drums or to play differently. Two men play kāliyās, a wind instrument made of brass. Deodhāis frequently put their heads near the instruments, in such a way that the latter are played directly into their (the deodhāis’) ears and stay so, listening to the instruments, for some time (usually a couple of minutes). This practice “charges” them. Most of the time, once they move away from the kāliyās, they dance frenziedly and scream loudly.

Deodhāis are expected to drink the blood from the head of goats, immediately after they have been sacrificed, and to dance on the dāos\(^{304}\) (blades used for sacrifices). According to a widespread discourse shared by both the deodhāis and the devotees, if a deodhāi is unable to drink this blood -

\(^{304}\) While standing, two deodhāis hold a dāo which in this way is around one metre above the floor; the sharp edge of the blade is turned upwards. To help himself step on the dāo, the third deodhāi puts his hands on the other two deodhāis’ heads. Once standing on the dāo, he remains in this position for some time (usually not more than a minute) with an ecstatic expression on his face; the deodhāis of Kālī invariably show their tongues. They and the other deodhāis possessed by fierce Goddesses are served freshly severed pigeons’ heads, while dancing on the dāo.
the English verb “to vomit” is used - or if his feet get cut on the swords\textsuperscript{305}, it means that he is not really possessed by any deity. During the 2012 and 2013 festivals (which I observed) nothing like that happened. I have no solid data to state that any deodhāī ever failed to drink the blood or cut his feet on the swords prior to 2012. Also, when reporting to me on these matters, neither deodhāis nor Kamakhys ever said that any such accident had taken place at some time in the past\textsuperscript{306}.

Notwithstanding all this, I heard this discourse an impressive number of times from several deodhāis as well as Kamakhyan women and men of different ages, castes and social status. From their point of view, it is the deity who drinks the blood and dances on the swords through the human body He or She “takes”. A human would not be able to do so\textsuperscript{307}. I therefore conclude that these two acts are widely understood, by both the deodhāis and the devotees, to test the genuineness of possession. At the same time, like the dance, they are something to be watched and take place before the eyes of the thousands of devotees attending the festival. It would be unjust to say that drinking the blood and dancing on the swords are only tests\textsuperscript{308}; saying so

\textsuperscript{305} While we were talking about dancing on swords, a deodhāi I am particularly familiar with spontaneously showed me the soles of his feet, stating proudly that he never cut them on the swords.

\textsuperscript{306} Only once did a deodhāi tell me that at some time in the past a second deodhāi had his feet cut while dancing on the swords. His statement did not sound at all genuine to me and had never been substantiated by any other deodhāī or any Kamakhyan.

\textsuperscript{307} Kamakhys (and Assameses in general) are non-vegetarian, but do not consume the blood of the animals.

\textsuperscript{308} The idea that the genuineness of possession should be tested is widespread among deodhāis and Kamakhys. I asked a number of times what the test is like and received an impressively wide range of examples. The son of Deviram Das (the deodhāī of Manasā, see chapter 2, § 3) told me the following things, on the basis, he said, of what he heard from his grandmother (that is, the deodhāī’s mother). Some forty years back, Deviram Das, then aged around fourteen, first claimed to be possessed by Manasā. He was asked where his weapons were and could detect their location with no hesitation; moreover, he could handle cobras without being harmed by them. Another deodhāī, I was told, showed up in the Temple before the dance started already wearing the clothes used during the dance and holding the weapons, etc. Also, it is believed that the deity who chooses a man to be His or Her vehicle reveals His or Her bija-mantra to this man. The deodhāī-to-be is bound not to disclose this mantra to anyone. I have heard that he should tell it to the pujārī of the concerned deity, so that the latter can verify if the mantra is the correct one or not. However, I am not sure whether this actually happens or not.
would reduce their spectacular side as well as their capacity to inspire awe in the devotees\(^3\)\(^0\)\(^9\).

5.5. Concluding remarks.

Pilgrims visiting the Kāmākhyā temple complex vary widely regarding geographical origins, economic conditions and social status. The range of religious activities they take part in is extremely diversified too. Different pilgrims have different attitudes of mind and visit the temple complex for different purposes. The Ambuvācī definitively represents the peack of the pilgrims’ influx; on the other hand, many pilgrims make several visits to the temple complex throughout the year. My aim in this chapter has been to portray this wide variety. At the same time I have tried my best to show similarities among people; that is, to discover patterns of behaviour, recurring ideas and postures, and so on. As said in the introduction, “pilgrim” has been used in a general way, to embrace these different realities under a single term – after all, all these people go to the temple complex because they have faith in the Goddess who they understand to be extremely powerful. It is indeed the power attributed to Her that pushes people to undertake the pilgrimage and overcome practical difficulties, as well as their fears regarding Assam.

Since this thesis is dedicated to the priesthood of the temple complex, I dedicated more time to those groups of pilgrims who are more likely to interact with Brahmans, that is, to have a pāṇḍā. In this perspective, poor pilgrims have been explored only briefly, because they usually cannot sponsor any rites and contact no pāṇḍā. Much more could have been said.

\(^3\)\(^0\)\(^9\) I am indebted to Grégoire Schlemmer for the remarks which lead me to these conclusions.
about the ascetics too, but for the same reason – they do not interact much with the Brahmans – I limited myself to sketching them rapidly.

The high number of pilgrims visiting the temple complex is, according to my interlocutors, a comparatively recent development. If it is undeniable that the high number of pilgrims is having a strong impact on the economic life of the temple complex, it is tempting to assume that it may with the passage of time exert a certain pressure over the ritual sphere and the understanding regarding the deities as well.
Pāṇḍā-hood and other forms of priesthood.

The present chapter aims at analysing pāṇḍā-hood as it is practiced in the Kāmākhyā temple complex and the various dynamics taking place around the private worship.

§ 1 highlights the basic features of the relationship between a pāṇḍā and his pilgrims: its perpetuity as well as the emotional connation that it frequently acquires. It also shows how the pāṇḍā, who talks in a familiar way with his pilgrims, reinforces during these conversations the fame of the mighty Goddess. § 2 describes the various rites a pilgrim can sponsor under the guidance of his pāṇḍā; and also highlights the relations among Kamakhyan priests resulting from the performance of a private rite. As will be shown, a pāṇḍā who has not been initiated and trained cannot perform the rites demanded by his pilgrims on his own; instead, he has to rely on a pujārī. Apart from catering for his pilgrims’ religious demands, a pāṇḍā also
takes care of their practical needs. The pāṇḍā is the only point of reference that a pilgrim has while in the temple complex. § 3 discusses the lodging and feeding of pilgrims, which is seen by the majority of pāṇḍās as their duty. § 4 examines the remuneration of the pāṇḍās. As elsewhere in South Asia, the money that a pilgrim gives to his pāṇḍā goes under the name of daksīṇā. Many Sanskrit texts extoll giving the daksīṇā as an intrinsic and extremely significant part of the rite; at the same time this presentation is problematic for the receiving Brahman priest; the latter can see his status as being diminished precisely by the fact of accepting the presentations of the yajamāna (the patron of the rite). Kamakhys are not uncomfortable receiving the daksīṇā; this transaction, however, needs to respect specific rules, which distinguish it from an ordinary payment. Notwithstanding these precautions, several devotees affirm that Kamakhyan Brahmans are greedy. § 5 explores these pungent allegations. Due to the (alleged) increase in the pilgrim numbers, providing pilgrims with various kinds of facilities can also result in a very profitable business, which many Kamakhys – even those who are not pāṇḍās - decide to undertake. Many people, both Kamakhys and devotees, see in the current development of the pilgrimage a threat for the Goddess’s power itself. Finally § 6 analyses the relations that Kamakhyan pāṇḍās maintain with outsider Brahmins who work at the Kāmākhyā temple complex and in Kamakhyan households with different tasks.
6.1. The perpetual relationship between a pāṇḍā and his pilgrims.

Bilingual Kamakhyans render pāṇḍā as “guide” or “agent\textsuperscript{310}”. The first answer I used to get when asking about pāṇḍās was that “they accompany pilgrims to darśana”. Pāṇḍās do indeed escort their pilgrims to the sanctum, but the pāṇḍā’s role is much wider and his relationship to his pilgrims is very significant, for the latter as well as for himself.

Pāṇḍā-\textit{hood} consists in having a perpetual, hereditary link with a certain number of pilgrims. A pāṇḍā inherits his father’s pilgrims and can also acquire new ones of his own. For his part, a man will rely on the pāṇḍā his father used to rely on; after the death (or the “retirement”) of that pāṇḍā, he will rely on the latter’s son. In other words, the relation is not only between two individuals; rather, it is between two family-lines. For this reason, Kamakhyan pāṇḍās keep registers where the name, home address and telephone number of each of their pilgrims are listed; they are called \textit{nāma-kāthā}.

Without exception all the pilgrims I spoke to stated that they rely on the same pāṇḍā throughout their repeated visits. Normally, they reach their pāṇḍā by phone to inform him of their arrival. During my 2011 fieldwork period, Himangshu Sarma happened to lose his mobile phone. He was very upset and told me with a worried expression (my translation from Assamese): “Pilgrims will call [me]!”

Several pilgrims continue to visit the temple complex throughout their lives. During my 2011 fieldwork I met many of Himangshu Sarma’s pilgrims. As I went back to the Kāmākhyā temple complex in 2012, I asked him which

\textsuperscript{310}Bronson (1867: s. v.) renders the term pāṇḍā as “an attendant or priest of an idol temple”; and Barua (2011: s. v.) renders it as “a worshipper of an idol, a proprietary priest”. It is reasonable to assume that the term pāṇḍā is related to Sanskrit \textit{pandita}, rendered by Monier-Williams (2005: s. v.) as “learned, wise, shrewd, clever, skilful in, conversant with. A scholar, a learned man, a teacher, a philosopher, a Pandit...” - some Hindi-speaking pilgrims tend to employ the term \textit{pandita}, instead of pāṇḍā. The related root, \sqrt{pand}, is tentatively explained by Monier-Williams (ibidem: s. v.) as follows: “prob. invented to serve as the root of the words below [including \textit{pandita}]. To go, move. To heap together, to pile up. To destroy, annihilate”. However, the origin of the substantive and of the root is unclear.
among his pilgrims he expected to visit the temple complex next. Himangshu told me that the same people I had met the year before would come back again in 2012, which is what in fact happened.

The conversation I had with one of Himangshu’s pilgrims is revealing in this respect. This man, in his forties, is from New Delhi and practices astrology. I have met him in the temple complex several times throughout my fieldwork. He usually makes visits lasting one or two days and frequently brings some acquaintances along with him. We communicate in English. When in 2012 I was “testing” the permanent nature of the pāṇḍā/pilgrim relationship, I asked him how he came to know Himangshu. He told me that previously he used to rely on a different pāṇḍā. On one of his visits to the temple complex, he found out that, after he had already given the dakṣiṇā to this pāṇḍā, the latter was asking for money from the other people who were accompanying him (the pilgrim). The pilgrim told me that he was very disappointed by the pāṇḍā’s behaviour; when recalling the episode he employed the verb “to cheat”. He stopped having any contact with this pāṇḍā; later on he met Himangshu, on whom he relies to this day. I do not intend to ascertain how close this episode is to what actually happened between this pilgrim and his previous pāṇḍā, whose identity I did not enquire about. It is relevant for the present purpose that, after the rupture of the pāṇḍā/pilgrim relationship, a new similar relationship has been built to replace the preceding one.

The same pilgrim explained me the reasons why it is advisable to rely on a pāṇḍā. He told me that he has been visiting the temple complex for many years and thus knows the proper mantras to be uttered to the deities inhabiting the Temple. Nevertheless he prefers to visit the shrine under the guidance of his pāṇḍā (namely, Himangshu). He compared his behaviour with that of a man and a woman who fall in love and decide to get married. Although they have chosen their life partner themselves they will ask their parents’ blessing before taking the final decision. “It’s a matter of respect”, he affirmed. This has to do with the perpetuity and stability of the pāṇḍā/pilgrim relationship. Once the relationship is set, the pilgrim going to
the temple complex will always contact his pāṇḍā. I do not know whether this pilgrim is also aware of the fact that having a pāṇḍā makes someone’s darśana much more easier – a dynamic I will detail in § 2.

Like the Kamakhyan pāṇḍā, the pāṇḍās of other Hindu pilgrimage sites have a perpetual, heritable link with their pilgrims. Van der Veer, Parry and Lochtefeld report a similar link between the pāṇḍās of Ayodhya, Benares and Haridwar respectively311 and their pilgrims. A major difference, however, needs to be pointed out. In Benares and Haridwar each pāṇḍā has a link with one or more specific regions of North India and consequently the right to all the pilgrims coming from those regions. Lochtefeld:

_Pandas_ keep [...]. records for all their clients, grouped first by village, and then by jati [...]. This enables a _panda_ to name a pilgrim’s family and ancestors with no information other than the pilgrim’s name, jati, and ancestral village, and many pilgrims expect the _panda_ to do this, since doing so proves their hereditary bond312.

This custom, reported for these pilgrimage sites, is unknown in the Kāmākhyā temple complex. Every Kamakhyan pāṇḍā has pilgrims of diverse provenance and can approach new pilgrims irrespective of their origins313. It can be tentatively assumed that the difference may be (partly) due to the comparatively smaller catchment area of the Kāmākhyā temple complex: as shown in chapter 5, § 2, the majority of pilgrims visiting the temple complex are Bengalis, Assamese and Biharis. The three huge pilgrimage sites of Ayodhaya, Benares and Haridwar, on the other hand, attract pilgrims from many different regions of South Asia.

A second difference needs to be pointed out. The pāṇḍās of Ayodhya, Benares and Haridwar regularly travel to their pilgrims’ villages to visit

311 See Van der Veer 1988: 185; Parry 1994: 97-98; Lochtefeld 2010: 124. In these pilgrimage places, however, the permanent nature of the link pāṇḍā/pilgrim is jeopardised by the harsh competition between pāṇḍās. See below.
313 All Kamakhyan pāṇḍās understand Bengali and Hindi. They are able express themselves in these languages, but tend to pronounce Bengali and Hindi terms according to the Assamese pronunciation.
them. This custom allows the pāṇḍās to reinforce the link with their pilgrims; it is also the occasion for a pāṇḍā to collect those gifts the pilgrim promised the former when they last met at the pilgrimage site\textsuperscript{314}. Kamakhyan pāṇḍās do not have the habit of visiting their patrons. However, they send them prasāda via mail, especially after the most important festivals. Entering Brahman houses, I sometimes happened to see a pāṇḍā sitting on the floor, surrounded by dozens of envelopes, patiently copying the addresses of his pilgrims from the nāma-kāthā on the envelopes. For their part, pilgrims sometime send money to their Kamakhyan pāṇḍās through the post in order to have a particular rite performed.

Before proceeding further, a short comment is appropriate regarding the vocabulary employed by Kamakhyans pāṇḍās to refer to pilgrims. As elsewhere pilgrims are called yajamāna, which is rendered by Monier-Williams as follows: “the person paying the cost of a sacrifice, the institutor of a sacrifice (who to perform it employs a priest or priests, who are often hereditary functionaries in the family)”. Along with this term, a second one is used to refer to the pilgrim, namely yātrī, which is related to the Sanskrit term yātrā, rendered by Monier-Williams as “going, setting off, journey, march, expedition [...] going on a pilgrimage...” While yajamāna stresses the role of the devotee as the sponsor and beneficiary of a rite, yātrī refers the fact that the devotee is actually a traveller, someone who displaces himself to reach the pilgrimage site. I do not know whether Kamakhyans are aware of this difference; the two terms are used synonymously in Kamakhyan parlance. Finally, Kamakhyans frequently employ the term mānuh (man), to refer to pilgrims. Asking the pāṇḍās waiting at the entrance of the Temple the reason why they were there, I frequently got the answer: “Mānuh āibo” ([my] men are about to arrive).

Both Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris can be pāṇḍās in the Kāmākhyā temple complex. Any adult individual belonging to one of these two groups can undertake pāṇḍā-hood. On the other hand, only Bardeuris and

Nananbardeuris can be *pāṇḍās*; outsider Brahmans are debarred from being *pāṇḍās*.

As with every other adult male Brahman, a *pāṇḍā* has been imposed the sacred thread in his teenage years\(^\text{315}\). Unlike the *pujārī* who is required to be initiated and trained in order to perform a *pujā*, the *pāṇḍā* does need any of these qualifications. It is essential to understand that a *pāṇḍā* is not expected to be able to conduct any rite. It is equally important to clarify that once the Brahman X is declared a *pujārī* by his seniors, he does not stop being a *pāṇḍā*. That is, he continues to be the *pāṇḍā* of his own pilgrims and may acquire more pilgrims as well. *Pujārī*-hood does not replace *pāṇḍā*-hood; rather, it is added to the latter. A Kamakhyan Brahman is by virtue of his bloodline entitled to be a *pāṇḍā*. A *pāṇḍā* can undertake the path to become a *pujārī*, but is not bound to do so. And indeed, I know a number of *pāṇḍās* who are not *pujārīs*. To put it differently, the terms “*pujārī*” and “*pāṇḍā*” do not designate two distinct groups, like “Bardeuris” and “Nananbardeuris”. Rather, they indicate two different functions the same Brahman can undertake.

Notwithstanding all this, experienced *pāṇḍās*, who have been observing innumerable rites conducted by *pujārīs*, end up having a certain knowledge about the rites. I observed *pāṇḍās* evaluating (positively or negatively) the work of a certain *pujārī*, when the latter was absent. That means that they feel competent enough to judge whether a rite was properly performed or not. This, however, does not diminish the *pāṇḍā/pujārī* distinction: if a Brahman has not been initiated, trained and recognized by his seniors as a *pujārī*, he cannot perform the rites, be they public or private ones.

A *pāṇḍā* and his pilgrims frequently become familiar with each other. Once the rites are over, pilgrims are usually invited to their *pāṇḍā’s* house, where they are offered the *prasāda* resulting from the rites that they sponsored and a snack\(^\text{316}\). On these occasions I often observed Himangshu and his wife chatting in a relaxed mood with the former’s pilgrims.

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\(^{315}\) On the *lagun-deni* (imposition of the sacred thread) see chapter 2, § 2.

\(^{316}\) This is true for those pilgrims who arrive at the temple complex and leave on the same day. Those who stay longer are lodged and (sometimes) fed by their *pāṇḍā*. See § 3.
One day in 2011, after escorting them to the *darśana*, Himangshu took one of his pilgrims$^{317}$ and the latter’s wife and daughter to his place. There, they were offered a chai and a snack by Himangshu’s wife. As usual, the conversation revolved around religious matters and pious actions. Eventually, Himangshu and his pilgrims talked to me about the relationship between them. Suddenly the pilgrim stood up, gave Himangshu a warm hug and told me:

He is my brother!

He said this with an enthusiastic expression on his face; Himangshu, for his part, was smiling too. When this man and his family left, Himangshu spontaneously talked to me about them. He told me that he deeply appreciates this man and then said “Relation *ache!”* (there is a relationship [of friendship between me and him]). In saying so, he crossed his forefingers tightly, to underline the existence of a bond between this man and himself.

Similarly, I observed Pramesh Sarma behaving in a familiar way with many of his pilgrims. While I was staying at his place, one morning I found him chatting in a very relaxed mood with a Bengali pilgrim in his fifties. In answer too my questions, Pramesh said that this man had been visiting the temple complex for the last two decades. He spontaneously added:

I have brotherly affection for him and he has brotherly affection for me.

The use of kinship terms to describe the *pāṇḍā/pilgrim* relationship is pointed out by Lochtefeld:

Since the family is the primary model for many Indian social relationships, *pandas* often describe themselves as having family relationship with their clients. As the pilgrims’ “family” in Hardwar, one *panda* explained in 1990, *pandas* were responsible for their clients’ ease and well-being. Another *panda* expressed this relationship even more

$^{317}$ This man has already figured in chapter 5, § 3.
forcibly in 2002, noting that aside from their *panda*, pilgrims had only God to depend on\(^{318}\).

To use Parry’s expression, *pāṇḍās* are “propagandists”: they often extol the almighty Goddess in front of their pilgrims and narrate the myths concerning the temple complex. This can be compared to a sort of “advertisement”; pilgrims are often “brain-washed” by their *pāṇḍās*, so to speak. 2011: having had the *darśana*, some of Himangshu’s pilgrims were taken by the former to his place. As usual, the pilgrims were offered a chai and a snack; they would leave for the airport in an hour or so. Himangshu was quite busy on that day, because a complex rite was going on to bless his newly constructed building (see photo 23) and he left the pilgrims with his wife. I was with them and listened to their conversation, which took place in Hindi. Himangshu’s wife started talking to the pilgrims and praised the Goddess Kāmākhyā; after some time she told them how the Daśamahāvidyās emanated from furious Saṭī, when Śiva refused to allow Her to go to Her father’s place (see chapter 1, § 3). The narration by Himangshu’s wife was very vivid and the pilgrims were captivated by her words.

On other occasions, it is the pilgrims who talk about the astonishing deeds attributed to the Goddess Kāmākhyā’s will with their *pāṇḍās*. The wife of the pilgrim mentioned above recounted the following episode to Himangshu and his wife: a friend of theirs got married and had a son, who unfortunately died when he was few weeks old. The couple were desperate, but kept praying to the Goddess Kāmākhyā. After a year or so they had a second child, who was incredibly similar to the dead one. The woman stressed this point repeatedly, which caught the attention of Himangshu and his wife as well. They listened to the woman with attention and kept nodding throughout the narration. To sum up, the conversations between the *pāṇḍās* and their pilgrims provide an occasion to share eulogistic ideas about the Goddess; Her enormous power is re-affirmed by both sides. As sketched in chapter 1, § 1, the Goddess is depicted as powerful and benign. By contrast,

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\(^{318}\) Lochtefeld 2010: 124.
Her violent side and the connected esoteric cult rendered to Her are played down on these occasions.

Unlike the pāṇḍās of Benares who send their assistants to nearby railway stations “to steal the jajaman of others and to break the hands and feet of those who steal ours”, Kamakhyan pāṇḍās do not pick up their pilgrims at the railway station nor at Guwahati airport. They either wait for them at home or at the entrance of the Temple. Sure, a number of pāṇḍās are always sitting at entrance of the Temple campus in order to grab new pilgrims; and a few pāṇḍās are to be met near the parking lot, where they can make contact with pilgrims, before the latter start climbing the stairs leading to the Temple. However, something similar to the tense competition between the Benares pāṇḍās, with periodic resorts to violence, described by Parry, is far from being observable in the Kāmākhyā temple complex. Here, competition between pāṇḍās is minimal, if not absent altogether. Once a pilgrim on his first visit to the temple complex makes contact with a pāṇḍā, the perpetual and hereditary link between them is understood to have been established and therefore the other pāṇḍās do not interfere with it.

6. 2. The rites to be undertaken.

The rites a pilgrim is likely to perform under the guidance of his pāṇḍā include the following: the darśana (“sight” of the Goddess in the sanctum), the kumārī-pūjā (worship of an immature girl) and the kumārī-bhojana (feeding of usually nine immature girls), the pūjā for Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī in the cālāntā, and a pūjā in one of the minor temples. In the

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321 The cālāntā is the second chamber of the Temple; it is only from here that one can access the sanctum. On the various chambers of the Temple see chapter 1, § 2.
last two cases the pūjā is likely to be followed by a homa (offering into the fire). Some pilgrims offer a bali (sacrifice) as well, the most common animals to be sacrificed being a goat or a pigeon – buffalo sacrifice is rather rare. A considerable number of pilgrims go to the temple complex to have their cars or motorbikes blessed. Finally several parties of pilgrims visit the Temple to have a saṁskāra performed for a member of their family (see § 6).

Each Kamakhyan pāṇḍā has some pieces of the cloth which has been used in the Temple during the three days of the Ambuvācī; as was said in chapter 5, § 4, this cloth is believed to be impregnated with the Goddess’s menstruation blood and thus to have tremendous power. Pāṇḍās tie thin pieces of this cloth on their pilgrims’ wrists. Some pilgrims ask for more cloth to take home and give to relatives; for their part pāṇḍās try not to give away too much cloth, because they themselves have only a limited quantity.

The first rite a pilgrim usually accomplishes under the guidance of his pāṇḍā is the darśana. Several pāṇḍās, but not all, take their pilgrims first to the saubhāgya-kuṇḍa (see photos 2 and 6); here pilgrims are asked to enter the pond up to the ankles and sprinkle some water on themselves. Near the pond stands a shrine dedicated to Gaṇeṣa, who is represented here by five stones. The pāṇḍā utters the mantra for Gaṇeṣa, which consists in asking the elephant-head God to allow the devotee to see (darśana) and touch (sparśa) His Mother, namely the Goddess Kāmākhyā.

Three different queues are open to regular pilgrims: the free one, the 101 rupee one and the 501 rupee one. Pilgrims choose which one they want to go through. While they are waiting in the queue, their pāṇḍā buys the mālās (flower garlands) and other offerings to be given to the Goddess. He does not wait with them in the queue, but keeps an eye on them. He needs to know how they advance in the queue because he will join them once they enter the cālāntā. I frequently met pāṇḍās strolling around in the Temple in

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322 During this rite, which takes more or less half an hour, a small image of some deity is installed in it. The deity thus installed in the car is presented with various offerings and is worshipped. At the end, pilgrims are instructed by their pāṇḍā to do one of three parikramās (circumambulation) around the car.
the morning and waiting for their pilgrims to reach the cālāntā; they are usually able to estimate how long pilgrims will have to wait, according to their position in the queue.

Once the pilgrims enter the cālāntā, the pāṇḍā shows up; he utters the praṇāma-mantra of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī, which the pilgrims repeat after him. Pilgrims usually throw some offerings, including money, to the divine couple. Then they reach the door of the sanctum. Many of them bless themselves by touching the huge stone lotus flower situated above the door. Then they descend the (wet and slippery) stairs leading to the sanctum. Here the pāṇḍā utters the praṇāma-mantra of Goddess Kāmākhyā and the pilgrims repeat it after him. They give their offerings to the idol of the Goddess, bow down and drink the water from the spring. Meanwhile the Bardeuri who is in charge of the sanctum puts the tilaka on their forehead and gives them some cloths or flowers which had been previously offered to the Goddess. Thereafter the same rite is accomplished for Kamalā (Lakṣmi) and of Mātaṅgī (Sarasvatī), whose idols are situated next to that of the Goddess Kāmākhyā. At darśana-hours, there are always two Bardeuris in the sanctum to guard it (see chapter 3, § 4). Whether the pilgrim having darśana has a pāṇḍā or not generally makes a great difference in the way he is treated by the Bardeuri guarding the sanctum.

In the vast majority of cases, the pilgrim who descends into the sanctum to have the darśana and the Bardeuri who guards it are meeting for the first time in their lives and, most probably, for the last as well\textsuperscript{323}. Having knelt down to the idol, the pilgrim gets up and disappears into the unknown multitude, while the next pilgrim in the line approaches to kneel down in turn. Bardeuris guarding the sanctum push the pilgrims who have no pāṇḍā to go through the ritual as rapidly as possible, so that the next one can approach. The orders “Uto! Utiye!” (Get up!) are repeated endlessly and, along

\textsuperscript{323} A few pilgrims have been coming to the temple complex regularly for years and are known to some Bardeuris. However, even these habitués can happen to meet a Bardeuri they do not know in the sanctum.
with mantras, form the soundtrack, so to say, of the sanctum. It must be kept in mind that the number of pilgrims paying their visit to the Temple is high – thousands everyday. Thus, the fact that the Bardeuri pushes the pilgrim to make way for the next in the line is partly for practical reasons - most probably, if the Bardeuris did not do this, the pilgrims waiting in the line would themselves urge those having darśana to make way for them. However, I am convinced that the very ephemerality and unrepeatability of their relationship plays a major role too. On crowded days the pressure exerted on pilgrims having darśana may perturb the latter. I vividly remember the bitter comments of a pilgrim who had just had darśana; with a rancorous expression on his face this man, in his fifties, told me that once in the sanctum he was not given the time to accomplish the rite in a proper way. He was furious.

The only pilgrims who receive better treatment are those who are accompanied by their pāṇḍās. A female devotee of Kāmākhyā Temple in her thirties, conscious of the dynamics taking place in the sanctum, once told me that the Bardeuri sitting there would only apply sindura on the foreheads of those pilgrims accompanied by a pāṇḍā, while those pilgrims who have no pāṇḍā will have to accomplish the rite by themselves. I am not entirely sure that this is always true; in fact I assume that different Bardeuris guarding the sanctum have slightly different behaviours. However, what I can state is that whether a pilgrim is accompanied by a pāṇḍā or not makes a difference in the way the Bardeuri guarding the sanctum treats him. In other words, although the latter has no link of any sort with the pilgrim having darśana, he acknowledges the link between the pāṇḍā and his pilgrim. From my first fieldwork, Himangshu Sarma told me that I should have darśana and always spontaneously accompanied me. He uttered the pranāma-mantras of

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324 During one of my most recent darśana, I observed that an employee of Kamakhya Debutter Board was posted in the sanctum. He was there to make pilgrims finish off their darśana rapidly, a task which he was accomplishing with impressive efficiency. I saw him energetically pulling devotees by their arms, while the latter were still kneeling down with their heads on the pavement.

325 I never gave Himangshu Sarma a single rupee for accompanying me to darśana, nor did he ever ask for anything.
Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī in the calantā and asked me to repeat them. In the sanctum he uttered (and I repeated) the pranāma-mantras of Kāmākhyā and then of Kamalā and Mātaṅgī. While I was kneeling down, he invariably asked the Bardeuri who was there to put tilaka on my head and to give me some cloth and some flowers. Sometimes he picked up these items himself from the idol and handed them to me. Afterwards, he escorted me outside the Temple. To sum up, he supervised the entire rite. Pāṇḍās behave similarly: they bridge the gap between the pilgrim and the Bardeuris guarding the sanctum. 

Once the darśana is completed, pilgrims climb up the stairs escorted by their pāṇḍā and come out of the Temple building. To conclude the rite, some pāṇḍās ask their pilgrims to do one or more parikramās (circumambulation of the Temple).

Many pāṇḍās - probably the majority of them – suggest to their pilgrims that they sponsor a kumārī-pūjā. This is a very common rite in the temple complex. Throughout my periods of fieldwork I have observed innumerable kumārī-pūjās. The best way to analyse the rite and the interactions taking place around it is probably to start from an example.

One day in February 2011, I was walking around the Kāmākhyā Temple when I met Shamal Sarma, a pāṇḍā known to me. Shamal is a Deka Bardeuri. In 2011 he was in his late twenties; he was unmarried and lived (and still lives at the time of writing) with his joint family in his ancestors’ house. On that day he was walking to the Temple along with his eight-year-old niece. As I guessed, some pilgrims wanted to perform a kumārī-pūjā. Shamal invited

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326 Only once was Himangshu Sarma not able to accompany me to darśana because he was busy with some of his pilgrims, who were offering a bali-pūjā. Once I arrived in front of the man sitting in the garbha-stāna, whom I did not know, I told him “Moi Himagshur ādmi” (I am a person belonging to Himangshu). The man nodded in assent. He did not utter the pranāma-mantra of the Goddess, but did not push me either. A few hours later I met Himangshu Sarma who immediately asked me (my translation from Assamese): “Was everything alright?”

327 Kamakhyans are not familiar with the term pradaksīna. To point out the act of circumambulating the Temple, they employ the term parikramā or the English “round”.

328 In 2011 Samal was living with his mother, his two unmarried elder sisters and his aunt. He lost his father during his childhood.
me to observe the rite, which took place in the nāṭa-mandira\(^{329}\) of the Kāmākhyā Temple.

This group of pilgrims included six individuals, namely a man in his fifties, his wife, their unmarried daughter and their son along with his family\(^{330}\). The man, an Assamese, told me that he and his family had arrived that day in the early morning from his hometown, Dibrugarh, in Upper Assam. The entire family was fasting, as many Hindu pilgrims do when they visit a temple. They had reached the Temple early in the morning and had done the darśana under Shamal’s guidance. Now, they were about to start the kumārī-pūjā. The man spontaneously told me that the kumārī-pūjā he was sponsoring was particularly aimed at finding a good husband for his unmarried daughter.

\(^{329}\) Kumārī-pūjās can take place either in the nāṭa-mandira or in the pāṇḍā's residence. On 1\(^{st}\) January 2009 I observed a lavish kumārī-pūjā, conducted by Himangshu Sarma. The kumārī, Himangshu’s daughter, had been dressed up in a silk sārī and was wearing various ornaments and colourful make-up. The five devotees, sponsoring the kumārī-pūjā, had brought a cameraman with them to film the rite, which was supposed to be performed in the nāṭa-mandira. As the rite was about to start, a passing pāṇḍā objected that it is forbidden to take photos or to record inside the Temple; it was quickly decided that the rite would take place outside the Temple building. Himangshu moved the offerings, while one of the devotees picked up the girl and brought her outside. The fact that a kumārī-pūjā can take place in different locations is due precisely to the nature of the object of worship: the Goddess is understood to be inherent in all immature girls, who are usually called “Mā” (Mother). In other words, any immature girl is in herself a form of the Goddess. This is proved by the fact that no ritual operation is needed to make the girl worthy of worship. Sometimes girls are dressed up in a sārī before the rite takes place, but this is not at all necessary. A second rite also involves immature girls; it is called kumārī-bhojāna and basically consists of feeding nine immature girls. Apart from these rites, which have a more or less stable structure, people often venerate girls in informal ways in their daily life. It is frequent to see someone touching a girl’s feet and asking her blessing. Some Kamakhyans, however, think that only Brahman girls can be worshipped, or that the latter are more worthy of worship compared to non-Brahman girls. Other Kamakhyans worship both Brahman and non-Brahman girls. On auspicious days, the Temple is teeming with non-Brahman poor girls, who live on the Nilachal; they are frequently recruited by the pāṇḍās, whose pilgrims want to sponsor a kumārī-pūjā. As a poor girl told me, the majority of the gifts, intended for the kumārī and arranged by the pāṇḍā, are actually appropriated by the latter once the rite is over. The girls often end up with nothing more then few rupees in their hands.

\(^{330}\) I have been told that another member of the family, a young girl, came along, but did not enter the temple, because she did not have “clean clothes”. I thought this statement was a euphemism employed to avoid saying that she was having her period. I did not enquire further, because I felt this could be a sensitive matter.
Shamal had arranged everything which was required for the rite, including a large mat on which the pilgrims were invited to sit. A pujaṛī had been called in order to instruct the main pilgrim, namely the senior man of the group, on the way to worship the girl. Unlike the pūja and the havana which are executed by a pujaṛī, the kumāri-pūja is executed by the pilgrim himself under the direction of a pujaṛī. The pujaṛī summoned by Shamal uttered the mantras which the pilgrim (confusedly) repeated. At the same time, he explained to the pilgrim the various mudrās to be performed and instructed him on the gifts to be presented to the girl - the sequence of offerings to be given to a kumāri follows the list of offerings given to Goddess Kamākhyā in Her pūja.

Shamal was present and vigilant during the entire execution of the rite. He remained silent most of the time, sitting by the two men. As soon as the rite was over, the pujaṛī left. The pilgrims took some photos hugging the kumāri, while Shamal was packing the items used during the rite. Then he invited the pilgrims to go to his house. These pilgrims were not aware of this habit and asked me where their pāṇḍā was taking them.

Once they arrived at Shamal’s house, the pilgrims were invited to sit in the TV room and offered the kumāri-pūja’s prasāda. Next they were served a homemade snack and water. Shamal, his aunt and his sister served the snack – none of them had any food while the pilgrims were eating. Having eaten, the pilgrims stood up and were ready to go, but Shamal asked them to sit down again, saying that he wanted to offer them a chai. The pilgrims obeyed - the daughter of the main pilgrim told me that they had planned to go to Kaziranga National Park that day after completing the rites, but now, she said, it was probably too late to do it. The pilgrims talked freely with Shamal for some time about different religious matters. Finally they gave him the dakṣinā and left.

Unlike Shamal, Himangshu, who is a pāṇḍā, does not call a pujaṛī when his pilgrims want to perform a kumāri-pūja. Rather, he himself instructs the main pilgrim on the way to perform the rite and utters the mantras, which the pilgrim repeats. He does rely on a pujaṛī, however, when his pilgrims require a pūja for any of the deities inhabiting the Nilachal.
This episode is symptomatic of the link between a pāṇḍā and his pilgrims. It also highlights the fact that the interaction between the pilgrims and the pujārī in charge of the rites is restricted to the execution of the rites. In the majority of cases, the pilgrims and the pujārī meet for the first (and possibly the last) time during the performance of the rites. In constrast, a pāṇḍā guides his pilgrims throughout all the rites they want to perform, and escorts them for their entire stay at the temple complex, which can last several days. Moreover, pilgrims are almost always invited to their pāṇḍā’s house after completing the rites, but they are never taken to the house of the pujārī who has conducted those rites.

A part from the kumārī-pūjā, pilgrims may decide to sponsor a pūjā for Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī. This rite takes place in front of the mūrtis in the cālāntā and must be performed by a Bardeuri who has been approved as a pujārī. Since entrance in the calantā is restricted, I only once had the chance to observe the pūjā for the movable mūrtis.

In April 2011 one of Himangshu Sarma’s richest pilgrim came from North India. He brought with him four men of similar economic status; the entire party relied on Himangshu332. The pilgrims were staying in a hotel in Guwahati. They each wanted to offer 1008 lotus flowers to the Goddess. This presentation is not part of the common rites taking place in the Kāmākhyā Temple and throughout my fieldwork I only observed it on this occasion. On the day when they arrived, they briefly visited the Temple and went along with Himangshu and me to see the lotus flowers: a man, sitting in the Temple, was opening the flowers, one by one. The next day, the five pilgrims showed up in the morning and had darśana under the Himangshu’s guidance. Then each of them had a pūjā performed in the calantā. Five Bardeuri pujārīs were at work at the same time; five huge baskets filled with the lotus flowers were purified and mantras were imposed on them. The pilgrims took the baskets on their heads and, one by one, went to the sanctum, where they threw the flowers on the idol of the Goddess. Then the party proceeded to the homa-

332 On the way a pāṇḍā can acquire new pilgrims through one of his pilgrims see chapter 5, § 1.
where the five pujaṭis performed the homa. This was among the biggest private rite I ever observed in the Temple. Whatever the size of the rite, however, the sequence puja-homa is the usual one in the Kāmākhyā Temple as well as in the minor ones. Once the homa was over, Himangshu took the pilgrims to the Koṭilīṅga (see photo 12) temple to have darśana there. Finally they were brought to Himangshu’s place and offered a snack by the latter’s wife. They chatted with him for sometime, gave him daksinā and left.

A pilgrim may decide to sponsor a puja in one of the minor temples. These rites are often intended to erase a doṣa, namely the problematic position of a planet in someone’s horoscope; if not taken care of, a doṣa is believed to create problems in the affected individual’s life. In the Kāmākhyā temple complex, each of the Navagrahas (”nine planets”) is connected to one of the Daśamahāvidyās. So, for instance, if a pilgrim knows that he has a Śani-doṣa, that is a doṣa due to Saturn, he has to sponsor a puja for Kāli. These relations between the Daśamahāvidyās and the planets extend to the days of the week, which are named after the planets336. For instance, the best day to offer a puja to Kāli is Saturday (śani-vār). A pāṇḍā, like any other Kamakhyan, is aware of these connections and advises his pilgrims in this regard, although the latter may be aware of (some of) these connections too.

It should be noted that a puja for one of the Daśamahāvidyās can be performed for reasons other than getting rid of a doṣa. Some Goddesses in

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333 As explained in chapter 3, § 1, the homa-ghar is used exclusively for the public, festive homa, a rite having a particular significance. Private homas usually take place in a second pavilion within the Temple campus. These five simultaneous homas were one among the largest private rites I have ever observed in the Temple. I attribute the fact that access was exceptionally granted to the homa-ghar to the uncommon size of the rite.

334 Along with this meaning, the term doṣa covers a vast range of related meanings, stretching from “fault, vice” to “guilt, crime” and “disease” (Monier-Williams 2005: s. v.).

335 The Navagrahas are: Sūrya (Sun), Candra (Moon), Maṅgal (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Bṛhaspati (Jupiter), Śukra (Venus), Śani (Saturn), Rāhu (North lunar node) and Ketu (South lunar node).

336 The connections are the following. Monday: Māta. Tuesday: Bagalā Mukhi. Wednesday: Chinnamastā and Tripurā Sundarā. Thursday: Tārā and Dhūmāvati. Friday: Bhuvanesvarī. Saturday: Kāli. Sunday: Bhairavi and Kamalā. Kāmākhyā is linked either to Thursday or to Sunday or to both. It should be added that Chinnamastā is connected to Rāhu and Dhūmāvati to Ketu.
fact are believed to be able to intervene in specific areas of human life - on the powers attributed to Goddess Bagalā see § 4.

If a pilgrim wants to sponsor a pūjā, the pāṇḍā, who has not been trained, will have to rely on a pujārī. The relation between a pāṇḍā and his pilgrims, however, is not diminished by the intervention of the pujārī, who has no permanent link with the pilgrims concerned. This custom has parallels in Ayodhya and Benares. According to Van der Veer:

[The karmakāndin] is learned in theory and practice of the ritual and is summoned and paid for special performances, but *is not bound by jajamani relations* [my italics]337.

In the Kāmākhyā temple complex, the pāṇḍā cannot choose the pujārī himself. The decision rests with the pālādāra who is in charge of the minor temple concerned on the day when the pūjā ought to be performed. For instance, if the pāṇḍā X needs a pūjā to be performed in the Chinnamastā temple today, he will approach the man whose pālā in the Chinnamastā temple falls today. The pālādāra can either perform the pūjā himself (provided he is a pujārī) or appoint a pujārī of his choice. This rule is valid both for the Kāmākhyā Temple and for the minor temples. However, whereas several pālādāras (at least one hundred) are attached to the former, in some minor temples there are only a handful of pālādāras. In other words, the authority regarding the private rites to be performed in the Kāmākhyā Temple is distributed among several individuals, while the power over some of the minor temples ends up in the hands of a few; the latter have the final say on any private rite taking place in the minor temple involved. One more variant of this rule needs to be mentioned. As shown in ch 2, a Bardeuri pujārī is entitled to perform not only the pūjās for the Goddess Kāmākhyā, but also the private pūjās for any of the deities inhabiting the Nilachal. If the pilgrims of a Bardeuri pāṇḍā, who has been approved as a pujārī, want a pūjā to be performed in a minor temple, the pālādāra concerned may allow the

Bardeuri *pujārī* to perform the *pūjā* himself. The reverse is not possible. A Nananbardeuri *pujārī* can in no circumstances perform any *pūjā* – not even a private one - in the Kāmākhyā Temple.

To avoid confusion, it should be clarified that the same individual can be involved in different private rites in his capacity as a *pāṇḍā*, a *pujārī* or a *pālādāra*. The example just mentioned has (hopefully) clarified that the same Bardeuri is acting at the same time as a *pāṇḍā* – connection with pilgrims, arrangement of the requested rite – and as a *pujārī* – performance of the rite. When in turn his *pālā*-day comes, other *pāṇḍās*, whose pilgrims want a *pūjā* to be performed in the Kāmākhyā Temple, will approach him in his capacity as *pālādāra*, in order to have a *pujārī* appointed for the *pūjās* required by their pilgrims.

The *pālādāra* has the final say. This rule encourages the formation of stable connections between individuals. For instance, Pramesh Sarma told me that when his fellow-Brahmans approach him on his *pālā*-days because their pilgrims requested the performance of some rites, he invariably appoints his cousin, who is a *pujārī*, to have these rites performed. He added that, since this arrangement has been in existence years, on Pramesh Sarma’s *pālā*-days some Kamakhyan *pāṇḍās* directly approach Pramesh’s cousin.

### 6.3. The *pāṇḍā*: “an essential support network”.

Pramesh Sarma and his younger half-brother Deep are Deka Bardeuris. They have inherited from their father a two-storey Assamese house with some ten rooms; the house is set around a courtyard which contains many plants. Under a small tree there is a carved stone (depicting erotic scenes)
which must once have been part of the ancient Temple building. Pramesh’s stepmother, the eldest member of the family, pays a daily homage to the carved stone by placing a burning candle over it every evening.

The family includes: Pramesh, now in his early sixties, his wife, and their two sons who are in their twenties; Deep, now in his forties, his wife and their child; Pramesh and Deep's unmarried sister and Deep's mother (the younger sister of Pramesh’s mother, who died when the latter was a child). Unlike the majority of Kamakhyan families, where each brother has his own kitchen, Pramesh and Deep share a single kitchen, where food is prepared for the entire family. Pramesh, the son of a pāṇḍā, is a physician; in his youth, he studied at Dibrugarh Medical College, one of the most celebrated institutions for medical studies in Assam. At the time of writing Pramesh is the only physician residing in Kamakhya Dham. Known by everyone as "Pramesh Doctor", he works in the small healthcare centre managed by KDB and sells medicines in his own house: a number of Kamakhyans visit him every day for every kind of disease. Deep is a pāṇḍā. Although Pramesh is not a pāṇḍā, he supervises his brother’s priestly activities. Indeed Pramesh’s authority commands the entire family and he has the final say on every matter.

Over the course of time, Pramesh and Deep have built a new three-storey building attached to their house. The family occupies some ten rooms and the remaining fifteen are devoted to pilgrims. Pramesh and Deep accommodate their own pilgrims and provide them with two daily meals from their own kitchen. Providing one’s pilgrims with accommodation and food is, according to Pramesh, part of the duties of a pāṇḍā; thus he doesn’t charge pilgrims for this. The food is prepared by Pramesh’s wife, Deep’s wife and one Assamese Brahman in his twenties who comes from a village in Darrang district - during my last fieldwork period, the latter was living at Pramesh’s. The quantity of food prepared at Pramesh’s is impressive; I frequently observed him calling one of vegetable-sellers of Kamakhya Dham

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338 As shown in chapter 1, § 2, some of stone bas-reliefs of the ancient Temple ended up in private houses, while others lie scattered here and there on the Nilachal.
on the phone and ordering kilos and kilos of vegetables and rice\textsuperscript{339}. Not all the pāṇḍās I know, however, provide their pilgrims with two daily meals. This was probably a widespread custom in the past, but seems to lose ground day by day. Also, these days a number of restaurants are available for pilgrims in Kamakhya Dham.

Apart from his own pilgrims, Pramesh accommodates pilgrims who are not his own – often other pāṇḍās who have no place to accommodate their pilgrims lodge them at Pramesh’s. Pramesh charges these pilgrims a daily rent for the room they occupy, “just like a hotel”. The monetary transaction emerging from this service is designated by the Assamese term bārā, which can be conveniently translated as “rent”. Pramesh does not provide any food for pilgrims who are not his own; “otherwise I become like a restaurant-boy”, he said. During one of our long conversations, he told me that some pilgrims, who first went to his place in search of a room, eventually became his pilgrims. What is significant, however, is that he establishes a clearcut distinction between those pilgrims who are his own and those who are not and modifies his behaviour accordingly.

A pāṇḍā is the only person a pilgrim can rely on during his visit to the temple complex. Often the pilgrim follows his pāṇḍā’s directions regarding which rites ought to be performed and how; even when the pilgrim has it in mind to perform a specific rite, say a bali (sacrifice), he entrusts his pāṇḍā with the organisation of this rite: in the case of a bali, for instance, the pāṇḍā will buy the goat and will contact a balikaṭā, that is a non-Brahman Shebait whose group’s task is to perform sacrifices\textsuperscript{340}. He will also arrange everything which is needed for the rite to be performed (red powder, sindūra, to be sprinkled on the goat’s head, flower garlands, etc.); it is the pāṇḍā who knows the garland sellers and approaches them when a garland is needed. It is again the pāṇḍā who buys fruit and other offerings for a pūjā to be performed and wood for a homa. To sum up, the pāṇḍā filters the relation between the pilgrim and the entire society revolving around the temple complex.

\textsuperscript{339} While at his place, I used to kid him, saying that he was a restaurant manager, at which he laughed.

\textsuperscript{340} On the balikaṭās see chapter 2, § 1.
The pilgrim also resorts to his *pāṇḍā* for every kind of practical need he may have. During fieldwork, I frequently observed Pramesh Sarma helping his pilgrims to plan their travels to tourist spots in Assam and nearby states – several pilgrims travel to the Kaziranga National Park or to Cherrapongee, in Meghalaya, after visiting the temple complex. He also frequently arranges for porters, to have the pilgrims’ luggage carried on their arrival and departure. Similarly, Parry reports observing *pāṇḍās* of Benares taking pilgrims not only to temples but to the shops as well341. I find Lochtefeld’s description of the *pāṇḍās*’ “support network” particularly convincing:

This *panda*-pilgrim connection would have been vital in earlier times, when pilgrimage sites had few lodging places, when the pilgrimage site would have been unfamiliar territory, and when a pilgrimage tour might have lasted for months. *Pandas* were responsible for lodging, feeding, and caring for their clients [...] Aside from arranging to meet their clients’ daily and ritual needs, *pandas* did whatever else was necessary—lending money, nursing the sick, and providing any other help that was needed. In an era when travel facilities were far less developed, they were an essential support network342.

As far as his priestly activities are concerned, a Kamakhyan Brahman is exposed to two groups of people: his pilgrims and the other Kamakhyan Brahmans. Pilgrims may only have a rough idea of the significance of the *pāṇḍā/pujārī* opposition. Similarly, they may not be aware of the relations between Kamakhyan Brahmans resulting from the performance of a private rite and the way money circulates among Kamakhyans once the pilgrim gives the *dakṣinā* to their *pāṇḍā*. They are unaware of the number of *pālā*-days owned by their *pāṇḍā* and of the way he manages these rights. They may not be very familiar with other Kamakhyans and may not know what the latter think of their *pāṇḍā* - Kamakhyans do indeed observe one another’s activities and easily issue judgements regarding their fellows. Sensing these dynamics,

I once asked to one of Himangshu’s pilgrims – an energetic businesswoman in her forties – for her opinion regarding the other Brahmans of the temple complex. She was concise:

I don’t know what they do. I only know Himangshu here. Only him.

In short, since the pāṇḍā filters the relations between the pilgrim and the society revolving around the temple complex, the pilgrims are basically unaware of the place their pāṇḍā occupies in that society. Thus, the fitness of the relationship between a pāṇḍā and his pilgrims depends entirely upon the former’s savoir faire. A Kamakhyan pāṇḍā may also have several enemies in Kamakhya Dham, but if he is skilful in dealing with his pilgrims, these issues cannot damage his relationship to his pilgrims. The fortune of a particular pāṇḍā depends upon the network of pilgrims he is able to build.

6.4. Remuneration.

Before leaving the temple complex, the pilgrim gives the daksīṇā to his pāṇḍā. The daksīṇā goes entirely to the pāṇḍā. The Kamakhya Debutter Board (the committee which presently manages the temple complex) does not have any claim on this money. Also, as shown in chapter 3, § 3, Bardeuris give a percentage of the money they earn on their pālā-days to the Kamakhya Bardeuri Samaj (the association of Bardeuris); on the other hand, they do not give any percentage of the daksīṇā they receive from their pilgrims to this association.

To the very best of my knowledge, there is no direct monetary transaction between the pilgrim and the pujārī. If a pujārī has been summoned to perform some rites, the pāṇḍā concerned will, for his part,
remunerate this *pujārī* - this, however, does not happen in the presence of the pilgrims. Whether the *pālādāra* gets some money for the appointment of the *pujārī* is unclear. The Bardeuris with whom I talked deny that this takes place in the Kāmākhyā Temple. However, as stated above, the situation in minor temples may be quite different from that in Kāmākhyā Temple.

As elsewhere in South Asia, in the Kāmākhyā temple complex, the money a pilgrim gives to his *pāṇḍā* is called *dakṣinā*. The term *dakṣinā* also applies to the money that the *pāṇḍā* gives to the *pujārī* for the performance of the rites required by the former’s pilgrims. Similarly, the *karmakāndins* of Ayodhya and Benares who, like the Kamakhyan *pujārī*, are summoned exclusively to perform the required rite, also receive a sum of money which goes under the name *dakṣinā*. In Parry’s words, this is “a fee for performing the ritual” (Parry 1994: 130). The *dakṣinā* given to a *pujārī* (in the Kāmākhyā temple complex) or to a *karmakāndin* (in Benares and Ayodhya) needs to be differentiated from the one given to a *pāṇḍā*. In fact, as has been shown, the *pāṇḍā* is someone who takes care of both the religious demands of the pilgrims and their practical needs.

In the Kāmākhyā temple complex the amount of money given under the name of *dakṣinā* by a pilgrim to his *pāṇḍā* depends entirely upon the former’s wish. I have observed a 100 rupees *dakṣinā* being given to a *pāṇḍā*, after the blessing of the pilgrim’s motorbike. On the other hand, another *pāṇḍā* told me that one of his richest pilgrims had given him a 15000 Rupees’ *dakṣinā* for escorting him to the *darśana*. This statement is, if not entirely correct, at least

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343 As stated in § 2, when the pilgrims of a *pāṇḍā*, who is also a *pujārī*, ask for a *pujā* to be performed in a minor temple, the *pāṇḍā* concerned, in his capacity as *pujārī*, is entitled to perform the *pujā* himself. This, however, is only possible if the *pālādāra* of the minor temple concerned agrees. I have been told that in similar cases the *pāṇḍā*-cum-*pujārī* may offer some money to the Nanabanerdeuris *pālādāra* concerned. The person who informed me of this habit said that it is his duty to offer this money; but, at the same time, he saw the accepting Nanabanerdeuris in an ambiguous way.

344 The Sanskrit term *dakṣinā*, whose original meaning is, according to Monier-Williams (2005: s. v.), “a profitable cow, a good milch-cow”, acquired, in the course of time, a second meaning: “a fee or present to the officiating priest (consisting originally of a cow)”. The term is also linked to the South (dakṣa); during Vedic sacrifices, it was on the southern side of the altar, that the *yajamāna* was expected to place the presentations for the Brahman priests.
quite reliable, as I have observed the pilgrim concerned kneeling down at this pāṇḍā's feet and handing him huge rolls of 500 rupees bills.

To the very best of my knowledge, Kamakhyan Brahmans do not receive any money understood to be dāna (gift). As Van der Veer (1988) and Parry (1994) show, the presentations which go under the name dāna are highly problematic and can easily jeopardise the receiving Brahman’s status. Van der Veer affirms that, unlike the dāna, the dakṣiṇā given to a pāṇḍā does not “seem to be problematic as far as the Brahman’s status is concerned”. Kamakhyans pāṇḍās and pujārīs never spontaneously spoke of any discomfort with receiving the dakṣiṇā. There are, however, specific rules to be respected regarding this presentation.

The dakṣiṇā cannot be asked for and cannot be bargained over. The pāṇḍās I observed take the money from the devotee’s hand and immediately pocket it. The money cannot be counted in front of the pilgrim. Also, the pāṇḍā is not expected to get any money from his pilgrims, unless the rites are completed. As shown in § 2, the day before the 1008 lotus flower offering, Himangshu, his five pilgrims and I went to see how the opening of the lotus flowers was progressing. An enormous bulk of flowers stood before us. Seeing that, one of the pilgrims spontaneously toke out his wallet and offered Himangshu some money. Himangshu refused to take any money. He was adamant.

The same applies to the dakṣiṇā given to a pujārī by a fellow-Brahman. Bhagavati Sarma (see chapter 2 § 2), a pujārī with whom I discussed the matter, told me that if he counted the money in front of his fellow-Brahman or bargain over the dakṣiṇā, he, not the giver, would get the morally negative effects of such an exchange.

According to a widespread custom, dakṣiṇā should not be a round figure; rather it ought to be a “plus-one-figure”, like 1001 Rupees, 1501 Rupees or 15001 Rupees, for example. Many pilgrims give their pāṇḍās such plus-one dakṣiṇās, but not all. It can be noted incidentally that the price of

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346 I do not know to what extent this is observed when a dakṣiṇā is given by a Kamakhyan pāṇḍā to a Kamakhyan pujārī.
the tickets for the *darśana* (see § 2) have been set according to this custom; these are the 101 rupee queue and the 501 rupee queue.

Last, but not least, the pilgrim giving the *dakśinā* is supposed to kneel at his *pāṇḍā*’s feet. The latter, for his part, is expected to take the money and bless the genuflecting pilgrim, by touching his head and back. The complex of behaviours related to *dakśinā* - it cannot be asked for, bargained over or counted, it ought to be a “plus-one-figure” figure, it involves the kneeling down of the pilgrim and the blessing on the part of the *pāṇḍā* - highlights the tendency to differentiate it from an ordinary monetary transaction. In the Hindu worldview, the necessity of undertaking a monetary transaction in the religious sphere becomes problematic. This monetary transaction cannot be simply understood as a business of some kind. Rather, it needs to be reinterpreted, in order to be distinguished from regular, worldly monetary exchanges. A way to do this is to magnify the value of the monetary transaction concerned: the latter is no longer simply a fee for the priest, but acquires a much wider role. Malamoud (1976) shows how Sanskrit texts insist that giving the *dakśinā* is indeed an essential part of the Vedic sacrifice (*yajñā*):

> ...il faut payer la *dakśinā*, parce-que sans *dakśinā*, le sacrifice est incomplet, et qu’un sacrifice incomplet est un sacrifice nul\(^{347}\).

The *yajamāna* who does not give the *dakśinā* nullifies the value of the *yajña*\(^{348}\). This is consistent with what one of the Bhattacharya (see chapter 2, § 2) gurus told me. During a long conversation we came to talk about the *dikṣā* (initiation); I asked him whether the money he receives from those who want to take the *dikṣā* from him is fixed or not. He strongly stated that he cannot ask for any amount from the *dikṣita*-to-be. It is up to the latter to give

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\(^{347}\) Malamoud 1976: 165.

\(^{348}\) *Ibidem:* 164.
what he can. This is in line with what Kamakhyan pāṇḍās and pujāris state. At the same time, he strongly asserted that the dikṣā cannot be given, if the guru concerned does not receive a presentation from the dikṣita-to-be. “Dikṣā cannot be free”, he firmly stated.

If many Sanskrit texts magnify the role of the daksīṇā, the latter is also seen as highly problematic. According to Heesterman:

The crucial point is the Brahmin’s acceptance of the sacrificer’s food and gifts, by which he is tied to his patron. Already for the Vedic ritualists, where one would least expect it, this is an insoluble problem. Thus an authoritative text considers the acceptance of daksīṇā tantamount to eating what falls from the giver’s head [...]. The king is represented in no uncertain way as an utter abomination, whose food and gifts take away the Brahmin’s tejas [splendour], and service with the king is ruled out for the proper Brahmin.

An “insoluble contradiction” marks the Brahman. On one side he should preside over the rites demanded by his yajāmana - the king or any other patron. On the other side, the presentations, which he must accept at the end of these rites, impoverish his status. The perfect Brahman should not be a priest for others. What emerges from my fieldwork is rather different. Kamakhyan Brahmins did not spontaneously state that a problem is inherent in receiving the daksīṇā itself; rather, they affirm that the daksīṇā cannot be asked for or bargained over. As Malamoud has shown, the presentation given to a priest cannot be understood as a regular payment, because it aims at “buying” something which does not belong to this world, being the favour of the Goddess, or salvation.

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349 The guru also stressed that people of few means ask him to give them the dikṣā, making it clear that they would not be able to give large sums of money. Even in these cases, he feels bound to give the dikṣā to these people.

While on fieldwork I heard allegations that the Brahmans of the Bagalā Mukhi\textsuperscript{351} temple have the habit of bargaining over the \textit{dakṣiṇā} they receive from their pilgrims. All the people who talked about this to me (both pilgrims and Kamakhyans) expressed their contempt regarding for this behaviour. I do not have the means to confirm these allegations, nor to refute them. However, it should be noted that the Bagalā Brahmans (some twenty individuals) constitute a group of very influential Nananbardeuris.

The Goddess Bagalā is thought to be extremely powerful. During informal conversations, a Bagalā Brahman in his thirties used the word “dangerous” to describe Bagalā and Her \textit{pūjā}, which can be performed for different purposes, from the resolving of land ownership issues up to the problems due to \textit{bhūt-pret}s (evil non-human beings\textsuperscript{352}). Bagalā, linked to Maṅgal (Mars) and to Tuesdays, is thought to favour any kind of business and thus several businessmen offer \textit{pūjās} for Her. Since She is also believed to be able to kill someone’s enemy, She is worshipped by politicians as well. The Bagalā Brahman quoted above explicitly compared the \textit{pūjā} for Bagalā with the one for Kāmākhyā: the former is far more threatening, while the latter is, in the Brahman’s words, “easy”.

Bagalā temple lies in the jungle, at a walking distance of some twenty minutes from the Kāmākhyā Temple. Different individuals maintain that many Assamese ministers and other VIPs render unofficial visits to the Bagalā temple at night. According to a source, VIPs visiting this temple sponsor lavish \textit{tāntrika pūjās} and indulge in vast consumption of alcohol and in sexual intercourse. The same source maintains that these visitors habitually give the Bagalā Brahmans large \textit{dakṣiṇās}\textsuperscript{353}. Intrigued, I asked some Bagalā Brahmans about their ministers and VIPs. They openly confirmed that the latter do visit their temple at night; one Bagalā Brahman even spoke to me about this matter spontaneously. None of them, however,

\textsuperscript{351} From now on I will refer to the Goddess by the first part of Her name, namely “Bagalā”. This choice corresponds to the local use in Kamakhyan parlance.

\textsuperscript{352} See chapter 2, § 1.

\textsuperscript{353} It needs to be mentioned that in 2013 huge works were in progress to enlarge the Bagalā temple. I have been told that three well-off devotees of the Goddess sponsored the works.
said what actually happens during these pūjās, nor did they mention the financial aspects of these activities.

For obvious reasons, I did not have the possibility to observe these pūjās directly. On the basis of the data collected, I assume that the circle around the Bagalā Brahmans results in a quite autonomous power, an enclave, in the framework of the temple complex. Dominique Baur (see chapter 2) gave me an interesting hint regarding this issue. It is reasonable to assume that the (alleged) greed of the Bagalā Brahmans is fuelled by the belief, shared by VIP devotees and Brahmans, that the Goddess Bagalā and Her pūjā are extremely powerful. A rite performed to have one’s political opponent defeated or one’s profitable business become even more profitable, is far “heavier” than an “easy” rite intended to, say, safeguard one’s family's health and prosperity. In other words, the Bagalā Brahmans are aware that they can provide the pilgrim with a highly valuable “product”, which is not available elsewhere in the temple complex. And a highly valuable product is usually sold at a high price.

6. 5. “They are making business with God”.

In 2013 I visited one of the deodhāis (possessed dancers354), who lives in Guwahati. We talked about different matters, including possession and his devotion to the Goddess. Usually cool in his manner, he suddenly became bitter when the conversation turned to the Brahmans of the temple complex. With a disgusted expression on his face, he repeatedly told me that nowadays the Brahmans sell their lands and use the money to build new buildings. He

354 On the deodhāis see chapter 2, § 3. On the festival revolving around deodhāni dance see chapter 5, § 4.
pointed out a specific plot, lying near his house and told me the name of the Brahman the plot used to belong to, before it was sold.

The family of this deodhāi owns some lands on the outskirts of Guwahati; his reply to my question “will you sell your land?” was extremely severe (my translation from Assamese):

Never! How will I feed my children then? What will my boy eat?

As far as I know, a major portion (if not the entirety) of the lands owned by the deodhāi’s family are not used for cultivation. Owning some land is not seen by the deodhāi (only) in practical terms; rather it has a much wider significance: a plot of land seems to be not only the property of a family, but also an essential means for the latter’s subsistence (even when the land is not actually cultivated). Consequently, in the eyes of the deodhāi, the Brahmans selling their lands are unscrupulous and their behaviour only shows their greed.

While the deodhāi and I were wandering around in his quarter, I was introduced to some Nepali neighbours of his and chatted for some time with them. Eating a Nepali delicacy, made from goat intestines, I mentioned my research on the priesthood of the Kamākhyā temple complex. As I would have expected, the comments were harsh: the Brahmans were accused of greed and avarice. One of the Nepalis came out with a lapidary sentence:

They are making business with God.

I happened quite often to hear inhabitants of Guwahati making sharp accusations against the Brahmans of the Kāmākhyā temple complex, who were perceived as a uniform, homogeneous entity. Usually two sets of criticisms go hand in hand. The Brahmans are invariably depicted as incredibly greedy; they only run after money. At the same time, it is said, they do not deserve the advantages they receive (money, respect, etc.), because they systematically neglect daily prayers and other religious activities or, at best, they perform them carelessly. Thus, they do not have the power (śakti)
which is precisely what is needed for a sound performance of the rites (public and private). In other words, their deviant behaviour makes them unfit for and unworthy of their function.

Van der Veer, Parry and Lochtefeld report the harsh criticisms levelled at Brahmans of Ayodhya, Benares and Haridwar. Greed is the most common accusation and is consistent with the bitter negotiations going on between Brahmans and priests in these pilgrimage places - in the Kāmākhyā temple complex, as has been shown, this does not happen. As Heesterman's words show (§ 4), the fact that a Brahman acts as priest for others is problematic. Fuller comments on Heesterman's words and briefly describes a second explanation of the problem inherent in priesthood:

...some informants say that, because the home can be kept cleaner and purer [...] than the temples, which are visited by people of all castes, public worship is devalued in comparison with worship performed in their homes by ordinary Brahmans, who thus [...] rank above priests. In a similar vein, one Brahman working in the Temple, who is not a priest, said that priests have the pure bodies of Brahmans, except for their hands, which are continually polluted by the touch of non-Brahmans when they are working in the Temple[^55].

Devotees of the Goddess Kāmākhyā do not spontaneously talk of a difficulty inherent in undertaking priesthood. Instead, the problem, in their eyes, is that being a priest entails respect for rules and the assiduous practice of spiritual exercises. This is precisely what the Brahmans of the temple complex are said not to do. Busy in moneymaking, they desert their duties; and that is why they do not have the power needed to perform rites properly. To sum up, the problem is not that a Brahman is a priest, but that he is an unworthy priest.

What agitates these critics is the socially and religiously sanctioned opportunity given to a Brahman to manage other people’s religious needs.

[^55]: Fuller 1984: 53.
and to make money out of it. With a different nuance, it is again the remuneration of the priest which is problematic.

A recurrent idea among Brahmans and devotees is that the power of the Goddess and of the entire temple complex is slowly fading away. A Bardeuri pāṇḍā of my knowledge once spontaneously complained about the extensive number of rites going on in the temple complex (my translation from Assamese):

It's too much! "Om svāhā, om svāhā". Every day so many pūjās going on at the same time! How can Mother Goddess accept all this? This side "Om svāhā, om svāhā", that side "Om svāhā, om svāhā". Too much! I don't agree with this.

To paraphrase the Bardeuri, the fact that a large number of private rites take place in the temple complex cannot but diminish the significance of each single rite. According to my observations, this Bardeuri does not have many pilgrims; also he is frequently employed by other Bardeuris to sit in the sanctum on the latter's pālā-days. It is tempting to assume that this man, now in his early fifties, was not able to adapt to the developments taking place in the temple complex. Seeing his fellow pāṇḍās acquiring new pilgrims and making considerable gains out of priesthood cannot but disturb his feelings.

Apart from this man, other people affirm that the power of the Goddess and of Her servants - the two things are closely intertwined - are presently diminishing. Talking with the Bhattacharya guru mentioned above, I asked him to tell me the names of his father and grandfathers. He did so; then spontaneously, he added: “They were more powerful than us”. I must have looked surprised; the guru went on to say that his ancestors used to engage in demanding meditative practices and were dedicating much of their time and energies to that. By contrast he, in his own eyes, does not do the same. He told me that he has spent much of his energy in providing his children with a good education, following them step by step.
When I was a boy, we were all studying in the same room. But with my son it was different. Everyday I used to ask him: “Did you do your homework? Can I help you with that?”

Busy with this and other activities which are not connected to the religious sphere, he was not able to devote much time to spiritual practices. His posture is consistent with the following, widespread idea, which I heard from many Hindus, both Kamakhyans and pilgrims. To put it into a single sentence, it could be said that for Hindus religion is demanding. A pious man who sincerely devotes most of his time and energies to religious practices gets the benefit of it; he acquires śakti and advances in his spiritual path. Religious practices are deemed to be challenging and need to be undertaken with constancy and perseverance. Those who are mostly busy in other activities (studies, work, business and so on) are not able to devote much time to religious practices and thus do not develop as far as the religious sphere is concerned. Kamakhyan priests too expressed similar views: in their eyes, the fact of being involved in family life and house-care alienates them from spiritual exercise and uplift. Ideally, a man should engage as much energy and time as possible in demanding religious practices; daily prayers are deemed to be only the minimum requirements for a pious man.

As has been shown in chapter 5, § 1, all my interlocutors agree that the number of householder pilgrims has been rising over the last twenty years. A prosperous business has arisen to attend to pilgrims’ practical demands in the Kāmākhyā temple complex. Today a number of Brahmans, both Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris, (partly) earn their livelihood by running guesthouses, restaurants and shops for pilgrims.

Many Brahmans destroy or enlarge their old Assamese-style houses and build concrete buildings: the number of new constructions in the village is impressive. These buildings tend to be of three or four storeys, because the plots of land one has or can buy from fellows villagers are quite small. The family starts living in the new building when the latter is not yet completed and keep on adding storeys as financial means permit. In most cases, some
rooms are intended for pilgrims, while the family occupies another portion of the building.

Many ṭaṅḍā combine the daksīṇās that they receive from their pilgrims with what they earn from the guesthouses, restaurants and shops they run. Other Brahmans, who are not engaged in any form of priesthood, provide pilgrims with various facilities. Now in his forties, Krishna Sarma (pseudonym) is a Bardeuri and does not practise priesthood. Rather, he is in business. When I first arrived in Kamakhya Dham in 2008, he had just laid the foundations of a new, comparatively large building. Since I was living in the same neighbourhood, I have watched this building growing day by day. For Ambuvaci Mela 2012, the ground floor of the building, including some six rooms, was ready; each room had an en-suite bathroom and basic furniture, that is, a bed. Not being a ṭaṅḍā, Krishna had no connection to pilgrims. One of his relatives, who is a ṭaṅḍā, was managing Krishna’s building by accommodating his own pilgrims as well as those of others there.

The present development is not seen with a positive eye by everyone. Kamakhyanas and devotees affirm that previously great ascetics used to visit the temple complex in order to engage in arduous forms of meditation. Today, according to my interlocutors, they have stopped doing so because “the way is blocked for them”. Although some Kamakhyanas and pilgrims enthusiastically look at the “development” which is in progress, others assert that the ongoing changes may gradually dilute the power of the divine presence. As an Aghori Nath in his thirties put it (my translation from Bengali):

Now Kāmākhyā became a tourist place. Slowly slowly God (Bhagavān) will go away from here.
6. 6. The outsider Brahmans.

The Kāmākhya temple complex is the largest and most visited pilgrimage place of Lower Assam. Consequently, as a result of their hereditary rights, the Kamakhyan Brahmans can be said to be an élite; they need other Brahmins to assist them in various ways. This explains why the demand for Brahman manpower is so high in the Kāmākhya temple complex. It is no surprise that young unemployed Brahmins from nearby areas would see it as a possible opportunity to (partly) earn their liveling. Brahmins who come from outside the Nilachal work in the Kāmākhya temple complex as well as in Kamakhyan households with different roles. I intend to focus my analysis mainly on two individuals: one of the Brahmans performing the saṁskāras demanded by pilgrims, and a cook.

Many parties of pilgrims come to the Kāmākhya Temple in order to have their marriages and other saṁskāras performed. Marriage is probably the most frequent one; I also observed several muṇḍāns (the ritual first cutting of a child’s hair) and upanayam. Three simple pavilions, situated within the Temple campus, are the location where these rites are performed (see photo 24). On particularly auspicious days, parties of pilgrims queue up outside the pavilions, awaiting their turn. Saṁskāras performed in the Temple are generally deemed to be cheap. It is difficult to ascertain the economic conditions of the pilgrim parties who come to the Kāmākhya Temple to have their saṁskāras performed. Some of them are extremely poor, whereas others seem to live in less difficult conditions. In any case, it

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356 The Sanskrit name of this saṁskāra is cūḍākarana. In Kamakhyan parlance it is designated by the term muṇḍān. It is reasonable to assume that the latter is linked to Assamese muṇḍa meaning the head or the skull (Bronson 1867: s. v.). Muṇḍa exists in Sanskrit; Monier-Williams (2005: s. v.) renders it as follows: “...a man with a shaven head, bald-headed man [...]”. Kamakhyan parlance has an alternative name for this saṁskāra: culikāṭ, whose literal meaning is “hair-cut”.

357 I still remember the tears of a man in his fifties, who, while his daughter’s marriage was performed, desperately told me that he could only afford to treat his guests to a simple meal in one of the restaurants near the Temple. It needs to be noted too that some of the Brahmins performing these rituals are extremely careless; they utter mantras in the most rapid possible way, while giving rude commands to the pilgrims about what needs to be
is a fact that wealthy devotees of the Goddess Kāmākhyā do not have their saṁskāras performed in Her Temple.\footnote{While on fieldwork, I used to attend ārati almost every evening and to spend sometime in the Temple after ārati was over. In this way I became familiar with a number of devotees, residing in Guwahati, who render frequent visits to the Kāmākhyā Temple. One among them is an educated well-off businessman, in his late twenties. He got married in 2012. Invited to his joint family’s house for dinner few months later, I was shown the wedding photos album and got an idea of the luxurious celebrations and rituals taking place on the occasion of his marriage. What is important for the present purpose, however, is that this man rented a hall in Guwahati for his marriage. Though a strong devotee of the Goddess Kāmākhyā – he visits the Temple several times a week - he would have never arranged for his marriage to be performed in Her Temple.}

Kamakhyans (both Brahmans and non-Brahmans) never use the Temple pavilions to have their saṁskāras performed, either. Instead, they arrange for their saṁskāras to be performed in their homes. Some Kamakhyans rent one of the newly built, fashionable marriage halls situated in Kamakhya Dham (owned by other Kamakhyans) for few days for the purpose.\footnote{I know of two Kamakhyan women (a Bardeuri and a non-Brahman) who did not have their weddings performed in their homes; instead their weddings took place in a temple outside the Nilachal. In both cases, that happened because the groom was not entirely accepted by their families.} While I was observing and taking photos of an Assamese marriage being performed in one of the Temple pavilions, a young Bardeuri told me:

These are small marriages, cheap ones. When my uncle gets married in few months, you’ll see what a big marriage looks like.

Kamakhyans have their saṁskāras performed by their hereditary purohits. The latter (a few families) live in Kamakhya Dham. It should be noted these purohits only serve the Kamakhyans; they never perform the saṁskāras for the pilgrims, which take place in the Temple pavilions.

Brahmans who come from outside Nilachal carry out the pilgrims’ saṁskāras. Bardeuris never perform these rites; a Bardeuri of my acquaintance once told me with a superior air: “We don’t have time for these things”. Bardeuris look condescendingly at the saṁskāras for pilgrims and at done next. Of course, the Brahmans’ arrogance has to do with the pilgrims’ social and economic status.
the outsider Brahmans who perform them. The image one gets listening to the Bardeuris is the following. The Bardeuris, busy enough with their extremely important tasks – first of all, the public worship of the Goddess Kāmākhya - would have delegated the performance of these cheap saṃskāras to the outsider Brahmans. However, although Bardeuris do not in practice perform saṃskāras for pilgrims, they are nevertheless involved in them, as will be explained below.

Several Bengali Brahmans perform the saṃskāras for pilgrims. These Brahmans reside in Guwahati and come to the Kāmākhya Temple in order to perform these rites360. I also know an Assamese Brahman in his early thirties who regularly performs these rites. Rakesh (a pseudonym) comes from an Assamese village. For as long as I have known him, he has been renting a room in a Bardeuri house and thus is almost always available in Kamakhyta Dham. From time to time he goes back to his own house, where his parents live. The following pages will be devoted to the analysis of Rakesh's involvement in the temple complex, which started some fifteen years back.

In several cases that I observed, Kamakhyan pāṇḍās guided parties of pilgrims to the Temple pavilions and supervised the performance of the required saṃskāras. That means that pilgrims did not enter in contact directly with the outsider Brahman, but through the action of a Kamakhyan pāṇḍā. The latter entrusted the outsider Brahman with the performance of the saṃskāra and arranged everything which was needed in order to carry out the rite (various offerings, wood for the fire to be lid, etc). However, I am not sure that this is always the case. When I was invited by Rakesh to observe the marriages he was performing, I noticed that some parties of pilgrims came without a Kamakhyan pāṇḍā to the Temple pavilions, where Rakesh alone was waiting for them. No pāṇḍā showed up during the performance of the rites, either; thus I assume that these parties were directly linked to him.

Rakesh eventually got his younger sister married into a Bardeuri family of Kamakhyta Dham. Anand Sarma (a pseudonym), his brother-in-law (the

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360 I do not know whether they perform saṃskāras for pilgrims in other temples as well, or not.
sister's husband) usually advises his pilgrims to perform a kumārī-पूजा (worship of an immature girl), after completing दर्शना. Anand, who is not a pujārī, does not conduct the kumārī-पूजा of his pilgrims himself. The Brahman whose assistance he demands for this purpose is Rakesh. I observed Rakesh conducting several kumārī-पूजा for Anand’s pilgrims. The majority of these rites took place in Anand’s residence itself.

In September 2013 a long-term pilgrim of Anand’s came to the Kāmākhyā temple complex and stayed at the Anand’s place. The pilgrim brought with him a man and his family who were visiting the temple complex for the first time. He was introduced to Anand and became his pilgrim. The “new arrival” told Anand that he wanted a viṣṇu-बिया to be performed for his unmarried daughter. In this case too, Rakesh was required to perform the rite, which took place in the ठाकुर-घर (domestic shrine) of Anand’s house.

Usually, the other outsider Brahmans who perform सांस्कृतिक for the pilgrims are confined exclusively to these activities and are never asked by Bardeuri pāṇḍās to conduct a kumārī-पूजा. Thus, in my view, Rakesh’s cooperation with his brother-in-law can be conveniently labelled as an exception. Bardeuri pāṇḍās, whose pilgrims want a kumārī-पूजा to be performed, usually ask for the assistance of a Bardeuri pujārī, or, if they feel confident enough conduct it themselves. Conversely, there are rites that can be performed exclusively by a Bardeuri pujārī, for example the pūjā (both public and private) for the movable mūrtis. Now, I never observed Rakesh performing any of these major rites. Nor does he take part in the pālā, of

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361 According to the pilgrim, his astrologer had detected some दोष in his daughter's horoscope, which would have led to the premature death of her future husband. The astrologer had recommended the pilgrim to have a viṣṇu-बिया (marriage to Viṣṇu) performed for his daughter. As was explained to me, through the rite the girl had been married to God Viṣṇu, who is, of course, immortal. Thus, she could not become a widow any more and the possibility of her human husband’s premature death had been annulled.

362 See § 2.
course. Thus, even if his case can be said to be exceptional, it does not threaten Bardeuris’ hereditary rights over the Kāmākhyā Temple.

The cooperation between Rakesh and his brother-in-law is surely known by several Bardeuris, especially by those who live in the same neighbourhood. I never heard any negative comments about their cooperation. It is tempting to assume that several factors contribute to make this unusual cooperation acceptable. First, Anand’s family has an excellent reputation in Kamakhya Dham. Second, the cooperation between Rakesh and Anand relates exclusively to the rites demanded by latter’s pilgrims, that is, to the activities of Anand as a pāṇḍā. In constrast, when Anand needs someone to assist him in the sanctum during his pālā-days, he invariably seeks the help of a Bardeuri. Third, Rakesh too has always behaved perfectly in Kamakhya Dham, as does his sister (Anand’s wife) as well.

It needs to be mentioned that a few times, during my latest fieldwork, I met Rakesh in the evening wearing a dhuti, a kurta and shawl. As Kamakhyan do, he only wears these “traditional” clothes when engaged in priestly activities. Rakesh was carrying pūjā materials and walking purposefully. In answer to my curious questions, he quickly said that he was going to the Bagalā temple and that some private pūjā was about to start (see § 4). Thus, I assume that he is sometimes employed there as a helper by the Bagalā Brahmans. As far as I know, Rakesh does not practise any priestly activity outside the Kāmākhyā temple complex. Though he is not a Kamakhyan he earns his entire liveling (or at least the biggest portion of it) from the various activities he undertakes in the Kāmākhyā temple complex.

As soon as I arrived in Kamakhya Dham in June 2012, Rakesh announced to me that he had got engaged to an Assamese Brahman girl and

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363 The reader may find strange it that I point out with emphasis what people actually do not do. However, I chose to do so because I am aware of the intricacy of the materials involved and I want to minimize the risk of being unclear.
364 On the clothing of Kamakhyan Brahmans see chapter 3, § 3.
365 During my latest fieldwork I noticed that Rakesh, who formerly used to wear only red when “in service”, started to wear yellow as well. Yellow is the colour worn by the Bagalā Brahmans (see § 4 of the present chapter). I asked him the reason for this change in his habits, without receiving any consistent answer. However, I am convinced that it has to do with the fact that he started to be involved in the pūjās performed in the Bagalā temple.
that he was going to marry her soon. After some time, as I was starting to
sense the importance of the values linked to one’s place of residence, I asked
him whether he was planning to bring his future wife to Kamakhya Dham or
not. He answered negatively and explained his reasons to me. If he settled in
Kamakhya Dham with his wife, she would be alone at home most of the time,
as he works in the Temple. That would be dangerous for her; he employed
the English word “risk” to express his concern. Thus, his wife would settle in
his own house, where his parents live. She would visit Kamakhya Dham
during festivals. As far as his daily life is concerned, he would continue to
reside in Kamakhya Dham in a rented room in order to be able to work in the
temple complex. He spontaneously went on, adding that in his village his
house is part of a Brahman neighbourhood and used the word “colony” to
describe it. He said proudly: “Unity acche” (there is unity [in the colony]).
Then, I asked him whether there is “unity” in Kamakhya Dham as well. He
answered negatively with a gloomy expression on his face. He said that
Kamakhyan Brahmans are greedy for money (my translation from
Assamese):

They need more and more. They have so much. It’s not enough. They
want more!

This conversation clarifies quite well Rakesh’s sense of belonging and
the concepts and values evocated by the idea of “home”. What is relevant to
the present purpose is that Rakesh feels like a foreigner in Kamakhya Dham,
even though he has been working in the Kāmākhyā temple complex for about
fifteen years in various capacities.

Another class of outsider Brahmans who work in the Kāmākhyā temple
complex are cooks. When Kamakhyan households have a saṃskāra or a pūjā
performed, they employ Brahmans from outside as cooks (see photos 18 and
26). Being invited to countless pūjās and saṃskāras, I met the same cooks
several times and soon became familiar with them. As I was soon to realise,
the same individuals are relied upon frequently, when a saṃskāras or a pūjā
is performed in a Kamakhyan household. Food should not only be prepared,
but also served by Brahmans. Thus along with the cooks, young Brahman boys are hired to serve guests. These people are hired on a daily basis.

Brahmans from outside are frequently employed as cooks when a Kamakhyan household offers a pūjā in one of the temples of the Nilachal. That means that the Brahman cook involved prepares the food, which will be offered to the deities who inhabit that temple.

Throughout my fieldwork I became familiar with Jitu Da 366, an Assamese Brahman living outside Nilachal, who has been working as a cook in the Kāmākhyā temple complex for several years. Since my very first period of fieldwork, out of devotion for the form of Śiva enshrined in the Koṭīlinga temple, Himangshu Sarma has been sponsoring the preparation of prasāda at this temple 367 (see photo 14); this happens once a week, on Monday, the day linked to Śiva. Himangshu meets the cost of the preparation of a large quantity of khiciri, a mixture of rice, lentils, vegetables and (of course) spices. The khiciri is cocked in the temple kitchen. Two dishes are offered Śiva and to Gaṇeśa, and then the food is distributed among the devotees – usually there are about fifty to hundred devotees to be fed. The cook hired to prepare this prasāda has almost always been Jitu Da. Most of the time, Jitu Da not only prepares the food, but also transports it to the sancta and presents it to Śiva and Gaṇeśa. Similarly, Kamakhyan households offering pūjās at the Koṭīlinga temple mainly rely on Jitu Da: on these occasions the latter prepares a wide variety of vegetarian dishes, to be offered to the God Śiva. This is not all. For quite a long time he has been employed to prepare the sweets offered to the Goddess Kāmākhyā at ārati.

Himangshu Sarma, in his early forties, is younger than Jitu and usually calls him “Jitu Da”. On the contrary, Jitu calls Himangshu Sarma by his nickname “Hemen”. Younger people are not supposed to call their seniors simply by their names (or nicknames). Instead, they are expected to add to

366 I am not sure whether “Jitu” is his actual name, or a nickname. “Da” (dā) is the short form of dādā (elder brother). See below.
367 Himangshu Sarma affirms that his custom of offering prasāda in this temple every Monday dates back to 1993. I cannot say whether 1993 is the exact year when he started doing so. However, according to my data, this custom is not at all a recent one.
the older person’s name the word dā; the latter is the abbreviation for dādā, meaning “elder brother”. On the contrary, elders call youngsters by their names (or nicknames). Thus, by calling him “Jitu Da”, Himangshu Sarma shows respect to Jitu. The latter is well known in Kamakhya Dham and generally held in esteem; I never heard a negative commentary about him.

During my most recent fieldwork, Himangshu Sarma consulted Jitu Da’s father, who is an astrologer. In order to do so, Himangshu Sarma hired a car and a driver and went along with his wife and his child to the village where Jitu Da’s father lives. He spent half a day there. The very fact that Himangshu Sarma took the time to consult Jitu Da’s father is significant: it means that Himangshu Sarma acknowledges a certain authority to this man. This surprised me: to the very best of my knowledge, Himangshu Sarma does not consult anyone outside the Kāmākhyā temple complex on religious matters, apart from his guru368. As can easily be imagined, it was Jitu Da who talked to Himangshu Sarma about his father’s knowledge.

At the same time, the fact that Jitu Da is an outsider is meaningful to Himangshu Sarma; the following anecdote will probably clarify the point. As I said in the Introduction, at the beginning of my fieldwork, I was living in a newly constructed building, owned by Himangshu Sarma. The latter lives a few steps away in his ancestors’ house along with his joint family. While I was in Kamakhya Dham in 2011, Himangshu Sarma’s wife left for her parents’ house with their children for some time. For a couple of days Himangshu Sarma cooked for himself and for me – the deal was that I would be given the two main daily meals by him. Then he probably felt lazy and asked Jitu Da to cook his and my dinner. While waiting for the latter to come, Himangshu and I were watching TV in his house. Suddenly Himangshu asked me if I would allow Jitu Da to cook in the room I was renting. He explained his reasons: since Jitu Da is not a Kamakhyan, he did not feel comfortable allowing him to cook in his own place. Of course I agreed. However, Himangshu Sarma’s request sounded strange to me, because he actually

368 On the complex net of guru-ship linking the Kāmākhyā temple complex to other areas of Lower Assam, see chapter 2, § 2.
employs Jitu Da to cook prasāda in Koṭiliṅga temple on his behalf. However, I did not enquire further, because I felt that if I did so, Himangshu Sarma would have interpreted it as unwillingness on my part to agree to his request. I straight away said “Yes, of course”. A point emerges from this episode, which is relevant to the present purpose: the fact that Jitu Da is not a Kamakhyan has its significance for Himangshu Sarma, notwithstanding the well-established relationship between the two men.

Several Kamakhyan Brahmins practising priesthood keep helpers, in order to deal with their different tasks. The two Brahman families I lived with do not employ helpers; thus my data on this point are not abundant. However, a few remarks can be made, based on observations and interviews. Helpers are young unemployed uneducated Assamese Brahmins who come from the villages. According to an informant, helpers assist the Brahman during rituals sponsored by pilgrims and may escort the latter to darśana as well. However, they cannot contact pilgrims on their own.

Young Brahmins from outside the Nilachal are employed as cooks in some Brahman households. As stated in § 3, Pramesh and Deep Sarma employ a young Brahman from the Darrang District to help in the preparation of food in their house. These cooks receive a monthly salary and are lodged and fed by the households they work for.

6. 7. Concluding remarks.

The pāṇḍā is the only person a pilgrim can rely on during his stay at the temple complex. The pāṇḍā takes care of the religious demands of his pilgrims as well as of their practical needs. The relationship is transmitted from father to son on both sides.
It is not easy to disentangle the various elements included among the harsh criticisms made against Kamakhyan Brahmans. As scholarly literature shows, the fact that a Brahman priest needs to be remunerated is problematic in the Hindu worldview. The priest becomes a kind of servant of his patron and eats what comes from the latter's hand. The devotees I talked to did not express any similar idea. Nevertheless, their criticisms regarding the Brahmans concern precisely the economic aspect of the relationship between the latter and the pilgrims. Brahmans are said to be greedy. Blinded by their thirst for money, they neglect their spiritual practices. Although the idea at play is slightly different, it nevertheless stresses the same thorny problem: the fact that a priest needs to be remunerated.

Kamakhyan Brahmans, for their part, do not see a problem in being remunerated. Rather, they strongly affirm that the presentation should be constrained to certain rules. This idea betrays the basic incompatibility of the this-worldly nature of the remuneration presented to a priest – it is money, indeed! - with the transcendence of the religious sphere.

The extensive business which presently flourishes on the Nilachal can only exasperate these ideas. The economic significance of the temple complex is such that it attracts Brahmans from outside the Nilachal. These people are allotted various marginal activities connected to the private cult. The current transformation of the pilgrimage is viewed with suspect by many Kamakhyans and devotees.
PART III

Administrative power
The ongoing dispute. Building collective identities.

It was towards the end of my first fieldwork (2011) that I started to sense the enmity between two groups of Kamakhyans regarding the management of the temple complex. Intrigued, I began to question the people I was familiar with. Their strongly emotional reactions – some of my friends vehemently expressed their contempt towards the opposite party, others told me that I should drop the investigation altogether – made it clear that the issue was of utmost relevance to them. As I was soon to discover, many Kamakhyans were (and are) personally engaged in supporting their party and therefore mobilize their resources (time, energy, money). Some of them provided me with legal documents; in this way, I realized that a seventeen-year-old dispute had been going on between the majority of Bardeuris, who made up the Kamakhya Bardeuri Samaj, and a second “mixed” body, the
Kamakhya Debutter Board\textsuperscript{369}, which brings together individuals of all castes including some influential Bardeuris.

The first aim of this chapter is to analyse the two opposite parties’ stances, that is to say, the way each group builds its own identity, in order to legitimize its posture and to attack that of the opposing party. The chapter also explores a third widespread attitude to the ongoing dispute, which I will call “the neutral alternative”. The focus is not so much on the court case itself as on the way the protagonists position themselves before each other.

\textsection{1} provides a summary of the management of the temple complex during the British period, in order to give historical depth to the present analysis; as will be shown, recurring dynamics can be detected, which are common to the ongoing dispute and to the ones that took place during British rule. \textsection{2} summarizes the significant events taking place during the two dalai-ship terms (1985-1996) prior to the foundation of KDB (1998); according some among my interlocutors, the antagonism between the two parties emerged during this period. The \textsection{3} goes back over these events through the words of two Bardeuris, each one strongly committed to one of the two opposing parties. Taking into consideration their opinions allows the reader to follow the formation of the two contrasted collective identities. The last part of the \textsection{3} surveys the beginning of the dispute (1997) and its development till now. \textsection{3} and \textsection{4} are devoted to the rhetoric each of the two groups employs. As will be shown, the two parties mobilize two sharply different sets of values and build their collective identities thereon. KDB claims to be rooted in “democracy”, because it includes individuals belonging to all castes; by contrast, the Bardeuri Samaj strongly affirms the “customary rights” of the Bardeuris and in particular their exclusive right to elect the Dalais (heads of the temple complex) from among themselves. In \textsection{3} I describe the rhetoric of each of the two parties, with the help of quotations, while in \textsection{4} I analyse the significant elements constituting each of them. \textsection{5} is devoted to the “neutral alternative”, which suggests that the real conflict has been taking place

\textsuperscript{369}To avoid confusion henceforth I will refer to the Kamakhya Bardeuri Samaj with the expression “Bardeuri Samaj” and Kamakhya Debutter Board with the acronym “KDB”.  

within the Bardeuri community. The chapter ends with the ideas expressed by people belonging to the two opposing groups regarding the duration of the dispute (§ 6). As might be expected, they blame one another for the expenses incurred by the dispute.

In the writing of this chapter, I used a number of judicial documents, including several court orders, in order to retrace the steps taken by each of the two parties in the judicial field. I want to clarify that for the present purpose I do not analyse these legal documents in themselves, nor do I compare them with people's opinions. Indeed the latter is my only concern. To put it another way, I extracted important data from judicial documents, but I do not intend to focus my attention on them. I consider people's opinions to be significant data in themselves and I confine my analysis to them. The only written document I analyse is the KDB’s Regulation. Its very nature – the Regulation was drawn up by Kamakhyans and was addressed to and circulated among Kamakhyans - makes it equivalent to a KDB member's speech.

This chapter deals with delicate issues, which are relevant to living people. Some of the individuals I talked to openly asked me not to convey their words to other Kamakhyans. As I did in other chapters, I will conceal the identity of the individuals whom I will quote with pseudonyms. In this chapter I will also refrain from giving any details about these individuals: age, level of education, occupation, place of residence, family composition, etc. In fact describing them would result in the possibility of immediate identification. The only information I will supply to the reader relates to the individual’s caste. In cases where it is significant for the present purpose, I will specify when the interview took place.

The Dalais in charge in 1996 and few other Brahmans who were operating around them will be openly named. These exceptions are due to the absolute necessity of specifying these individuals' public position within the Temple’s administration, in order to understand their actions. For instance, I would need to write "the Bara Dalai in charge in 1996"; this makes
these individuals immediately identifiable, thus rendering the use of pseudonyms completely useless.

Before proceeding, I wish to clarify that I do not support, nor prefer either of the two contending parties.

7.1. Management of the temple complex during the British period.

In 1826 with the treaty of Yandabo the Burmese occupation of Assam came to an end and Assam passed under British control\(^ {370}\). In 1833 the Company's Court of Directors in London adopted the policy of non-interference in religious matters. Consequently, British officials operative in Assam withdrew from the affairs of Assamese temples (including the Kāmākhyā temple complex) and in 1842 the office of *sevācalōā* was abolished\(^ {371}\). *Sevācalōās* had been the main representatives of former Ahom kings in relation to Assamese temples; as far as the Kāmākhyā temple complex is concerned, it appears from some documents that the charge of *sevācalōā* was confined to the Bhattacharyas\(^ {372}\). Dalais were there at the time of Ahom kings as well; in the Kāmākhyā temple complex, as in other Assamese temples, the post of Dalai was restricted to the Bardeuris\(^ {373}\). A judgement of Kolkata High Court (1940) affirms that the Dalai was

\(^{370}\) For the Burmese war and the British intervention against Burmese see Gait (2008, chapter 19). For the first stage of British domination of Assam see Gait (*ibidem*, chapter 20).

\(^{371}\) See Adhikary 2008: 140-144.

\(^{372}\) According to a declaration (1851), signed by the Dalai Ganga Prasad Sarma, during Burmese war, the post of *sevācalōā* was held by one "Parbatia Goswami", that is to say, one of the Bhattacharyas. See *True copy of a letter from Gangaprosad Deb, Daloi to the public of Nilachal Hill having the Temple of a Goddess*: 1. On the Bhattacharyas see chapter 2, § 2.

\(^{373}\) In the majority of Lower Assam temples there are groups of Brahmans called Bardeuri and having prerogatives similar to the ones of the Bardeuris of the Kāmākhyā temple complex.
“appointed or elected” by the Bardeuris and sanctioned by the king or his representative\textsuperscript{374}. It is not entirely clear how administrative power and religious authority were distributed between the Dalais and the Bardeuris on one side and the sevācaloās on the other. What is relevant for our purpose is that with the abolition of the office of sevācaloā, the Dalai is the only remaining office endowed with power. Newly elected Dalais would approach the Deputy Commissioner soon after their election, to have the lands of the temple registered in their name\textsuperscript{375}. It seems that in this regard the Deputy Commissioner’s intervention was much more limited than that of the Ahom king. In fact the Deputy Commissioner did not have the task of approving (or rejecting) the selection made by Bardeuris, but only of recording it.

During the British period, various groups of Kamakhyanas engaged in a series of disputes, the pivot of hostilities being always the access to, and the limits of dalai-ship. The courts deciding over these disputes invariably reaffirmed the exclusive right of Bardeuris to elect the Dalais among themselves and the power of the Dalais to look over the management of the temple complex, in agreement with the Bardeuris.

According to Bronson (1867: s. v.) dalai means “a leading person, a chief artificer, an astrologer”. Adhikary affirms that dalai is derived from dala, (a shrine, a temple). At the same time he also points out that dalai was “a title of a chief of a party of goldsmiths or Mariyās (braziers) or of an astrologer\textsuperscript{376}”. Barua (2011: s. v.) allows both meanings. It seems plausible that the term migrated from one social context to another, being invariably used to designate the leader of a group of individuals practising the same profession.

For the writing of this § I utilized several legal documents, including a judgement dated 1931, arbitrating between a group of non-Brahman Shebaits (headed by one Jibanram Balikata) and the then Dalai, Vishnu Prasad Sarma. This judgement, delivered by the Special Sub-Judge of Assam

\textsuperscript{374} Certified copy of A.I.R. 1940 Calcutta 269. Baroda Kanta Deba Sarma and others v. Bangshi Nath Deba Sarma Bishipathak Bardeuri and others: 2. Ganga Prasad Sarma in the above mentioned letter (ibidem) affirms that he was appointed by one Ahom king.

\textsuperscript{375} Adhikary (1996: 104) affirms that the rule was introduced in 1834.

\textsuperscript{376} Ibidem: 102.
Valley Districts at Guwahati, goes back over the episodes of dispute that had taken place since the beginning of British rule.\footnote{377 See Certified copy of Judgement of the Spl. Sub-Judge, Assam Valley District in Title suit No. 45 of 1927. Jibanram Balikata and others of Kamakhya against Bisnuprasad Sarma Daloi and others of Ditto (1931). I have been using certified copies of this judgement and of the ones deciding over previous disputes. These certified copies are contained in the file of a judgement delivered in 1940 by the High Court of Kolkata (Certified copy of A.I.R. 1940 Calcutta 269. Baroda Kanta Deba Sarma and others v. Bangshi Nath Deba Sarma Bidhipathak Bardeuri and others), examined in § 4. The numeration of the pages reproduced below refers to the one employed by the judgement of 1940.}

In the 1830s a dispute arose between the then Dalais, Ganga Prasad Sarma and his nephew Prananath Sarma (Burhas) on one side and Vishnudutta Sarma on the other. According to a declaration submitted by Ganga Prasad Sarma and Prananath Sarma themselves\footnote{378 On the subgroups Bardeuris categorize themselves in see chapter 3, § 1.}, during the Burmese occupation of Assam, the Ahom king Chandrakanta Singha took shelter “westwards” and required Ganga Prasad Sarma and Prananath Sarma to accompany him, along with the Goddess’s movable icon. During the absence of Ganga Prasad Sarma and Prananath Sarma, the Burmese authorities declared Vishnudutta Sarma Dalai; the latter did not belong to any of the priestly families linked to the temple complex. After the British took control of Assam, Ganga Prasad Sarma and Prananath Sarma returned to the temple complex and were confirmed as Dalais by the Commissioner in charge. The rivalry between them and Vishnudutta Sarma started at this point. The suit resulting from this situation was heard by three Panchayats as well as by British authorities and eventually reached the Sadar Dewani Adalat\footnote{379 True copy of petition of claim of Ganga Prasad Daloi and another before the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup (1836).} of Kolkata, which in 1838 ruled in favor of Ganga Prasad Sarma and Prananath Sarma:

\[\text{\begin{footnotesize}
\[\text{\footnotesize ibidem: 1. According to Adhikary (2008: 133) king Chandrakanta Singha took shelter in the Company’s territory, that is in the present day Goalpara District.}
\[\text{\footnotesize 381 The Sadar Dewani Adalat (Supreme Court of Revenue) was established at Kolkata in 1793 by the British Parliament.}
\end{footnotesize}}\]
...it is clear that (i) the ancestors of the appellants [Ganga Prasad Sarma and Prananath Sarma] used to hold the post of Shevaity [dalai-ship] since antiquity during the time of by-gone Rajahs of Assam and (ii) that save and except the five houses of Brahmins [the Bardeuris] to whose circle the appellants as well belong - none else had the power of touching (the Goddess) and (iii) that the plaintiff [Vishnudutta Sarma] does not belong to their circle [...]...the mere absence of the appellants through fear of life [...] cannot be a ground for deprivation of the appellants from their own Mourousi Haqq (hereditary ancestral rights). And the fact of the appointment of the plaintiff to that post which fall vacant through the necessity of the absence of the appellants together with their ancestors and posterity shall not turn out to be an obstacle, in the matter of the appellants regaining their rights, at the time of their incoming (or reappearance).

Ganga Prasad Sarma and Prananath Sarma attached to their declaration a list, containing the names of their (alleged) ancestors who (allegedly) held the office of Dalai during the time of the Ahom kings. Accepting this list, the Sadar Dewani Adalat of Kolkata validated the genuineness of Ganga Prasad Sarma’s bloodline. At Ganga Prasad Sarma’s death, his brother, Durga Prasad Sarma became Dalai (not without some turmoil). Afterwards the charge was transmitted to Durga Prasad Sarma’s heirs up to the 1940s. This family came to be known as “Bara Dalai Ghar” (bara dalai ghar, the House of the Major Dalai). Durga Prasad Sarma’s grandson, Vishnu Prasad Sarma, was the last member of this family to hold the post of Dalai; he died some time before

382 Here this term is used to point out exclusively dalai-ship. At the time of writing the term “Shebaits” embraces all the people having hereditary tasks and rights connected to the temple complex, including Brahmans and non-Brahmans. Since this use of the term is the current one, I have conformed to it throughout the thesis. On the term “Shebaits” see chapter 1, § 5.

383 The suit was instituted in 1930 by Vishnudutta Sarma. Later on the Commissioner dismissed his suit. Vishnudutta submitted a petition to the Governor General, who delegated the matter to the Commissioner. The latter thought that the case was worthy of retrial and sent it to the Sadar Dewani Adalat. At this Ganga Prasad Sarma and Prananath Sarma (the appellants) filed the above-mentioned declaration in support of their (alleged) hereditary right to dalai-ship.

384 Certified copy of Decree of the Sudder Dewani Adalat of Calcutta in Suit No. 251 of 1838: 12.
The Sadar Dewani Adalat’s decree confirmed the existence and legitimacy of the five groups of Bardeuris, who throughout the suit are called “Pandas”. From this moment onwards, the courts arbitrating over disputes among Kamakhyans will invariably confirm the legitimacy of the Bardeuris as the Dalais’ only electors vis à vis the other Shebaits. On the other hand the internal balance of power within the Bardeuri community will be subjected to significant modifications.

In the 1850s a dispute took place, which eventually sealed the entry of a new Bardeuri family into the political arena of the temple complex. The disputed election of Krishnakanta Sarma (a Deka) as joint Dalai was questioned by the then Dalai, Durga Prasad Sarma. The two rivals eventually came to an agreement and Krishnakanta Sarma held the post of Dalai. Since Ganga Prasad Sarma and Prananath Sarma’s tenure (1830s) there had always been two Dalais in charge at the same time. While Ganga Prasad Sarma’s post was transmitted to his brother, the second post had a very turbulent history and kept passing from hand to hand. However, at the death of Krishnakanta Sarma, his son Abhoya Kanta became Dalai (1893). This family came to be known as “Horu Dalai Ghar” (horu dalai ghar, the House of the Minor Dalai). The two posts (Bara Dalai and Horu Dalai) can be said to have been quasi-hereditary ones, because succession to the posts, although based on bloodline, invariably needed to be ratified by the Bardeuris, through elections.

The Special Sub-Judge’s judgement of 1931 (one of my main sources, see above) comments on the dispute that took place in the 1850s. It affirms that to strengthen his position, Durga Prasad Sarma tried to buy the support of non-Brahman Shebaits, “by executing an Ekrarnama [agreement] in their

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385 On the Bara Dalai Ghar see chapter 2, § 2.
386 Prior to this, in 1854-55 a dispute took place, which again questioned the office of Dalai. It was affirmed that the Bardeuris and only they had the right to elect the Dalai among themselves.
387 According to a judgement delivered by Kolkata High Court in 1940 (Certified copy of A.I.R. 1940 Calcutta 269. Baroda Kanta Deba Sarma and others versus Bangshi Nath Deba Sarma Bidhipathak Bardeuri and others: 3) before the Burmese war there existed only one post of Dalai. It seems likely that Ganga Prasad Sarma himself initiated the joint post and handed it over to his nephew to settle internal conflicts in his own family.
favour\textsuperscript{388}. This is indeed a strategy which I frequently detected throughout the disputes taking place in the British period (see below).

In 1872 six Bardeuris instituted a suit in the Court of the Deputy Commissioner “in their capacity as Bardeoris for delivery of the accounts from 1262 to 1277 B. S. [Bengali Saka Era, corresponding to 1865-1870]\textsuperscript{389}” against the then Dalais, Durga Prasad Sarma and Krishnakanta Sarma. At the same time a group of Nananbardeuris and non-Brahman Shebaits applied to be added as parties and affirmed that “they alone were competent to take accounts from the Dalois and not the Bardeoris”. The dispute was settled in favor of the Bardeuris. According to the Special Sub-Judge’s judgement of 1931:

It will appear from this litigation that in pursuance of a combination between the then Dalois and the non-Bardeoris Shebaits, an attempt was made to shake off the yoke of the Bardeoris (5 families of leading priests). This attempt failed, and the powers and privileges of the Bardeoris as sole stewards were confirmed and consolidated in respect of the Kamakhya endowments\textsuperscript{390}.

The settling of this dispute strengthened the position of the Bardeuris as a group vis-à-vis the Dalais. It was affirmed that:

...the office of the Daloi is not a hereditary office, but elective and the right of election is in the hand of the Bardeoris [...]. The Bardeuris, as a class, have a right to watch over the administration of the Temple lands, and protect such founds from waste, and that the Dalois are, so to speak, their (the Bardeoris’) agents in this matter\textsuperscript{391}.

\textsuperscript{389} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{390} Ibidem: 216.
\textsuperscript{391} Ibidem.
In 1874 an attempt was made to acquire Bardeuris’ rights via a female line of descent, which was rejected\textsuperscript{392}.

In 1880 Durga Prasad Sarma died and his son, Guru Prasad Sarma, was appointed Dalai by the majority of the Bardeuris. On this occasion, a group of non-Brahman Shebaits filed a petition, “claiming that the right of election must be exercised by all Shebaits, Brahmans and Sudras, collectively\textsuperscript{393}”. This petition was rejected and the election of Guru Prasad Sarma was confirmed\textsuperscript{394}.

Finally, the dispute settled in 1931 arose when a group of non-Brahman Shebaits, headed by Jibanram Balikata\textsuperscript{395}, instituted a suit against the then Dalais, Vishnu Prasad Sarma and Abhoyakanta Sarma (who died in 1930, during the pendency of the suit). The lawsuit can be summarized as follows\textsuperscript{396}. The British do not interfere with the affairs of the temple complex; Bardeuris do not really supervise the Dalais’ work; and non-Brahman Shebaits, from their side, cannot help the situation, because they have no part in the management. Thus, the lawsuit affirms, “the Daloi enjoys supreme and unrestrained authority in the management of the Temple”. Uncontrolled, the Dalais misuse the power they have and the result is “entirely unsatisfactory”: the lawsuit goes on to describe how the temples are in very poor condition, although the income from pilgrims’ donations is considerable. As was to be expected, the Dalais rejected all accusations made against them. What is relevant for our purpose, however, is that the court reasserted the Bardeuris’ supremacy, on the basis of the conviction that this custom represented the tradition:

The name “Bardeori” is not a new invention or coinage, as sought to be made out at the trial by the plaintiff’s side [Jibanram Balikata]. We find

\textsuperscript{392} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{393} Ibidem: 217.
\textsuperscript{394} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{395} Balikatas are non-Brahman Shebaits. They are entrusted with the killing of the animals to be offered to the deities. See chapter 2, § 1.
\textsuperscript{396} See Certified copy of judgement of the Spl. Sub-Judge, Assam Valley District in Title suit No. 45 of 1927. Jibanram Balikata and others of Kamakhya against Bispurprasad Sarma Daloi and others of Ditto: 203-204.
the word “bardeori” used in an old copper-plate which is produced in original at trial [...]. It was dated 1686 Sak [1764] and it purported to evidence the grant of some Brahmottar\textsuperscript{397} lands by king Rajeswar Singha to the ancestors of Bishnuprasad Daloi. These 5 families of Bardeoris were also loosely called Pandas in the ancient times, as will appear from the documents of the time of Assam Rajas and earliest British documents after the annexation of Assam [...]. In a Parwana which the Commissioner of Assam addressed to the managing Bardeoris in 1827, they were not addressed by name but only as [...] 5 Pandas of Kamakhya Dham. This expression “5” gives the entire key of the Scheme of Kamakhya management; “5” did not express heads of men but technically the group of managing Bardeoris who came out of “5” original stocks [...]. On the other hand [...] the certified copy of the Brahmottar grant by Gauri Singha Raja in 1709 Sak [1787], to a Chandipathak\textsuperscript{398} Brahmin of Kamakhya showed, that such Brahmins were never styled as Bardeoris or Pandas\textsuperscript{399}.

Whatever the situation may have been before the arrival of the British, it seems clear that the courts contributed to the solidification of the power of the Bardeuris as a group. As elsewhere in India, the courts settling lawsuits among religious functionaries thought that it was their task to conform to the “tradition” of the religious institution concerned\textsuperscript{400}. Courts upheld the idea that it was Bardeuris’ exclusive right to elect the Dalais and always adhered to this idea. The 1858 dispute is revealing: that one of the Dalais was opposed to the election of a second, joint Dalai did not matter. The joint Dalai was legitimate because he had been elected by the Bardeuris. Also, the courts contributed to the creation of an unbridgeable distance between Bardeuris on one side and the rest of the Shebaits on the other.

\textsuperscript{397} The term brahmottara indicates a piece of land granted by a king to a Brahman temple priest. On the different types of land grants see chapter 3, § 3.

\textsuperscript{398} Chandipathaks are classified as Nananbardeuri. See chapter 3, § 5.

\textsuperscript{399} Certified copy of Judgement of the Spl. Sub-Judge, Assam Valley District in Title suit No. 45 of 1927, Jibanram Balikata and others of Kamakhya against Bishnuprasad Sarma Daloi and others of Ditto: 212.

\textsuperscript{400} See chapter 3, § 3.
One more recurring dynamic needs to be highlighted. In the 1858 dispute the Dalai in charge opposes the election of a second Dalai; in the 1872 dispute the two Dalais look for a way to get rid of the Bardeuris’ power. Both these conflicts originated within the Bardeuri community; and in both cases the contending Bardeuris resorted to the Nananbardeuris and to the non-Brahman Shebaits to strengthen their position (but met with the courts’ refusal). This is, mutatis mutandis, what happened at the beginning of the ongoing dispute. In the most recent dispute (1931), however, the judgement does not suggest that the origin of the enmity resides in the Bardeuri community; the latter responds cohesively to a threat which seemingly comes from the non-Brahman Shebaits.

At the death of Abhoyakanta Sarma (1930) a dispute arose among Bardeuris to designate his successor. This dispute, which eventually resulted in the widening of the access to dalai-ship beyond the limits of the two Dalai Ghars, is analyzed in § 4.


In 1985 two Dalais were elected from among the Bardeuris401. The Bara Dalai was a Deka, named Jnanada Prasad Sarma; the Horu Dalai was a Bidhipathak, named Paran Chandra Sarma. Neither of them was new to dalai-ship. Jnanada Prasad Sarma had been Horu Dalai for one term, at some time

401 This § is based on several sources: judicial documents, informal conversations and on semi-structured interviews I conducted with two individuals, each one strongly committed to one of the opposed parties. The statements of these two individuals fit with each other in many respects and thus allow the reconstruction of the main moves undertaken by each of the two parties. By contrast, it will be shown how they diverge regarding the motivations they detect beyond these moves.
in the period between 1970 and 1977\textsuperscript{402}; Paran Chandra Sarma had been Horu Dalai between 1977 and 1985\textsuperscript{403}. In both cases, the Bara Dalai had been Pramath Nath Sarma, a Hota, who held the position for some twenty years.

According to the five-year term rule\textsuperscript{404}, in 1991 new elections took place: Jnanada Prasad Sarma and Paran Chandra Sarma were re-elected. Thus, the two men held the position together for eleven years, from 1985 to 1996. During their two subsequent terms, a number of structures were established within the Temple campus. Such innovations met with sharp criticism on the part of the Shebaits, including many Bardeuris. Protests took place and the relations between the Dalais and the Bardeuris deteriorated.

Before proceeding, I want to clarify that the focus of my analysis is mainly on Jnanada Prasad Sarma: according to data, he and his family were involved in the conflicts occurring during and after his tenures. As far as my knowledge goes, the role played by Paran Chandra Sarma was less important\textsuperscript{405}.

Questioning people about Jnanada Prasad Sarma did not clear up my doubts. Instead, a new intriguing element started to arouse my curiosity: many Bardeuris opposed to KDB affirmed that towards the end of his second tenure, Jnanada Prasad Sarma, then in his eighties, was not entirely sound of mind. Before giving these statements deeper scrutiny, I wish to investigate Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s life before 1985. The following information comes from semi-structured interviews held with Bharati Prasad Sarma, Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s eldest son.

Jnanada Prasad Sarma was born between 1913 and 1915, the youngest of five brothers. His eldest brother and the next one were pujārīs. His father arranged Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s marriage at a tender age with a Brahman girl from Kamakhya Dham; the couple had five sons and three daughters. Jnanada Prasad Sarma never practised priesthood. He studied at Presidency

\textsuperscript{402} It in unclear which years their term exactly covers.

\textsuperscript{403} According to a declaration signed by Paran Chandra Sarma, elections due in 1982, took place in 1985.

\textsuperscript{404} Since 1970 a term of five years is applied to dalai-ship, which formerly was a lifelong post. A committee of Bardeuris was responsible for this decision.

\textsuperscript{405} I do not intend this affirmation to be definitive; further researches may throw more light on this point.
College in Kolkata and obtained an M.A. in History; later on he got a B.L. degree from Kolkata University. Having concluded his studies, he worked as a history teacher at Handique Girls’ College in Guwahati. He eventually gave up teaching, in order to join the “Community Project and Panchayat Department” of Assam Government and on his retirement in 1970 was Joint Director. At the beginning of his career, Jnanada Prasad Sarma resided in Guwahati; later on he moved to Shillong (1952-1970), which was the capital of Assam at that time. He came back to Guwahati after his retirement, in 1970, and was invited to become Dalai by the Bardeuris.

Bharati Prasad Sarma describes his father’s appointment to the dalai-ship in the following way:

People from Kamakhya came and requested my father to become Dalai, with Pramath Nath, who was Bara Dalai at that time. Then he stopped [from 1977 until 1985 Jnanada Prasad Sarma did not hold the position; see above]. When Pramath Nath Dalai expired, again these people invited him. He said “I will not go for contest. If you want me to serve in Kamakhya Temple, I will love to, but you just give me the thing”. Immediately they said yes […] He was very honest, very clean man. Very knowledgeable man! They invited him because he had a very good image, a very good reputation in the society.

Bharati Prasad Sarma, now in his late seventies, can be said to have a “very good reputation in the society”, as his father had. He obtained a B.E. Mech degree and served in the “Public Health Engineering Department” of Assam Government; When he retired he had reached the position of Additional Chief Engineer. Bharati Prasad Sarma lived on the Blue Hill for a few years during his childhood and then moved to Guwahati, where he spent most of his life. He is a member of KDB’s executive committee. In this paragraph I wish to compare his statements about the facts that occurred

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406 For a short period (a couple of years) he lived in London; the “Community Project and Panchayat Department” appointed him to a refresher course there.
between 1985 and 1998 with the statements of another Bardeuri, Vijay Sarma (a pseudonym), who is strongly opposed to KDB.

Vijay Sarma:

Actually, at that time, he [Jnanada Prasad Sarma] was an educated person, they [the Bardeuri Samaj] thought that he may be a good Dalai. That is why they invited him [...] In Kāmākhyā from ancient time also, all are educated, but he was more educated. That is why people thought that he will be a good Dalai, he will give better advice on how to run the Temple.

To sum up, Jnanada Prasad Sarma would have been selected by the Bardeuri Samaj because of his high level of education and his brilliant career. This point per sé deserves more attention. In fact, Pramath Nath Sarma, Dalai for some twenty years, was a renowned tantric pujārī and a guru. These considerations may suggest that the main reasons for considering a particular individual fit for dalai-ship shifted significantly with the passage of time.

Before proceeding a few remarks need to be made concerning the Bardeuri Samaj. Asking Bardeuris when the Bardeuri Samaj was formed, the invariable answer was “a lot of time ago”. I did not come across any documents which make statements about the Bardeuri Samaj’s antiquity. Bardeuri Samaj membership exclusively follows bloodline, that is, it is only open to the adult, male Bardeuris of the Kāmākhyā Temple. Bardeuris usually give a percentage of the money collected on their pālā-days to the Bardeuri Samaj. They proudly maintain that all the Bardeuri households opposed to KDB observe this custom and that part of this money is used to pay the Bardeuri Samaj’s advocates. According to Hemen Sarma, a Bardeuri, the Bardeuri Samaj uses its funds to (partly) sponsor the major

407 A related, significant issue is that of residence. While Pramath Nath Sarma spent his entire life residing in Kamakhya Dham, Jnanada Prasad Sarma left the “blue hill” in his youth and spent his life in Guwahati and in Shillong.

408 On the functioning of the pālā see chapter 3, § 3.

409 See chapter 2.
festivals taking place in the Kāmākhyā Temple. The Bardeuri Samaj has no official seat.

During Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s tenures, steps were taken to modify the Kāmākhyā Temple’s structures, the first one being the paving of the entire Temple campus. Bharati Prasad Sarma:

After my father became Dalai, slowly, slowly I got involved. I was serving here, in the Government, I knew all the people from the higher society. Whenever they visited Kāmākhyā they used to complain: “Sarma, it’s so dirty! Kāmākhyā is so filthy! Take some steps to develop the thing”. It was some talking, discussing, nothing more. Then one day I thought: “What if I lay stones in the entire campus? During Ambuvācī-melā the Temple complex used to become so dirty, we cannot walk. The mud going through our fingers, I still remember that. I thought “I want to develop this thing!” I have developed it with the help of my architect. Then I identified some projects.

Bharati Prasad Sarma showed me a huge hand-made map of the Kāmākhyā Temple campus, indicating the proposed projects. I want to clarify that it is difficult to ascertain how much of these activities was due to Jnanada Prasad Sarma himself, and how much was due to the other people acting around him: namely, his son, Bharati Prasad Sarma, Riju Prasad Sarma and Bhabani Charan Sarma. Whatever the state of Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s

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410 KDB members affirm that KDB too sponsor major festivals.
411 The list of the activities undertaken by Bharati Prasad Sarma includes: rebuilding of the Eastern gate of the Temple enclosure, plantation of trees in the Temple campus, construction of a pilgrims’ shade (see below), of a garden and of a museum (terminated in 2011), expansion of the road connecting Guwahati with the hilltop, installation of electric poles, opening of a (probably once existing) outlet on the Temple’s southern side and installation of a filter in the saubhāgya-kuṇḍa (the main basin within the Temple campus, see chapter 1, § 3) for its purification. Bharati Prasad Sarma also dreamt of building a ropeway, which would have connected the top of the Nilachal with the southern bank of the Brahmaputra river.
412 Riju Prasad Sarma, a Bura Bardeuri, is presently at the head of KDB, in the post of administrator. He entered the political arena of the temple complex during Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s tenure, as the latter’s secretary. A Nananbardeuri, Bhabani Charan Sarma is a lawyer of Guwahati High Court and the Advisor of KDB’s executive committee. Most probably, he wrote the Regulation. Despite various attempts, I was unable meet them.
health may have been\textsuperscript{413}, it is certain that a number of actions, undertaken in
his name, enjoyed the cooperation of the individuals named above. I will use
the expression “Jnanada Prasad Sarma's group”, implying that those things,
which appear to have been done by him, may have been done with the
participation of the people around him. After all, the present purpose is not
to investigate the internal equilibrium of Jnanada Prasad Sarma's group;
rather it is to understand how this group, whose activities resulted in the
foundation of KDB, came to oppose the other party.

Bharati Prasad Sarma affirmed that his activities invariably met with
discontent from the Bardeuris:

They are all against me, all against me means they are all against
development. They do not like all these things. They do not like
development, they do not think for the pilgrims, they do not think for
the people, they do not care for the people! That they [the pilgrims]
should get some facilities [...] Their [the Bardeuris'] background is
limited, their education is limited. They have an inferiority complex.
They think me to be an outsider, they consider me as an outsider,
because I don’t stay there [in Kamakhya Dham]. Although I belong to
Kāmākhyā, they think I’m trying to take authority over them [...] They
never thought of any kind of facilities to be provided to the people. Only
they are after money making. Mānu āiba, darśan kariba, tokā dibā, gusi
jāba [People will come, they will do darśan, they will give money, they
will go]. As fast as they can dispose them off, it’s quick money coming to
them. They have no time to think about people’s welfare.

Bharati Prasad Sarma portrays the activities he undertook under his
father’s tenures as necessary steps towards the “development” of the temple
complex. In other words, according to him, these things undeniably improved
the condition of the temple complex; it is only because they were busy
making money that the Bardeuris did not realize that these works were

\textsuperscript{413}Bharati Prasad Sarma, with whom I talked at length, never referred to his father's
(alleged) illness. I did not ask him directly about this matter, because I was afraid of hurting
his feelings.
absolutely necessary. One among the most disputed structures build under Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s tenures is the pilgrims’ shade, the long corridor used to order pilgrims into a queue\footnote{See chapter 1, § 3.}. Bharati Prasad Sarma:

People [waiting for darśana] used to stand under the sun, when it was raining. Nobody was thinking about that. I talked to tourism department. They said “Ok, you do it, we will give you money”.

On the contrary, Vijay Sarma sees the pilgrims’ shade as a useless structure, compromising the beauty of the Temple campus. He uttered the following words with an angry expression on his face:

For tourists [pilgrims] there is a shade, by the side of saubhagyā-kuṇḍa. Before it was very beautiful [...]. Very beautiful, open place, you can look at the Temple from every side. After the construction of this one [the pilgrims' shade], it became a very ugly place [...]. It [the pilgrims' shade] is not necessary, it is used [only] for Durgā-pūjā, and for some other special occasions.

According to Vijay Sarma, the renovations were nothing but a “very milky business”, through which money donated by Assam Tourism Department or by private donors was manipulated by Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group. Accusations of corruption circulate in the other direction as well: Bharati Prasad Sarma affirms that “scams and anomalies” were taking place before his father’s tenure. It may be noticed incidentally that accusations of corruption and of financial mismanagement are frequently thrown against the present managing committee as well. The point that I wish to underline is that Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group’s innovating activities were not welcome by many Shebaits, including the vast majority of
Bardeuris. Thus the relations between the Dalai and the Bardeuris deteriorated, especially during the former’s second mandate\textsuperscript{415} (1991-1996).

In 1996 the second consecutive tenure of Jnanada Prasad Sarma and Paran Chandra Sarma expired. It is a fact that the elections, which were supposed to be held in 1996, did not take place. Vijay Sarma’s view of this is as follows:

At the end of his tenure, Jnanada Prasad Sarma was behaving like a dictator [this is most probably a reference to the innovations introduced by Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group]. When he understood that Bardeuris were not going to elect him again, he founded KDB.

Between 1996 and 1997 Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group (who would found KDB in October 1997) started promoting the idea of enlarging the right to vote to all the servants of the temple complex and of setting up a committee including the two Dalais elected by the Bardeuris and the representatives of all the different Shebaits. The group, who claimed to have the Dalais’ support, prepared a document titled “Kamakhya Debutter Regulation\textsuperscript{416}” – whose main idea is that a mix-caste committee should be formed and given power – and circulated it among the Shebaits. The latter were asked to give their signature, if they agreed to the Regulation. Meanwhile, in 1997, the Bardeuri Samaj approached the District Judge, asking for the election of new Dalais. In June 1998 Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group presented to the District Judge a voters’ list, including the name of Brahmans and non-Brahmans of Kamakhya Dham.

In order to frame the implications of the failure to carry out the 1996 election, some consideration has to be given to the regularity and significance

\textsuperscript{415}None of the Bardeuris I heard made any reference to the facts occurring during Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s tenures, as Vijay Sarma did. Nevertheless, I assume that Bardeuris opposed to KDB have an intimate understanding of these facts pretty much similar to Vijay Sarma’s one. What, instead, Bardeuris proudly voice is the legitimacy of their “customary rights”, that is a replica of the Bardeuri Samaj’ official stance (see §3).

\textsuperscript{416}To avoid weighting down the text, from now onwards I will write “the Regulation”, in order to refer to the mentioned document.
of previous Dalais’ elections. In 1970 it was decided that every dalai-ship term should last five years and that elections among the Bardeuris should be held at the end of every term. Nevertheless, the election of the Dalais did not actually happen every five years: the two rounds of elections prior to the missed elections of 1996 did not actually happen “on time”, so to speak. I assume that a sort of permitted delay in holding elections was generally accepted. Probably Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group was employing the permitted delay in order to lay the foundation of KDB. Moreover, if a permitted delay existed, it means that the Bardeuri Samaj was pretty much aware of its existence. In my opinion, the Bardeuri Samaj was not much concerned about the mere fact that elections were “late”; the Bardeuri Samaj was concerned about the propaganda activities of Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group. The Bardeuri Samaj understood that Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group, knowing the Bardeuris’ discontent, was looking for the support of the other Shebaits.

It seems probable that elections in general had not been really meaningful before 1996. In 1970, in theory, the post of Dalai stops being a lifelong one. In reality, the three Dalais in charge after 1970 (Pramath Nath Sarma, Jnanada Prasad Sarma and Paran Chandra Sarma) held the position during periods of time longer than five years, through several rounds of elections. In other words, notwithstanding the establishment of the five-year term, the widespread understanding of dalai-ship at that time may well have been that of a quasi-lifelong one. That would explain the wide range of diverging statements I heard about the terms of the dalai-ship. It needs to be recalled also that both Bharati Prasad Sarma and Vijay Sarma affirmed that Jnanada Prasad Sarma was invited by the Bardeuri Samaj to become Dalai. It is tempting to assume that elections, although held in practice, were not really relevant in themselves and that access to dalai-ship was regulated by a (more or less) common agreement among Bardeuris. Let us take is as given that dalai-ship remained a quasi-lifelong position after the 1970s. This fact, in turn, would mean that a possible non re-election of Jnanada Prasad Sarma in

417 See note 35.
1996 would have been a very significant act on the part of Bardeuris, a sort of slap in the face to him. It is for this reason that in 1997 Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group turned to the Nananbardeuris and the non-Brahman Shebaits, a move very similar to the ones made by former Dalais during British rule (on the disputes of 1858 and of 1872 see § 1).

The District Judge delivered his decision on 21st October 1998: it was mandatory to dissolve the then managing committee (Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group) and to elect two new Dalais among the Bardeuris. In order to manage the temple complex in the period of time preceding the elections:

It is ordered that the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, Guwahati, should constitute a committee either u/s 25(a) of the Act, or to constitute an ad-hoc committee from the members of the Bardeori Samaj for the proper management of the affairs of the deities in its greater interest within a month from the date of this Order\textsuperscript{418}.

On 25th October 1998, Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group assembled a significant number of Shebaits in a meeting and declared the Kamakhya Debutter Board (KDB) to have been founded on the base of the Regulation. In this way, the Dalais and the group of people operating around them remained in power. After the meeting, the Dalais’s office (a two-storey building within the Temple’s campus) started to be used by the newly-formed KDB, since the Dalais were signatories of KDB’s foundation. Today KDB regularly uses the ex-Dalais’ office; a huge, colourful sign bears the words “Office Kamakhya Debutter Board”, surmounted by the script in Assamese alphabet “Kāryālaya Kāmākhyā Debottar Bord”; two images of the Temple frame the script. The treasure of the Temple, situated a few steps away from what was once the

\textsuperscript{418} Copy of order dated 21.10.98 passed by the District Judge, Kamrup, Guwahati in file No [illegible] in connection with the Kamakhya Temple: 6. The judge is referring to the amendment (1987) of the Assam State Acquisition of Lands Belonging to Charitable Institutions of Public Nature Act, 1959. The Act of 1959 allows Assam Government to freely dispose of the lands donated to religious institutions by kings of the past or by devotees. See chapter 3, § 3. The Act’s amendment goes one step further: it orders that for each religious institution a managing committee has to be formed and has to be presided over by Deputy Commissioner or Sub-Divisional Officer or his nominee.
Dalais’ office, has been incorporated into KDB’s area. The same happened to the adjacent shrine of God Kubera, who is believed to be the treasurer of the Goddess. A railing encloses the edifice containing the treasure, the shrine and KDB’s office.

The newly-formed KDB challenged the District Judge’s decision, Jnanada Prasad Sarma figuring in it as the main petitioner. The petition did not challenge the legitimacy of section 25/a of the amended Act; rather it challenged the jurisdiction of the District Judge in passing the above-mentioned order (21st October 1998). The court case went to Guwahati High Court, which by its order dated 2nd May 2000 dismissed the petition and ordered the formation of an ad-hoc committee under section 25/A of the Act. Accordingly, in September of the same year, the Deputy Commissioner issued the following order:

...the present Managing Committee of the Kamakhya Devalaya headed by Shri Jnanada Prasad Sarma and Shri Paran Chandra Sarma, whose tenure in office has already expired, is hereby ordered dissolved with immediate effect. They will hand over the charge of office to the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, Guwahati, within 3 days from the date of issue of this order.

Two writ petitions (WP) filed by KDB’s members challenged the Deputy Commissioner’s notification. The same scenario – the High Court ordering that a managing committee be formed under section 25/a of the Act and KDB’s members challenging the High Court’s orders – repeated itself several times. Meanwhile, both the Dalais died between 2002 and 2003. The fact that High Court’s orders were challenged meant that the court case continued for

419 This reconstruction of the petition is based on the High Court order dated 2nd May 2000. See below.
several years and that, ultimately, KDB (which originated in Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group) remained in power.

One major point in the dispute's progression is the Guwahati High Court’s judgement, delivered on 25th October 2011. According to the latter, KDB had no *locus standi*, namely the right of a party to bring an action and to appear and be heard before a court:

There is nothing on record to even indicate that the validity of the Regulation and/or the legal status of the [Kamakhya Debutter] Board had ever been acknowledged in law to confer on the latter the necessary locus to pursue any legal remedy in any forum. There is no semblance of any emblem of stamp of validation of the Regulation or the Board to permit a representation as sought to be endeavoured by the petitioners [KDB] in the face of the age old custom/practice [dalai-ship] unassailably rooted in the annals of the institution [...] We are of the unhesitant opinion that the petitioners lack in the locus standi to maintain the present proceedings.422

The Court issued the following two directions (among others):

i) Election to the office of the Doloi (s) would be held as per the customary practice confining the electorate therefore to the four families of Bordeuris, namely Buras, Dekas, Vidhipathaks and Hotas.

ii) The State Government in consultation with the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup would formulate the norms/guidelines for the election to the Managing Committee contemplated by Section 25A in term of the letter and spirit thereof423.

In accordance with the order, the Bardeuri Samaj prepared a list of adult male Bardeuris and the elections for the Dalais took place on 16th November 2011. The two elected Dalais were a Bura, Kobindra Prasad Sarma


423 *Ibidem: 66.*
(Bara Dalai) and a Hota, Jadunath Sarma (Horu Dalai), nephew of Pramath Nath Sarma. After the elections in November 2011, a Dalais' office was established. It is a single room on the ground floor of one of the private buildings just outside the Temple campus. It has some basic pieces of furniture and a TV, which is frequently in use. A simple sign, hanging on the door, bears the words "Dalai's office".

Soon after the delivery of Guwahati High Court judgement, KDB's members challenged the High Court's decision. In this way the case went the Supreme Court of New Delhi, the highest judicial organ in the whole of India. The latter ratified the election of Dalais and issued a stay-order\textsuperscript{424}, namely a non-definitive order that suspends previous judicial proceedings and the judgements that resulted from those proceedings: the High Court order (25\textsuperscript{th} October 2011) was rendered inoperative. The Supreme Court reaffirmed the validity of 25/a of the Act and validated the Dalais' election which took place in November 2011. At the time of writing (March 2015) the Supreme Court has not yet delivered its definitive order and the dispute is pending.

7.3. “Democracy” against “customary rights”.

The Regulation gives KDB absolute power over the properties of the Goddess.

The Board shall be the final controlling, managing and administering authority of the Debutter in its entirety and management of the Temples

\textsuperscript{424} Supreme Court of India. Record of Proceedings. Petition(s) for Special Leave Appeal (Civil) No (s) 30721-30723-2011. Riju Prasad Sarma etc. etc. v. Satate of Assam & Ors.
Complex along with all properties, assets and finances of the Debutter shall be controlled, managed and administered by the Board\textsuperscript{425}.

The term *debotter* is understood as follows:

"Kamakhya Debutter" shall mean and include all the properties both movable and immovable, the Temples Complex and the entire endowment of the Deity of Sri Sri Kamakhya\textsuperscript{426}.

Chapter III of the Regulation is entitled “Powers and Functions of the Board and the Management and Administration of the Debutter”. A wide range of different powers is listed in it: “Power of the Board to Discharge its Duties”, “Power of Board to Accept Donations”, “Power of Board to Utilise Funds”, “Power of Board to Donate, Contribute or Subscribe”, “Power to Make Investments”, “Power to make Contracts”, “Power to Accept Compensation” and “Power to Frame Rules”\textsuperscript{427}. In the sixth and final Chapter, “Finance and Accounts”, it is affirmed that:

All funds of the Debutter shall be deemed to have been placed at the disposal of the Board\textsuperscript{428}.

The Regulation sets out the KDB’s functioning in detail. Some of the matters treated in it are: the voting system, the term of each board, eligibility criteria, the way the list of the voters has to be prepared and so on.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{425} *The Kamakhya Debutter Regulation* 1996: 5. The Regulation has been typed down for the use of the court. I used this copy. On fieldwork I saw a copy of the original booklet, distributed by Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group among the Shebait. It contains an Assamese version of the English text and is nicely rebound; the front page shows an image of the Temple. The original booklet slightly differs from the copy made by the court (see below).

\textsuperscript{426} *Ibidem*: 3. Barua (2011: s. v.) translates *devottar* as “land granted free of rent for the purpose of a temple”. Similarly Bronson (1867: s. v.) translates it as “an endowment of a temple”. The term, once employed to point out the lands donated to a temple, is used in this context to cover the entire property of the Goddess.

\textsuperscript{427} *The Kamakhya Debutter Regulation* 1996: 10-15.

\textsuperscript{428} *Ibidem*: 20.
To illustrate KDB’s ideological instruments, I will quote the Regulation as well as Bharati Prasad Sarma. To illustrate the Bardeuri Samaj’s ideological instruments, I will quote Vijay Sarma a Deka Bardeuri and proud defender of Bardeuris’ “traditional rights”. A few other individuals, belonging to each group, will be quoted incidentally.

I want to clarify that, for the present scope, I understand KDB and the Bardeuri Samaj to be two internally homogeneous groups in terms of rhetoric. Fractures and enmities exist within each of the two groups and I also know of individuals migrating from one group to the other. However, I observed an impressively homogeneous ideology being displayed by each of the two parties.

Bharati Prasad Sarma describes KDB’s foundation as follows:

We don’t have a constitution here...paramparā. We call it paramparā. Tradition, you can say. We are Barapujari, we are authorised in the main Temple. Others are Nananbardeuri [...]. Tradition is there that the head of the management will be from our family. Only five families came. They [Nanabardeuris] are in large number. They also have to be given permission to go there [to be pāṇḍā], because they don’t have any earning. We allow them to go for that [pāṇḍā-hood], but they cannot perform pūjā. Now they also want to become Dalai. But our tradition does not allow. So, what my father [Jnanada Prasad Sarma] did? Anticipating all these problems, he said: “let us have Dalai from our family; but let us also set a board where we have representative of all the sections of people residing in Kamakhya: Nananbardeuris, Malis, Athparias, Duaris, etc. We will constitute a committee headed by Dalai, selected by our Barapujari voters only. So paramparā will be maintained. But to satisfy these people - see they also want a share in this thing - let us have a committee, because they are also good people, they are qualified now, they are educated. Let us accommodate them. Let us have a committee and let their representative be selected by their sections: Athparias, Balikatas, Malis, etc. But ultimate authority will be

429 See § 2.
430 Here Bharati Prasad Sarma is referring to the “Kannauj account”; see chapter 4, § 1.
the Dalai” [...] You have to make it acceptable to all the people. If you stick only to the Bardeuris, other people will feel offended, they won’t be happy. If you can involve the entire community as a whole, that will be more acceptable. If you stick to Barapujaris there will be always frictions. If we select one capable man from the entire community, what is there wrong with it? This is what I call democracy, it is community participation!

Bharati Prasad Sarma’s statements fit perfectly the Regulation’s articles on this matter. According to the Regulation, KDB members are to be elected by the Shebaits in the number of thirteen. Here I will not analyse the complex voting system established by the Regulation, since such analysis is not necessary for our present purposes. The point I want to underline is that the Regulation entitles every group of Shebaits (Bardeuris, Nanabardeuris and non-Brahman Shebaits) to vote their own representatives onto the executive committee. To sum up, the main aim behind KDB’s formation would have been the social enlargement of access to the management of the temple complex. KDB’s motto about its “democratic” nature – so frequently and proudly voiced by its members and supporters – refers exactly to this fact.

On the contrary, the Bardeuri Samaj’s motto – widespread and proudly voiced as much as the KDB’s one – mainly repose on the “Kannauj account”. As shown in chapter 4, § 1, Bardeuris proudly affirm that they originated in Kannauj (Uttar Pradesh) and were brought to the temple complex by the kings of the past in order to worship the Goddess Kāmākhyā.

Vijay Sarma compared the idea that Nanabardeuris and non-Brahman Shebaits should be involved in the management with the flow of Bangladeshis through the Bangladesh-India border431.

Lots of people are coming from Bangladesh; they [the Congress] are making them Indian citizens, what will happen? They don’t have any sentimental attachment to India. They will lead to a chaotic condition. The same will happen if you allow everyone to vote. After ten or twenty

431 I referred to this phenomenon in chapter 5, § 2.
years again someone will come. “We are resident of this place, we want voting rights, we want management”. Some other people, Christians or Muslims, will come and reside here; you cannot stop them. They’ll ask for management; what will you do? You have to follow some traditions, or it will lead to a chaotic condition.

Another Bardeuri told me:

This is one thing I always repeat to everyone. The High Court of Guwahati was founded after Independence. 1947, India became independent, you may know. And Dalais were there long before. Hundreds of years before! Now, how can the High Court express a judgement on the elections of Dalais? Can you tell me? They, the Dalais, were there since ages! [...] These are our customary rights. We are fighting for our customary rights!

Bardeuris opposing KDB built up (the picture of) a very coherent collective identity, reposing on “tradition”, a word which I endlessly heard. They strongly affirm the inviolability of their “customary rights”: according to them, the charge of the Dalai is the only legitimate one and this custom should be adhered to up to this day. This assumption rests on the royal order’s legitimating power; consequently, any other power, including the High Court, should conform to the validity of dalai-ship. Bardeuris’ construction of a coherent identity overcomes internal distinctions. In § 4 I will show how much their “customary rights” have evolved during the XXth century (due to internal conflicts within the Bardeuri community), as well as the way they overcome such ambiguity, in order to build up their strong collective identity.

In theory all Bardeuris, including those who embraced KDB, are members of the Bardeuri Samaj, by virtue of being born of a Bardeuri father. Bardeuris opposed to KDB know and admit that few Bardeuris are

432 I will come back on the gap between legality and legitimacy in § 5.
433 As stated in § 2, in 2011 the Bardeuri Samaj produced a list of male adult Bardeuris for the Dalais’ election. The names of Bardeuris who are KDB members were there in the list.
members of KDB. Nevertheless, they talk of themselves as a unitary group, excluding those anomalous Bardeuris who embraced KDB. To avoid repetition, from now onwards, by saying “Bardeuris” I will exclusively refer to the Bardeuris opposed to KDB.

Not all Bardeuris are equally committed to the Bardeuri Samaj. The Bardeuris’ list produced in 2011 for the Dalais’ election included 466 individuals. Of these, some fifteen individuals are members of KDB. Among the remaining ones (about 450 individuals), many, who do not reside in Kamakhya Dham, are hardly known to me; thus, I have no means to say whether these people are really concerned with the actual dispute or not. The vast majority of the Bardeuris residing in Kamakhya Dham oppose KDB. Among them, some ten individuals are particularly active in supporting the Bardeuri Samaj. They are in possession of copies of the orders and study them frequently. Other Bardeuris frequently rely on these people to find out about the dispute’s progression. On 24th September 2013 there was a hearing in the Supreme Court. I was in Kamakhya Dham on that day; for the next three days I observed Bardeuris talking at length amongst themselves about the hearing. Several Bardeuris, knowing of my interest in the dispute, told me what (in their opinion) had happened in the Supreme Court on that date. All the versions I heard were incredibly homogeneous. I realized that Bardeuris constitute a very effective network, where information circulates in a single-perspective way. Many Bardeuris are not conversant with English and thus cannot access the judicial documents by themselves. Once a hearing is over, the facts occurring in it are “translated” and immediately distributed to all the Bardeuris.

By comparing the two sets of statements quoted above, it becomes clear that dalai-ship is thought of in different ways. For the Bardeuri Samaj it is an unchanged and unchangeable tradition, crossing the ages because of its own

434 These people usually have secular occupations and do not practise priesthood. Although they have their pālā-rights, they generally entrust their relatives with the performance of the related duties and do not ask for their share back. In other words, although they may have an affective connection to Kāmākhā Temple, they do not have an economic link with it.
435 On the hearing of 24th September 2013 see § 6.
validity. On the contrary, in Bharati Prasad Sarma’s view, the office of the Dalai has to be maintained, but needs nevertheless to be accompanied by a larger administrative organ. The “one man system” - as a member of KDB sharply described dalai-ship - has to be dropped. Dalai-ship in itself appears to be an obsolete item in the management of the temple complex; Bardeuris supporting it are considered to be narrow-minded, because they are not able to understand that things need to change; “it is the demands of the times”, in Bharati Prasad Sarma’s words. His affirmations are in accord with the Regulation. The latter preserves the dalai-ship's electoral system (the Dalai has to be elected by the Bardeuris only), as well as the Dalais’ powers regarding rituals:

The Daloi and the Chief Shebait shall exercise such powers and functions in respect of the performance of the daily worship, ceremonies, rituals, etc. and the Board shall not interfere with the methods, systems and modes of performing such daily worship, ceremonies, rituals, etc. The Regulation incorporates the office of the Dalais in KDB, keeping its religious jurisdiction unaltered; the Dalais are entrusted with the supervision of the Shebait's activities relating to the cult and their “code of conduct”.

On the next page the text goes as follows:

The Doloi/Dolois shall be in charge of all matters relating to the palas [pālā] and rituals dischargeable and enjoyable by the Shebaits and oversee that their customary and traditional rotation [...] are strictly adhered to and followed.

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436 The Kamakhya Debutter Regulation 1996: 17. According to the Regulation the Chief Shebait has to be elected by all Shebaits and is one of the members of the Executive Committee (ibidem: 16). Any Shebait who has attained the age of forty is eligible for the post of Chief Shebait, irrespective of his caste. The Chief Shebait’s main task is to supervise the Shebaits’ activities relating to the cult and their “code of conduct” (ibidem: 18-19).

437 Ibidem: 18.
of the ritual life of the Temple and of its priesthood. What dalai-ship loses under the Regulation is its former supremacy, as well as the administrative powers it enjoyed before 1998. One could argue that the office of Dalai, deprived of these elements, is no longer the office of Dalai, but I did not find Bardeuris engaged in this kind of reasoning. Instead, they are much more concerned by the fact that since the death of Jnanada Prasad Sarma and of Paran Chandra Sarma (2002-2003) up to 2011 no new Dalais were elected. The Bardeuri Samaj states that the lack of Dalais over some eight years is due to the unwillingness of KDB to perform elections. KDB, on its side, replays to these accusations, stating that the cause is to be found in the courts’ stay-orders, which would have impeded KDB from holding elections. These mutual accusations being the core of § 6, let us now go back to the strident debate taking place around KDB's foundation.

Bharati Prasad Sarma:

He [Jnanada Prasad Sarma] designed a constitution, he planned a constitution. And that was circulated among all the people. “You go through, you look at it, if you have any objections let us know”. At that time they [the Bardeuri Samaj] kept silent, nobody objected to that. So ultimately we'll say that it is accepted. Thereafter these people [the Bardeuri Samaj] went for litigation.

After “democracy”, the second pillar on which Bharati Prasad Sarma founds KDB’s legitimacy is the broad (if not unanimous) consent Shebaits would have given to its foundation. On this point, the Regulation goes as follows:

438 The Regulation entrusts the Dalais and the Chief Shebait with the following tasks: preparing and maintaining of the voters’ list, representing the Debutter in the case of VIPs’ visits to KT, sponsoring programs “with prior approval of the Board” and promoting the learning of Sanskrit. Under the Regulation, the Dalais need to be properly initiated. Also, the Dalais and the Chief Shebait are the only members of the Executive Committee who need to be initiated (Ibidem: 16-19). On initiation see chapter 2, § 2 and 3.
It [the Regulation] shall come into force with effect from the date of signing of this Regulation and its formal presentation before the Shebaits by the existing Dolois in a General Meeting before the Shebaits\textsuperscript{439}.

Immediately after, the text describes the way such a meeting was held:

This Regulation was signed by the two Dolois viz. Jnanada Prasad Sarma and Paran Chandra Sarma and presented before the Shebaits. On the 25\textsuperscript{th} day of October, 1998, a General Meeting of all the Brahmin and Non-Brahmin Shebaits of Goddess Kamakhya was convened where in it was resolved that this Regulation be adopted and henceforth the affairs of the Kamakhya Debutter are being governed as per this Regulation.

The same meeting is described in “A Comprehensive Document on the Kamakhya Debutter”, a booklet emanating from KDB. It affirms that:

...the Kamakhya Debutter Regulation was presented in a general meeting on 25.10.1998, before all the Shebaits and the Regulation was \textit{unanimously adopted} [italics are mine]\textsuperscript{440}.

The then authority (the Dalais) would have framed a new management system, given it a written form (the Regulation), circulated it among the Shebaits to know if they were ready to accept it and consequently to sign it. Finally, the Dalais would have called all the Shebaits into a “General Meeting”, in order to have the Regulation adopted.

The statements of a Bardeuri opposed to KDB, Gopal Sarma (a pseudonym) sharply contrast with this view:

They are claiming support of the masses. They used to take signatures from all the people [...]. Regulation is not something, which came from

\textsuperscript{439} This quotation and the following one have been copied by me from the original booklet. They are not present in the copy of the Regulation made by the court.

\textsuperscript{440} A Comprehensive Document on the Kamakhya Debutter: 1.
the people, it’s something which came from someone’s mind. Ask what is like the Regulation. Nobody knows.

Moreover he added:

Of course if you are giving power to someone, any, any damn people on the earth, will accept it. Without giving if he is getting anything, he will definitively accept it, if you want to speak the truth.

Thus, according to Gopal Sarma, the support Shebaits gave to KDB’s establishment (through their signatures) was not the product of conscious consent. Rather, it was the product of the seduction that the promise of power exercised on them. I found no further data on the “General Meeting” and I cannot say how many individuals actually took part in it. I do not doubt that an assembly of Kamakhyans actually took place on 25th October 1998, because members of both parties agree that it did occurred. Anyway, it is impossible to know what the individuals who took part in it actually felt and thought. Were the Shebaits persuaded that some sort of “new era” was about to start? Were they committed to it? Or were they simply attending the meeting, hoping for some advantages to be granted to them? In other words, the question is: to what extent had KDB’s pervasive rhetoric entered people’s mind? In § 4 an § 5 I will set out two different points of view about KDB and its activities which echo respectively Bharati Prasad Sarma’s statements and Gopal Sarma’s ones.

Bardeuris I spoke to repeatedly stated that KDB came into power “forcefully” and “by muscular power”. Curious, I kept on asking people, till one day a Bardeuri of my acquaintance took me to his place and, leafing through legal documents, pointed out that KDB’s foundation (25th October 1998) occurred four days after the delivery of District Judge’s decision (21st October 1998). As stated in § 2, the latter gave the order to dissolve the then managing committee (Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group) and to elect two new Dalais among the Bardeuris. Two more elements need to be kept in mind to locate the events in their correct place. The Bardeuri Samaj had already
approached the District Judge in 1997. Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group presented the voters’ list to the District Judge on 21st June 1998. My view is that in the second half of 1998 the two parties, having made their moves, were waiting for the District Judge’s decision. When the latter was delivered, Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group realized that its power was no longer in conformity with the law. They hurriedly called into a meeting the people who had signed the Regulation few months earlier and announced that KDB had been founded. I believe that the entire organisation came about in a sudden way, before people could start talking about and discussing the District Judge’s decision. In other terms, KDB’s foundation took place, ignoring the District Judge’s decision (which was soon after challenged). It is this particular fact that the Bardeuris point out, when they say that KDB came into power “by muscular power”.

Before concluding, it should be clarified that, although Guwahati High Court has affirmed that KDB’s status has never been validated by law (25th October 2011, see § 2), KDB actually manages the Temple. What KDB cannot control is the way Bardeuris manage their pālā-rights: a portion of the money donated by pilgrims in the sanction goes to the Bardeuri Samaj, while KDB receives no share of this money\textsuperscript{441}. Also, KDB has no command over the interactions between the pāṇḍās and their pilgrims and gets no share of the daksīṇā that the latter give to the former\textsuperscript{442}. On the other hand, KDB directly receives the money pilgrims throw in the donation boxes (see § 6). Moreover, wealthy pilgrims often donate huge sums of money to KDB to sponsor the building of structures in the Temple campus.

It should also be highlighted that although two Dalais were elected by the Bardeuris in November 2011, according to my observations the former have no real power in the political arena of the Temple. By contrast, Tarini Prasad Sarma has a leading role among the Bardeuris. As shown in chapter 2, § 2, Tarini Prasad Sarma is one of the most venerated gurus of the temple complex, a member of the Bara Dalei Ghar and a reputed pujāri. In other

\textsuperscript{441} I have been told that KDB receives a share of the money donated by pilgrims in the minor shrines of the Temple campus.

\textsuperscript{442} On the relations between pāṇḍās and pilgrims see chapter 6.
terms, he is one of the highest religious authorities of the entire temple complex. During my fieldworks he was the Bardeuri Samaj’s president - the list of the Bardeuris electors prepared in 2011 for Dalais elections is signed by him. To wrap up, Tarini Prasad Sarma has a role similar to that of the Dalai, although he does not officially hold the post.

7.4. The building of two opposing identities.

Since KDB’s members affirm with pride that KDB’s first aim is to give access to power to Nananbardeuris and to non-Brahmans Shebaits, I became eager to know what was the opinion of the latters. Sanjay Das, a non-Brahman Shebait, said this about KDB:

I believe they do very good job. You know, because many people are working [for KDB], they have job. They are giving so many things to old ladies and poor people, like us, they help us. So I think...we support them. Few people do not support them, I know, because they need to say “We are kings! We are kings!” , but we support Debutter Board, because they work for us, they fight for us [...] Before, the old ladies, who have no husband, they are just like that, they don’t earn money, but now Debutter Board every month gives them money, rice, dāl and everything. Then sometimes sārhi, then in this time umbrella, in this month [the rainy season was going on]. It’s like this, all the times they are giving to old ladies, who have no husband. Money, rice, food and sārhi, all these things. Then they run so many hospitalis⁴⁴³, so many things...they help us. I believe that, for my opinion. They help us so many times, that’s why we are for Debutter Board.

⁴⁴³ Here Sanjay Das refers to a charitable clinic run by KDB. The clinic, situated in Kamakhya Dham, is open to everyone; a generalist doctor visits the patients and medicines are provided free of cost.
I asked him what the situation was like before 1998.

That time I think not so many works were done and the place was not clean. But now I think it's much better! It's like this, before you go to Temple, all is dirty because of birds, what to say [...] all these dirty things. But now they clean every time, look there [pointing out two KDB's employs, busy in cleaning activities]! But before nothing!

Sanjay Das prizes KDB's donations to widows, the building of structures and its attentiveness to cleaning the Temple and the areas around it. He went on to say:

Before it's like this, poor people are like poor people and rich people like rich people. Now poor people also like freedom, they also want to do job, you know, but before it's like “we are rich, you are poor”. [Now] it's like balance. I believe my self, not other people.

Sanjay Das states that, before KDB’s foundation, the Brahmans – Bardeuris and Nanantardeuris together – had some sort of dominance over the other Shebaits. According to him, KDB resolved the asymmetrical situation existing among the Shebaits at that time into a more egalitarian system. The attentiveness shown by KDB to the lower strata of the Blue Hill’s society is not only a matter of generosity; Sanjay Das’s feeling is that KDB finally gave the non-Brahman Shebaits the dignity they deserve. “They fight for us”.

I observed Sanjay Das’s interactions with Brahmans. He has warm, friendly relationships with a number of Brahmans⁴⁴⁴ (both Bardeuris and Nanantardeuris) of his age; at the same time he holds a more distant, but still respectful, regard for other Brahmans, who are older than him. Finally, he holds some particular Brahmans in contempt, because he dislikes their

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⁴⁴⁴ On the notion of “best friend” and on its capacity of bridging the gap between different groups see chapter 4, § 3.
behaviour, both in personal matters and in public ones. To sum up, Sanjay adopts different postures before different Brahmans. However, his words show the tendency to treat Brahmans as a uniform, unbroken entity. He is inclined to think of the Brahmans as a privileged group, which he flatly labels as “they”.

I propose to compare the words of Sanjay Das – a non-Brahman supporter of KDB – with those of Bharati Prasad Sarma – a member of KDB’s executive committee. The former’s feeling of an unbalanced situation existing in the past among the Shebaits perfectly fits with the latter’s statement: “If you stick to Barapujaris, other people would feel offended; they will not be happy”. According to both, KDB had filled the gap between the lower and higher strata of Kamakhya Dham’s society. Extrapolating from these particular individuals’ opinions, it can be said that KDB builds up its legitimating edifice on the idea that all the Shebaits, irrespective of their caste, should be represented in and their needs taken care of by the management. For religious matters, as has been shown, KDB leaves the ultimate authority with the Dalais. In short, KDB’s construction of its identity is rooted in overcoming the caste system and of the three-fold hierarchy. On the contrary, the Bardeuri Samaj’s identity is rooted in the caste system and more particularly on the supremacy of a particular group, namely the Bardeuris.

For some time I felt quite comfortable with this model; then, suddenly, I realized that some of the data did not fit into my frame. Bardeuris I was talking to confusedly made reference to some sort of internal distinction between Burrhas and Dekas on the one side, and Hotas and Bidhipathaks on the other. Slowly I came to understand that this distinction had to do with dalai-ship as well. I started to ask people whether Dalais needed to be selected specifically from one of the four groups or not. The wide divergence of answers I obtained only puzzled me more. Meanwhile I noticed that Bardeuris tended to do away with this issue quickly, as if it were of minor
importance. Whatever the answer was, it was given in a flat way, without any further comment. This tendency surprised me, because I was used to observing excited Bardeuris vehemently and proudly defending their “customary rights”. Eventually I realised that in the past, dalai-ship had not always been open to all Bardeuris: as has been shown in § 1, for almost a century it was restricted to the two Dalai Ghars.

In the 1930s a dispute arose among Bardeuris concerning access to dalai-ship. The plaintiff was Baroda Kanta Sarma, a Deka belonging to the Horu Dalai Ghar. He challenged the appointment of Bangshi Nath Sarma, a Bidhipathak, to the post of Horu Dalai, after the death of his (Baroda Kanta Sarma’s) father, Abhaya Kanta Sarma (on 1st March 1930). According to Baroda Kanta Sarma’s lawsuit, while the latter was making preparations to be elected Dalai, on 1st May 1930 Hotas and Bidhipathaks held a meeting and announced that they had elected Bangshi Nath Sarma Dalai “in the absence of the plaintiffs [Burhas and Dekas] and without any legal right448”. By contrast, Bangshi Nath Sarma affirmed that notices had been served on all Bardeuris before the meeting was held449. On 1st May 1930 itself, both versions agree, Hotas and Bidhipathaks filed an application to the Deputy Commissioner to have the lands of the temple settled with Bangshi Nath Sarma. On 12th May 1930, Burhas and Dekas held a meeting and declared that Baroda Kanta Sarma had been elected Dalai and then went to the Deputy Commissioner.

Baroda Kanta Sarma underpinned his lawsuit (September 1931) with the following affirmations450: during major festivals only Burhas and Dekas can perform the festive pūjā for the Goddess Kāmākhyā451; on particularly auspicious days only Burhas and Dekas are entitled to perform the daily pūjā

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448 Plaint in the Title Suit No. 11 of 1931 of the Court of the Subordinate Judge, Assam Valley Districts: 22.
449 Written-statement of Bangshinath Sarma and others in Suit No. 11 of 1931 of the Court of the Subordinate Judge, Assam Valley District: 35.
450 Plaint in the Title Suit No. 11 of 1931 of the Court of the Subordinate Judge, Assam Valley Districts: 21-22.
451 At the time of writing, during major festivals only Burhas and Dekas can perform the festive pūjā for the Goddess. In other words, my data fit with Baroda Kanta Sarma’s affirmations. See chapter 3, § 1.
for the Goddess Kāmākhyā⁴⁵²; on the occasion of Durgā-पुजा, Burhas and Dekas receive more emoluments than Hotas and Bidhipathaks; after the extinction of the Brahmas, Burhas and Dekas received the lion’s share of the former’s rights. All these elements testified, in Baroda Kanta Sarma’s argument, to the “predominance (or priority)⁴⁵³” of the Burhas and Dekas over the Hotas and Bidhipathaks. Finally the lawsuit affirmed that no Hota or Bodhipathak had ever been Dalai during British rule, nor under the Ahoms. To support this affirmation, Baroda Kanta Sarma produced a list of the Dalais in charge during British rule and of those in charge during the Ahoms, pointing out that all of them were either Burhas or Dekas⁴⁵⁴.

Bangshi Nath Sarma reacted with a written statement (January 1932). He affirmed that during festivals Bidhipathaks are entrusted with the reading of the bidhis (scriptures) and Hotas with the performance of homa⁴⁵⁵ (offering into the fire). This statement is in line with the actual organization of the festive cult - Baroda Kanta Sarma’s lawsuit swiftly did away with the Hotas’ and the Bidhipathaks’ tasks. On the contrary, Bangshi Nath Sarma could not really oppose the fact that Hotas and Bidhipathaks cannot perform the daily पुजा during auspicious days. Bangshi Nath Sarma further affirmed that Burhas and Dekas performed the funeral rites of the last member of the Brahmas and therefore got the lion’s share of the latter’s rights; “this distinction” according to the written affirmation “[was] not indicative of any superiority⁴⁵⁶”. He questioned the validity of the list of Dalais in charge under

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⁴⁵² According to Baroda Kanta Sarma’s lawsuit the list of the auspicious days when only Burhas and Dekas can perform the daily worship includes the following: the pañcaparva, that is to say, in each month the two aṣṭamī, the two caturdaśī and the saṅkrānti; the three concluding days of the Durgā-पुजा of āśvina (September/October); the Pohān-biyā, namely the marriage of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī (celebrated on the dvitiyā or tṛtiyā of the bright half of puh, December/January). My data regarding the actual division of tasks fit Baroda Kanta Sarma’s affirmations (I have no data concerning the Pohān-biyā). See chapter 3, § 3.

⁴⁵³ Plaintiff in the Title Suit No. 11 of 1931 of the Court of the Subordinate Judge, Assam Valley Districts: 21-22.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibidem. Indeed legal documents show that since the beginning of the colonial period (1826) all Dalais were selected from among the Burhas and the Dekas. By contrast it is not clear whether under the Ahoms the same custom was observed or not.

⁴⁵⁵ Written-statement of Bangshinath Sarma and others in Suit No. 11 of 1931 of the Court of the Subordinate Judge, Assam Valley District: 32-33.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibidem.
the Ahoms produced by Baroda Kanta Sarma. All in all Bangshi Nath Sarma and the other defendants repudiated the idea that Burhas and Dekas had any preeminence over the remaining groups; also Burhas and Dekas had “no special family rights” granting them exclusive access to dalai-ship:

It is not true that any particular family has a permanent right to the office of the Daloi. The Bardeuris elect the person to be a Daloi whom they consider fit out of the five families (now four families) of Bardeuris. The Bardeuris only elected Dalois out of the families of Deka and Bura Bardeuris for some generation considering the latter fit. Because of that the right of other Bardeuris to be elected a Daloi has not been impeded and thereby no custom has come into existence.

Bangshi Nath Sarma produced the documents regarding the previous lawsuits (see § 1) and stated that “in no document [...] has any decision been made to the effect that the Bardeuris of the families of Deka and Bura alone have right thereto [to dalai-ship]. This was indeed a very intelligent move; in fact the quasi-hereditariness of the posts of Dalai had never received any official recognition by any court. On the other hand, courts had reinforced the right of all Bardeuris to elect the Dalai.

The suit was heard by various courts in Guwahati and eventually went to the High Court of Kolkata. The ideas expressed in the judgement (1940) are in line with those of Bangshi Nath Sarma:

It may be that members of the Deka and Bura families have more duties to perform in connection with the worship. It may be that they have a greater number of days of palas (turn of worship) or get more emoluments. But these facts are not inconsistent with the custom as proved, namely that a Daloi can be a member of any of the four Bardeori families [...]. The fact that in the past only Dalois were elected from Bura

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457 *Ibidem:* 34.
458 *Ibidem:* 35.
459 *Ibidem.*
460 At that time, Guwahati had no High Court (it was established after Independence).
and Deka families, is after all an equivocal circumstance. That fact cannot do away with the evidence afforded by the documents which we have mentioned above [the documents regarding previous lawsuits]. The further fact that no instance has been proved of a Bidhipathak or a Hota being a Daloi in the past is of very little import [...]. We accordingly hold that the plaintiffs have not established their case and that defendant 1 [Bangshi Nath Sarma] has been validly appointed as the second Daloi of the temple.\footnote{Certified copy of A.I.R. 1940 Calcutta 269. Judgement in Appeal 128 of 1935 Baroda Kanta Deba Sarma Deka Bardeori and others v. Bangshi Nath Deba Sarma Bidhipathak Bardeori and others: 9.}

At the time of the dispute all the Burhas and Dekas were on the side of Baroda Kanta Sarma (a Deka himself), while all the Hotas and Bidhipathaks were with Bangshi Nath Sarma\footnote{Vishnu Prasad Sarma, the then Bara Daloi and a Burha did not want to be registered as a plaintiff and thus was registered as a pro-forma defendant.} (a Bidhipathak). It is evident that the dispute and High Court order had significant consequences for the internal balance of the Bardeuri community: from this point onwards, no Dalai would be elected from the two Dalai Ghars. When asked about the Dalai Ghars, many Kamakhyans listed the families of the different Dalais in charge during the XX\textsuperscript{th} century, including for instance Jnanada Prasad Sarma's family. Thus the expression “Dalai Ghar”, once employed to designate two specific families, expanded its boundaries, and eventually included the families of all those people who became Dalai, after the enlargement of the 40s.

What I want to highlight is the relationship Bardeuris living at the time of writing have with these facts. The majority of Bardeuris I talked to knew of the above-mentioned dispute\footnote{The documents relating to the dispute have been given to me by a Bardeuris who is strongly committed to the Bardeuri Samaj.}; many of them frankly admitted that in the past Dalais used to come from the two Dalai Ghars. In this context, the enlargement of dalai-ship's boundaries would be the product of a court order, and not the heritage of an interrupted “tradition”. Nevertheless, Bardeuris belonging to the two sub-groups speak of themselves as a unitary group; no one ever placed the two sub-groups into a hierarchy. In short,
Bardeuris simply overlook the 1930s dispute and the internal distinctions, which may challenge the group’s unity. Under my insistent questioning, some Burhas and Dekas carelessly admitted that in the past Dalais used to come exclusively from their sub-group. Nevertheless, the expression on their faces and the tone of their voices clearly showed their lack of interest in this matter.

The concept of “traditionalism”, described by Eisenstadt, can help to understand the Bardeuris’ posture:

As a reaction to the possibilities of erosion, the tendency known as “traditionalism” can develop [...] Traditionalism is not to be confused with a “simple” or “natural” upkeep of a given tradition. Rather, it denotes an ideological mode and stance oriented against the new symbols; it espouses certain parts of the older tradition as the only legitimate symbols of the traditional order and upholds them against “new” trends.

Through a selective process, Bardeuris minimize internal distinctions and maximize the gap between themselves and the rest of the Shebaits. This is, in fact, the point they need to stress, in order to combat KDB’s “democracy discourse”. Their stance before KDB is similar to the posture that the Brahmans of Mīnākṣī Temple adopted before Tamil Nadu Government officers (Fuller: 1984). The Brahmans of Mīnākṣī Temple understand themselves to be divided into two broad groups, the Vikkira Pantiyas and the Kulacekaras. As stated in chapter 4, § 1, the former have more rights than the latter in the Mīnākṣī Temple's rituals; for example, only they can touch the two main images of Mīnākṣī and Her husband, Sundaresvara. Quarrels and hostilities divided the two groups in the past; the conflict between the two groups, Fuller argues, “was principally about their different rights to perform various types of ritual and, almost certainly, about the emoluments linked to

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those rights⁴⁶⁶”. Kings, their ministers and later on, the British Collectors of Madurai found themselves busy settling the disputes that erupted among the priests.

Notwithstanding this scenario, when the author exposes the disputes taking place between the priests and the Government committee controlling Mīnāḵṣī Temple, the former appear to act as a quite homogeneous group. For example, both Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras “strike” during six years against the decision of Tamil Nadu Government to let Harijans and Nadars⁴⁶⁷ into the Temple⁴⁶⁸.

I wish to compare the Bardeuris of the Kāmākhyā Temple with the entire community of Mīnāḵṣī Temple Brahmans: Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras. Just as Bura-Dekas and Hota-Bidhipathaks opposed one another, so did Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras. With the passage of time and the rise of a new political situation, Bura-Dekas and Hota-Bidhipathaks found it more useful to obliterate the significance of their internal distinctions and unite in a homogeneous group. Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras acted similarly: when facing Government officials, they expressed themselves in terms of a single group. Fuller reports that priests blaming governmental control over the Temple admitted that this had at least one positive effect: the improvement of relations between Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras⁴⁶⁹.

Both the Bardeuris of Kāmākhyā Temple and the Vikkira Pantya of Mīnāḵṣī Temple affirm that their origins are not in the place where they live, but in North India⁴⁷⁰ (Kannauj and Benares, respectively). The Bardeuris of the Kāmākhyā Temple voice the “Kannauj account” with pride, because it is this particular argument that distinguishes them from the rest of the

⁴⁶⁶ Ibidem: 33.
⁴⁶⁷ According to Fuller (ibidem: 41-42) “the Nadar, although not Untouchables, are traditionally ranked only slightly above them, as a ‘half-polluting’ caste”. This definition refers to Hardgrave (1969: 22).
⁴⁶⁸ Fuller 1984: 116-122. On the opposition of the Brahmans of the Mīnāḵṣī Temple to Tamil Nadu Government see also § 5.
⁴⁶⁹ Ibidem: 131.
⁴⁷⁰ In chapter 4, § 1 I compare the way Bardeuris’ and Vikkira Pantiyas’ claims about their “origins” are constructed.
Shebaits. It needs to be kept in mind that it is the supremacy of all Bardeuris which has been challenged by KDB.

Unlike the Bardeuris, the Vikkira Pantiyas express their “Benares account” in a plain way, “with little conviction”\(^\text{471}\); their point is no more to affirm their supremacy over Kulacekaras, but to unite with Kulacekaras, in order to defend the rights of the entire Brahman community of the Minâkshi Temple before Government officials.

At the time of Fuller’s researches, Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras did argue among themselves about the division of ritual tasks, remaining nevertheless united before Government officers. Similarly fractures and enmities do exist among the Bardeuris opposed to KDB and malcontent may arise about the different rights hold by each sub-group\(^\text{472}\). However, those Bardeuris who are against KDB show the capacity to be cohesive in defending their “traditional” rights.

Evans-Pritchard points out similar dynamics among the Nuers.

Nuer tribes are split into segments. The largest segments we call primary tribal sections and these are further segmented into secondary tribal sections which are further segmented into tertiary tribal sections\(^\text{473}\).

What is relevant for the present purpose is that:

Each segment is itself segmented and there is opposition between its parts. The members of any segment unite for war against adjacent segments of the same order and unite with these adjacent segments against larger sections. Nuer themselves state this structural principle clearly in the expression of their political values. Thus they say that if the Leng tertiary section of the Lou tribe fights the Nyarwac tertiary section-and, in fact, there has been a long feud between them-the

\(^{471}\) Fuller 1984: 187.

\(^{472}\) In chapter 3, § 4 I analyse the complaints of Bhidipathak Bardeuri regarding the Bhidipathaks’ small average number of pālā-days.

\(^{473}\) Evans-Pritchard 1968: 139.
villages which compose each section will combine to fight; but if there is a quarrel between the Nayrkwac tertiary section and the Rumjok secondary section, as has occurred recently over water rights at Fading, Leng and Nyarkwac will unite against their common enemy Rumjok which, in its turn, forms a coalition of the various segments into which it is divided.\textsuperscript{474}

“Fission and fusion in political groups”, Evans-Pritchard argues, are two aspects of the same segmentary principle, and the Nuer tribe and its divisions are to be understood as an equilibrium between these two contradictory, yet complementary, tendencies.\textsuperscript{475}

To sum up, there can be a considerable shift in the way people group together (and legitimize their grouping). It can be hypothesized that if in future some agent were to put at risk the rights of the Bardeuris and the Nananbardeuris, these two groups will find an ideological stance to unite against the opposite party.

\section{7.5. The neutral alternative.}

As asked about the way KDB manages the temple complex, Ravi Sarma, a Nananbardeuri, said the following (my translation from Assamese):

Debutter \textsuperscript{[KDB]} did neither bad, nor it did good. They are employing some people. Some people \textsuperscript{[of KDB]} do not know how to behave, they are not able to behave in a nice way, some guys. Other ones are fine. In this way, Debutter is running the Temple nicely. Nowadays people of

\textsuperscript{474} Ibidem: 142-143.
\textsuperscript{475} Ibidem: 148.
Kamakhya [Dham] are developing. They build up streets and houses. It's very good.

After this initial, plain statement, Ravi Sarma continued, saying:

Ultimately Debutter is the Bardeuris, and the Bardeuris are the Debutter. They are only one thing. Debutter is taking some Nananbardeuris, it is employing them in the Temple.

Such an emblematic statement needs some comment. By affirming the identity between the Bardeuris and KDB, Ravi Sarma makes reference to the following elements, which he does not explicitly mention. First, today KDB's administrator is Riju Prasad Sarma, a Bura Bardeuri; he was part of Jnanada Prasad Sarma's group. Second, this group included a few other prominent Bardeuris, who, at the time of writing, are members of KDB's executive committee. Ravi Sarma's words suggest that the hostility between KDB and the Bardeuri Samaj originated mainly in an internal fracture of the Bardeuri community: that is, the opposition between the vast majority of Bardeuris and Jnanada Prasad Sarma's group, at the time of the latter's second tenure (1991-1996). To use the words of a non-Brahman Shebait, the fight is taking place "gharor bitarat" (inside the house). The only difference between KDB and the Bardeuri Samaj would be that the former is recruiting some Nananbardeuris into the Temple's administration.

Ravi Sarma further says:

There [in KDB] there is no Dalai. No Dalai. Dalai is only a Bardeuris’ affair. Debutter said that Nananbardeuri and Bardeuri must be the same - they must have the same rights. Bardeuri should be able to elect their representatives, and Nananbardeuri too. This is the thing. That’s why they are fighting in the Supreme Court. That is the reason.

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476 See § 2.
These statements may appear to contradict the preceding ones (and actually appeared so to me). Ravi Sarma detects a strong link – even identity – between KDB and the Bardeuris. Immediately afterwards, he affirms that KDB’s aim is to render equal rights to both Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris. Also, he affirms that under KDB, dalai-ship is cancelled\textsuperscript{477}. The statement reproduced in the second quotation represents Ravi Sarma’s sincere understanding of the entire issue, while in the following one he is reproducing KDB’s widespread “democracy” rhetoric. Later on he said:

I don’t support anyone of them. I don’t support anyone of them. We have some duties in the Temple, we have to meet our duties. We are pāṇḍāś of the Temple, we have to do it.

Shortly after that he said:

Ultimately Temple should not be given to the Government! It should not be given to the Government! This is the main thing. If Government will be able to control Kāmākhyā [temple complex], then we, people of Kāmākhyā, will face a lot of problems. Now we are building new houses freely. We do not need permission from GMC [Guwahati Municipal Corporation]. We have no permission. If Government will come, it will tie locks [to our buildings]. Then to get the permission, a lot of money will go. If the people of Kāmākhyā would be together, if they would run the Temple together, Government would not be able to take the Temple. I do not support anyone of them.

According to Ravi Sarma the hostilities among Kamakhysians and the resulting dispute may encourage the Government to take over the management of the temple complex. The possibility of Government

\textsuperscript{477} I do not know whether Ravi Sarma is acquainted with the Regulation, which clearly states that two Dalais, elected by Bardeuris, will be part of KDB’s executive committee. In my opinion, his words “There [in KDB] there is no Dalai” point out that KDB’s aim is to limit Bardeuris’ supremacy, by forming a mixed committee which would include also the Dalais.
interference is seen as a risk: people of the Blue Hill, Ravi Sarma fears, will inevitably suffer, once they lose hold of the temple complex.

For the past fifteen years, Kamakhyans have been constructing a number of new concrete buildings\(^{478}\). As the Blue Hill is considered to be a *debuttar* land, Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) has not, to date, had any say in the Hill’s management. Thus, those regulations controlling the building of new structures in Guwahati and in the surrounding areas do not apply to the Blue Hill: “We do not need permission from GMC”. According to Ravi Sarma, if the Government takes over control of the temple complex, those rules will be applied to the Blue Hill as well and consequently many of the recently built buildings will be shown not to meet the required standards. It is only by paying “a lot of money” that Kamakhyans would be able to have their buildings ratified as conforming to law. With a few impressive words and a serious expression on his face, Ravi Sarma voices a concern that is widespread among Kamakhyans. A number of people, belonging to all groups, expressed their apprehension about possible interference by the Government in the affairs of the temple complex. As far as KDB and the Bardeuri Samaj are concerned, as is to be expected, they blame each other for causing the dispute and thus putting the temple complex at risk.

It is not my aim, in this text, to make predictions about the dispute’s results. Anyway, a few facts need be recalled to mind. First, according to the Kamakhyans, the Assam Government has acquired a number of pieces of land which had been donated by kings to the Temple and its priests. The bitterness of the Kamakhyans’ comments on this point was shown in chapter 3, § 3. Second, amendment 25/a of the Act\(^{479}\) orders that every Assamese temple should be managed by a committee presided over by the Deputy Commissioner. True, the amendment has until now never been enforced in the Kāmākhyā temple complex. On the other hand, the District Judge and the High Court have repeatedly tried to hand over the management of the temple complex to the Deputy Commissioner, on the basis of this particular Act.

\(^{478}\) The phenomenon, which has impressive proportions (as elsewhere in contemporary India), is discussed in chapter 6, § 5.

\(^{479}\) See note 50.
Third, an interim-order of Supreme Court of 2012 has entrusted the Deputy Commissioner with the key of the Temple's treasury. In 2013 the living Bara Dalai told me that, when he needs some of the objects contained in the treasury (like the paraphernalia used during parades) he has to approach the Deputy Commissioner with a formal request. Once the rites are over, he has to return the key to the Deputy Commissioner. These elements must be in Ravi Sarma's mind, as well as in those of other Kamakhyans. In addition, Kamakhyans are aware that the Supreme Court is the highest judicial organ of India and that its final order would not be appealable.

Fuller devotes a large portion of his work to the analysis of the way the priests of the Minākṣī Temple understand the official powers which have been controlling the Temple: first the British and after 1947 the Tamil Nadu Government. Although the pictures of the relation Temple/Government relationship in the two Temples are different, significant similarities can be detected in the attitudes to the Government held by the priests of the two Temples.

Madurai came under British rule in 1801. The British, Fuller states, "became soon involved in the temple affairs and consciously took over the royal duty to 'protect' the temples"480. The Madras Regulation 7 of 1817 formalized the colonial power's policy.

In 1833, however, the Company's Court of Directors in London, responding to pressure from Christian missionaries and their supporters, ordered the government in India to withdraw from its involvement in religious institutions. The withdrawal policy was eventually enshrined in the Indian government’s Religious Endowments Act (20 of 1863), which repealed Regulation 7 and stipulated that temples were to be handed over to responsible local management committees481.

480 Fuller 1984: 112.
The policy of non-interference in religious matters seems not to have been as effective in Tamil Nadu as it was in Assam482 and “the government (at least in Madras) never succeeded in disentangling itself entirely from the temples”483. With 1863 Act:

Regulation of the temples was supposed to become the responsibility of the courts after withdrawal, but in reality ‘the legal provisions which were supposed to guarantee the administration of public endowments in the interests of the public were totally inadequate’ (Washbrook 1976: 185), and effective legal action against the new trustees was virtually impossible. Corruption was therefore widespread, and repeated but fruitless efforts were made in Madras to persuade the government to reintroduce legislation to control temple trustees484.

Eventually, in 1925, the Legislative Council of Madras issued the “Religious Endowments Act”, which gave “the government unprecedented power over the temple committees”485. In 1937 Minākṣi Temple officially came under the control of the Hindu Religious Endowments (HRE) Board. Two years later, in 1939 major agitations took place among the priests concerning the “temple-entry dispute”, that is, the opening of Minākṣi Temple to Untouchables. The priests left the Temple, and the administration replaced them with other priests. According to Fuller, it was during the six-year-long “strike” of the priests that the balance of power was definitively altered in favor of the administration. The latter, according to Fuller, exploited the priests’ absence and made a series of moves aimed at “tightening administrative supervision of the priests, thereby reducing their

482 See § 1.
483 Fuller 1984: 113. Fuller bases his reconstruction on Presler’s PhD thesis (Religion under bureaucracy: policy and administration for Hindu temples in Tamil Nadu, south India, 1978), which was unpublished when Fuller was writing Servants of the Goddess.
484 Fuller 1984: 113.
485 Ibidem. This Act is equivalent to the amendment (1987) of the Assam State Acquisition of Lands Belonging to Charitable Institutions of Public Nature Act, 1959, with the difference that the latter has never been applied in the Kāmākhya temple complex until now.
In 1951, the Tamil Nadu Government transformed the HRE Board into a Department, thus consolidating its control over temples. To summarize, a strong centralizing process was underway and the Temple, which was once linked at various titles to influential local groups, gradually came under the overall supervision of the administration. This sketch, although brief, is sufficient to understand how the Assam Government is “late” in making an attempt to control the temples existing on its territory, compared to Tamil Nadu.

At the time of Fuller’s fieldwork, priests mercilessly blamed politicians, government officials and the Temple administration. In the eyes of the priests, the people of the administration are arrogant, incompetent and dishonest. What is relevant for the present purpose is that:

…the priests [...] do not accept that there ever has been a legitimate successor to the Nāyaka dynasty [...]. neither the British nor independent Indian governments, nor their various branches and agencies, such as the courts and the Department.

Fuller stresses on various occasions the existence of a hiatus between legality and legitimacy. Priests of the Minâkṣī Temple know and admit that the innovations introduced by the administration were confirmed by the courts, that is, they were legal. But that does not mean that they regard these moves as legitimate. The only power Minâkṣī Temple priests regard as fully legitimate – and the one on which they base their position – is constituted by the now vanished royal dynasties. This concept is inherent in the Bardeuris’ stance when they uphold their “traditional rights”. In § 3 it has been shown how a Bardeuri challenged the very authority of the High Court to make decisions regarding dalai-ship. However, this concept is not limited to the Bardeuris, but is shared by all the Kamakhyans I discussed the matter with. They all see a possible interference by the Assam Government as both

486 Fuller 1984: 125.
noxious and illegitimate. The words of a non-Brahman Shebait are worth quoting. In 2013, Anand Das and I had a long conversation regarding the ongoing dispute (my translation from Assamese):

There should be a change in the committee [KDB executive committee]; the same people have been ruling for fourteen years. How is this possible? And they [the Kamakhyans] should have taken the important decisions among themselves. They fought; the case went to the Supreme Court. Now there are no means [to oppose the Supreme Court]. Whatever the Supreme Court will say, that would be the final order. What will it say? I don’t know. Actually, how can the Supreme Court know about the affairs of the temple complex? What is dalai-ship? Who are the Bardeuris? The Supreme Court knows nothing about these things [...] Now the Government got almost involved in the affairs of the temple complex. We were independent. What will happen? I don’t know. We were independent. But this will come to an end.

The Supreme Court will inevitably arbitrate this dispute, but actually it lacks the necessary knowledge to do so. Also, Anand Das says: “We were independent”. As has been shown, non-Brahman Shebaits did not have any official access to power under dalai-ship. Since KDB came to power the situation hardly changed, because the elections, which would have involved all Shebaits, never took place. Nevertheless Anand Das, a non-Brahman Shebait, is able to build up a spacious identity, embracing all Kamakhyans, irrespective of caste. Kamakhyans, understood in this broad sense, have been controlling their temple complex and should continue to do so, but, seemingly, they are going to give way to the Government.

With Anand Das’s and Ravi Sarma’s words, the weight given to the ongoing dispute completely changes. In fact, the two opposing postures held by KDB and the Bardeuri Samaj have, nevertheless, one common element: they both rest on the assumption that it is worth continuing the fight. Anand Das’s and Ravi Sarma’s statements threaten this logic: the fight is useless and
meaningless. Not only that, it may even be dangerous for the wellbeing of Temple and its people.

Ravi Sarma’s affirmation of complete neutrality is perfectly coherent with his assumption and reinforces it. Like him, many Nananbardeuris I talked with actually affirm themselves to be neutral in the ongoing dispute. In the later part of the interview, Ravi Sarma talked about the marriage of his brother (thus, a Nananbardeuri) with a Bardeuri girl from Kamakhya Dham, whose identity I will cover under the pseudonym “Sundari”:

A Bardeuri girl did not come here, in our house? Sundari is a Bardeuri girl. We arranged the marriage, isn’t it? Ultimately, I mean to say, people from Kamakhy have links with each other. We are Nananbardeuris, we arranged our marriage with Sundari, isn’t it? Sundari married my younger brother; my younger brother and me, it’s the same. The same. My brother and I have, we have this one, what you call it, blood relation!

The reference Ravi Sarma made to his brother’s marriage with a Bardeuri girl is aimed at making it clear that ultimately Brahmans of Kamakhya Dham are linked to each other and thus should not fight. At the same time, it served a second, related purpose: this statement somehow lessens the difference in status between Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris, so strongly stated by the Bardeuris. In other words, the fact that Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris can inter-marry would mean that there is not much difference between them. Later on, Ravi Sarma and I happened to talk about the distinction pāṇḍā/pujārī. Our conversation is reproduced here:

I: What is the difference between a pāṇḍā and a pujārī?
R. S.: There is no difference. A pāṇḍā can perform pūjās and a pujārī can perform pāṇḍā-hood.
I: But [to be pujārī] one has to study books.
R. S.: One has to study [books].

489 See § 3.
490 On the rules Kamakhyan Brahmans follow regarding the choice of the life partner see chapter 4, § 3.
I: Dīkṣā is required.

R. S.: Having taken dīkṣā, one has to study. It is not a big deal. Books are available. Bringing books, one can perform pūjā.

When I first had a look at the transcription of Ravi Sarma’s interview, I had the feeling that the different “pieces” were not matching up with each other. Why was Ravi Sarma talking spontaneously about his brother’s marriage, for example? Why was he so careless about the distinction pāṇḍā/pujārī? Later on I came to the following conclusions.

Ravi Sarma says: “A pāṇḍā can perform pūjās and a pujārī can perform pāṇḍā-hood”. Indeed, every Brahman of Kamakhya Dham can be a pāṇḍā and can potentially become a pujārī (of the temple he has pālā-days in); on the other hand, pujāris behave as pāṇḍās when they accompany their pilgrims to a temple which is not their own. Thus, Ravi Sarma’s words correspond to the broad framework regulating priestly activities. Nevertheless, he is omitting one extremely important rule: the ban on Nananbardeuris pujāris, who perform public and private pūjā in their temple(s), performing any pūjā in the Kāmākhyā Temple. It is beyond doubt that Ravi Sarma knows about this rule; what is relevant for the present purpose is that he is not mentioning it. Not only that. Ravi Sarma maintains that performing pūjā is not a difficult job and that books are available to help the pujārī to perform it properly. These statements differ sharply from those of Hemen Sarma, a Bardeuri pujārī. As already mentioned in chapter 2, § 2, the books (kāthās) giving instructions for the pūjā dedicated to the Goddess Kāmākhyā are manuscripts that circulate exclusively among Bardeuris. The Bardeuri pujārī must have studied them, but cannot under any circumstances consult them while performing the pūjā for the Goddess Kāmākhyā. Instead, according to Hemen Sarma, the books giving instructions for the pūjā dedicated to the minor deities have been printed, are on sale and can be consulted during the performance of the pūjās for these deities. In Ravi Sarma’s words, however, books are not categorized further.

To sum up, Ravi Sarma does not try to make any distinction between the pūjās performed for minor deities and the one performed for Goddess
Kāmākhyā. As far as religious activities are concerned, he strengthens his family’s link to Kāmākhyā Temple by affirming that they (his family) are entitled to be ṣānyāsī and should serve the Temple accordingly. By contrast, when talking about Nananbardeuris practising ṣānyāsī-hood in the Kāmākhyā Temple, Bardeuris say that it is thanks to their (the Bardeuris’) permission that Nananbardeuris can actually be ṣānyāsī. “We allow them to be ṣānyāsī” is a sentence I heard frequently. Usually, when describing the whole phenomenon, Bardeuris show no expression in their voices or their faces, as if they were speaking about some trivial matter; a gesture of the hand, signifying the act of liberally giving away something, usually accompanies this expression. The message the Bardeuris want to convey is the following: “since ṣānyāsī-hood is not such an important task as pūjārī-hood (which we only can perform), we admit that Nananbardeuri may perform it”. Ravi Sarma’s statements give a completely different impression of the phenomenon: ṣānyāsī-hood is his family’s customary duty, which should be properly performed generation by generation. Pūjārī-hood, on the contrary, is not a big deal.

Ravi Sarma undoubtedly knows very well the asymmetry between the Bardeuris’ rights and those of the Nananbardeuris; nevertheless his words are aimed at diminishing such disparity. One more element needs to be kept in mind. According to Ravi Sarma, “KDB said that Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris should be the same”. As has been shown, KDB’s agenda displays a scenario where Bardeuris, Nananbardeuris and non-Brahman Shebaits should be given equal access to the management of the temple complex. Ravi Sarma’s not mentioning non-Brahman Shebaits is in contradiction with KDB’s agenda. I do not know whether Ravi Sarma is simply not aware of the Regulation’s contents or if he is deliberately excluding the non-Brahman Shebaits from KDB’s aims. It is certain that this move tends to mark the difference between Brahmans and non-Brahmans (by ignoring the latters). At the same time the preceding moves – mentioning of inter-marriage taking between Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris, putting the

\[491\] See § 2 and § 3.
pūjā performed to the Goddess Kāmākhyā on the same level as those performed for minor deities, stressing the Nanabardeuris' duty in Kāmākhyā Temple as pāṇḍās – are aimed at smoothing out the asymmetry existing between Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris. His selective “strategy” appears to be pretty much similar to the one employed by Bardeuris in defending their “customary rights”\(^492\): those elements which can conveniently defend one’s own group’s identity are vigorously exhibited and are never subjected to any kind of doubt. At the same time, the elements, which may challenge that identity, are simply not voiced or, when the anthropologist insists, they are at best quickly spoken of, without attaching any significance to them.

While KDB has a strong hold on Kāmākhyā Temple, it does not enjoy the same relationship with minor temples. KDB receives daily a percentage of the money donated by pilgrims at the different shrines existing in the Kāmākhyā Temple campus, but to the best of my knowledge it does not receive any share of the money donated in minor temples. KDB runs a ticket system that regulates access to darśana in Kāmākhyā Temple and takes the money raised by the sale of the tickets. No ticket system exists in the minor temples. KDB continuously upgrades Kāmākhyā Temple’s infrastructure. During fieldwork, I observed an almost uninterrupted succession of works being undertaken\(^493\). However, almost no works are undertaken by KDB in minor temples. Last but not least, KDB’s office is situated within the Kāmākhyā Temple campus\(^494\). On the basis of this evidence, I am tempted to say that the control KDB has over minor temples is, if not altogether irrelevant, at least very limited. Consequently, the impact of KDB’s control on Nananbardeuris’ lives is limited as well. That is probably one of the reasons why many Nananbardeuris have a neutral attitude to KDB. Some of them say that KDB has promised to give them rights, but did not respect the promise. However, people voicing this idea do not express any particular concern

\(^{492}\) See § 4.

\(^{493}\) Many pilgrims sponsor works through KDB. As is to be expected, given the tense relations between the various groups, accusations of corruption and of mismanagement of money circulate regarding these works.

\(^{494}\) See § 2.
about it. In other words, many Nananbardeurs have the following feeling towards KDB: if the organisation did not give them anything, it did not take anything away from them either (as it did with the Bardeuris, according to the latter’s opinion).

7.6. A seventeen-year-old dispute.

Gopal Sarma (Bardeuri, supporter of the Bardeuri Samaj) affirmed in 2011:

“It has been fourteen long years, there was no selection, election, nothing; the management is running like that only. It’s a little bit of chaos [...]. It’s the same people [KDB’s executive committee’s members] running since the last fourteen years”

Shortly afterwards he told me:

If they want to do the elections, why fourteen years? What exactly is happening in fourteen years?[...] I have not seen them taking any step [...] towards the election.

Similar comments have been heard often during interviews and unplanned conversations. KDB not only stopped the elections of the Dalais; the main concern of many Bardeuris is that the very same people who were part of Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group have been in power since Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s second tenure (1991-1996). “There should be at least a change of faces”, argued Gopal Sarma.

KDB members defend themselves with two main stances. First, they underline that it was the Bardeuri Samaj that first approached the District
Judge in 1997; that is, it is because of the Bardeuri Samaj that the court case was initiated. As Bharati Prasad Sarma said “they went for litigation”. By this account KDB was dragged to court by the hair and thus obliged to defend itself. Second, they affirm that it is due to the slowness of the judicial procedure that KDB’s internal elections have not been held – and that, as has been shown, would include the Dalais' elections as well495. Bardeuris, for their part, attack this argument, saying that KDB has been delaying the judicial procedure, by systematically challenging the High Court's orders. Gopal Sarma's interview took place in June 2011, when the dispute was pending in the Guwahati High Court. After the delivery of the High Court’s order (25th October 2011) and the challenge to it, this argument has only gained more momentum. An episode that occurred during my last fieldwork may clarify this situation.

On 24th September 2013 there has been a hearing in the Supreme Court. I was in Kamakhya Dham and talked with Vijay Sarma, about the hearing:

24th September. What happen? Have you heard? In Supreme Court they spend lots of money. They buy a Judge and his son, [who is] a lawyer. They do an unethical thing! Actually in the court, an advocate cannot read [be engaged by one of the parties] in the bench where his father is a Judge. They engaged him [the son] and immediately withdrew it. Just to give the father the excuse that "My son is reading in my court, so I cannot handle the hearing and I postpone it". They know that their position is weak. That's why they are delaying the matter.

Finally he argued:

They [KDB] are the appellants, we are the respondents. In all cases, appellant go for the speedy trial. In this case, what happens? The appellant is running away and the respondent is chasing [laughing].

495 See § 3.
All the Bardeuris I heard talking about the hearing have the same opinion about this hearing: KDB intentionally engaged as its lawyer the son of the judge who was to preside over the hearing. Consequently, the judge had no option other than to postpone the hearing. Unfortunately, as I was about to leave, I did not find the means to discuss the 24th September hearing with any of the KDB members I am familiar with. In any case, I am of the opinion that KDB members do actually try to have the final judgement delayed496, because they are pretty much aware that all the orders delivered till now – since the very first one of the District Judge in 1998 – have been against them.

Vijay Sarma’s words express another widespread accusation against KDB: the latter is using the Temple’s money – that is, the money donated by devotees – in order to defend its illegitimate and illegal position. KDB responds to this accusation with the same argument described above: it is because the Bardeuri Samaj started the court case that KDB is forced to spend the Temple's money in the courts.

I want to clarify that I never observed people of the two opposing parties openly voicing these accusations in front of each other. As far as I could see, people belonging to the two opposing parties do not actually interact very much. On the contrary, within each party, people do consult each other and comment on the ongoing dispute in public, for example in the Temple campus. Thus, I assume that each party is aware of the recurrent accusations advanced by the opposing group. Some Kamakhyaans may also have noticed that I speak to people belonging to the two groups. When talking to me, Kamakhyaans actually take it for granted that I had heard the

496 It can be briefly noted that the reasons driving the two parties to oppose each other shifted with the passage of time. In 1991-1996 Bardeuris were contesting the installation of new infrastructure in the Temple campus, while Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group was firm in defending the setting up of those structures. In 1996 and 1997 a strident debate set the two groups against each other concerning the election of the Dalais. Today, in contrast, the focus of the hostilities is on the fact that the same people have been in power for seventeen years as well as on KDB’s actual management of the Temple. For its part, KDB is no longer engaged in defending its building projects; its scope now is to defend its own existence and its right to manage the Temple. In other words, the debate about Jnanada Prasad Sarma’s group’s infrastructure projects, as well as the earlier debate regarding the Dalais’ election – once of central interest – became irrelevant.
opposing group’s accusations and, consequently, are very concerned to give me their replies to those particular accusations. This common attitude allowed me to “weave” together the two opposing parties’ arguments.

Many individuals belonging to the two opposing parties reside in Kamakhya Dham, sometimes a few steps away from one another. Tight kinship relations exist between individuals belonging to the two groups. What I perceived is a sense of discomfort certain individuals feel before their relatives who belong to the opposing group. This may mean that relatives’ houses are not frequently visited and that relationships between relatives are reduced to what is strictly necessary. As far as my knowledge goes, no one ever openly reported any case of violence occurring between the two groups, nor did I hear about cases of physical aggression.

An episode I observed may provide an idea of the way the enmity between the two groups shapes people’s everyday life. It was evening and ārati had just finished. I was chatting with a Bardeuri, Govind Sarma, and some North Indian pilgrims in the Temple campus. As usual, the conversation mainly revolved around religious observance and pilgrimage sites throughout India. The pilgrims, habitués of Kāmākhyā Temple, knew Govind Sarma since their precedent visits and were conversing with him in a familiar, although respectful, way. A donation box is usually placed in that particular spot and was there at that time as well; it is an aluminium box, seventy centimetres in height, with a slit through which pilgrims can insert notes or coins. While we were talking, two employees of KDB came and carried the donation box away. To go to KDB’s office – where the money was to be counted and cashed - they had to climb the stone steps: the expression on their face indicated that that was not at all an easy job. Casting a glance at the two employees, Govind Sarma said (my translation from Assamese):

    How much money! How much! They are not able to carry it!

He uttered these words with a bitter laugh and a rancorous expression on his face. Also, he spoke loud enough for the two KDB employees to hear
him. The latter, already busy enough, did not reply. At Govind Sarma’s words, the pilgrims stared at him, with an astonished expression on their faces. Unaware of the ongoing dispute, they found it strange that Govind Sarma, being a priest of Kāmākhyā Temple, was upset by the fact that money was donated to Kāmākhyā Temple itself. Govind Sarma told them about the ongoing situation (from his point of view, of course) and concluded by telling them about the “Kannauj account”. The indulgent pilgrims nodded and did not add a single word to those of the priest.

7. 7. Concluding remarks.

The Bardeuri Samaj underpins its posture with the “Kannauj account”, which is capable of definitively distinguishing Bardeuris from all other Shebaits. Separation and exclusivity are the keywords of the Bardeuri Samaj’s standing. On the contrary, KDB stresses the need for an inclusive move, in order to involve all Shebaits into the management of the temple complex. The Bardeuri Samaj bases its stance on “tradition” and rootedness in the past, while KDB presents itself as a modern, up-to-date organization, in tune with the contemporary world. The two stances are built one against the other; it is impossible to appreciate the makeup of each of them without considering the existence of the opposing one.

Bardeuris supporting the Bardeuri Samaj throw pungent accusations against KDB (corruption, mismanagement of funds, etc.): KDB, I was told, claims that its aim is to involve all Shebaits in the management, but in fact it is only running after money and power. These accusations are incited by the fact that KDB has been actually managing the Temple; consequently, the Bardeuri Samaj feels the need of criticizing the outcome of its (KDB’s) work. To sum up, the Bardeuri Samaj makes two sets of criticisms of KDB –
ideological and moral - at the same time. First, KDB’s proclaimed aims (opening of access to power to all Shebaits) are incongruent with the tradition of the temple complex, and thus illegitimate. Second, these aims, which KDB so strongly asserts, serve the purpose of covering mere material interests. On the other hand, KDB rarely makes such harsh criticisms of the Bardeuri Samaj. Rather, it uses different tools to criticize the Bardeuri Samaj, namely it states that the supremacy of Bardeuris and dalai-ship are obsolete strands in the management of the temple complex, which need to be superseded once and for all. Bardeuris, upholding their hegemony, are narrow-minded and naïf; they are not able to conform to “the demands of the times”.

The Bardeuri Samaj’s stance is constructed through the obliteration of the internal distinctions existing among Bardeuris. This move permits the construction of a cohesive, collective identity. Bardeuris pick out the “Kannauj Account” which ring-fences their group and at the same time disregard the once effective sub-groupings.

Ravi Sarma’s position is similar. In order to merge together Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris, he ignores the significant differences existing between the two groups’ rights and underlines all the elements they have in common. He tends to create two groups: the Bardeuris-Nananbardeuris on the one hand and on the other side the non-Brahman Shebaits; and places an unbridgeable distance between them. Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris, being so tightly linked to each other, should not fight, in case the Government tries to take over the management of the temple complex. Kamakhyans see a possible interference by the Government in the affairs of the temple complex as both dangerous and illegitimate. People belonging to all castes and all groups agree on this point.

Sanjay Das’s posture echoes KDB’s propaganda: different groups are there, but all of them need to be given the same rights. Brahmans are not of superior status; they are simply arrogant, because they are convinced of their superiority.
All the postures I have described have two elements in common: they are single-focused – no doubt is admitted – and they are constructed in order to serve the purpose of the group they are voiced by. Bardeuris need to underpin their fading privileges; KDB looks for the backing of Nananbardeuris and non-Brahmans and also needs to distinguish its ideology from that of the Bardeuris. Ravi Sarma does not feel implicated in the dispute; his moves are aimed at bettering his group’s status.

In this chapter I often read between the lines of people’s statements. I frequently made a distinction between the words actually uttered by the individuals concerned and the intentions which could be detected behind those words, by framing them in a wider context. While re-reading the draft of this chapter, I realized that in most cases I was not sure whether the “real intention” I detected was conscious or not. Let us take Ravi Sarma’s words, for example. As has been shown, Ravi Sarma’s words tend to smooth out the asymmetry existing between Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris. Now, I wonder what Ravi Sarma’s intimate thoughts are. It is beyond any reasonable doubt that Ravi Sarma knows about the asymmetry distinguishing the rights of the Bardeuris from those of the Nananbardeuris. Given that, how does he interpret these rules in term of status? Is he himself convinced that no status gap exists between Bardeuris and Nananbardeuris? Or, being aware of the existence of that gap, is he trying to convince me of its irrelevance? I leave the task of dealing with these questions to further research.
Conclusion

The Kāmākhyā temple complex set on the Nilachal (the blue hill) in Guwahati includes the main Kāmākhyā Temple and some twenty minor temples. The Bardeuris (the great priests) are the Brahmans who have rights over the Kāmākhyā Temple; the Nananbardeuris (the other or different great priests) are those who have rights over the minor temples, collectively called nānāndevālaya. The Bardeuris, the Nananbardeuris and the non-Brahmans all live in the village around the main Temple, Kamakhya Dham, and are collectively called “Shebaits”.

The two groups of Brahmans undertake mainly two types of activities: those connected to public worship and those connected to private worship. In each temple, including the main one, public worship is organised through a rotation system, the pālā, which assigns every day to a specific Brahman, designated as the pālādāra. The latter has to ensure that the worship is done properly on the day he is in charge of. The Bardeuri/Nananbardeuri
distinction and the uneven distribution of pālā-days among the Brahmans who have rights over a particular temple have no bearing on pāṇḍā-hood, namely the perpetual and hereditary link between a Brahman, designated as pāṇḍā, and his pilgrims. The fact of being born of a Bardeuri or a Nananbardeuri father entitles the Bardeuris and the Nananbardeuris (and only them) to be pāṇḍās. One of the main questions behind the present thesis has been to analyse the relative significance of public and private worship in the sphere of the concepts and in the actual practices of the Brahmans.

As far as the concepts which underpin the existence of the temple complex are concerned, the public worship is clearly of primary importance. The divine presence of the Goddess and of the other minor deities on the Nilachal is taken for granted and Brahmans should execute the public daily and festive worship for these deities. On the other hand, the internal organization of the Brahman community and its activity are in many regards profoundly shaped by the considerable influx of pilgrims. The enrichment of some of the Brahmans, their tendency to engage mainly in private worship, the emergence of employee/employer relationships among the Brahmans and the concentration of the Brahmans’ activity in the areas mostly visited by pilgrims are all phenomena related to one another in specific ways which have been highlighted by the different chapters of this work.

At present, thousands of pilgrims visit the Kāmākhyā temple complex every day. A pāṇḍā can in theory approach any pilgrim (apart from those who already have a pāṇḍā); thus, in the present context, pāṇḍā-hood can result in a profitable occupation. However, since the fortune of a pāṇḍā entirely depends upon how skilled he is in approaching pilgrims and dealing with them, those pāṇḍā who, because of their own character, do not have these skills, often end up having few pilgrims. This can lead to a burning resentment on the part of the less fortunate Brahmans (see chapter 6, § 5). At the same time, many pāṇḍās, busy with their pilgrims, do not seem motivated to undertake the long and demanding process leading to pujārī-hood; and on their pālā-days they tend to delegate the worship of the Goddess to their fellows who are pujārīs (chapter 3, § 3).
As far as the Bardeuri community is concerned, the large pilgrim numbers contribute to the creation of employee/employer relationships among the Bardeuris. As shown in chapter 3, § 4, the pālādāra may decide to delegate the guarding of the sanctum to fellow Bardeuris, in order to be free to deal with his pilgrims.

A dense and diverse Brahman activity is observable in those temples of the complex which receive large number of pilgrims. The Kāmākhyā Temple is where all pilgrims go. As shown in chapter 6, § 1, a number of pāṅgās are always to be met outside the eastern entrance of the Temple campus where they approach pilgrims. Within the Kāmākhyā Temple, the sanctum and the second chamber (the calantā, through which pilgrims access and leave the sanctum) are very lucrative. This encourages the emergence of out-of-pālā activities. As shown in chapter 3, § 4, a number of Bardeuris ask pilgrims for donations for some of the bas-reliefs located in the calantā. It can be noted incidentally that the areas of the Temple campus where pilgrims mostly circulate are very profitable too; here non-Brahman Shebaits ask for donations from pilgrims for various minor idols.

Some of the minor temples which compose the complex receive large pilgrim numbers. Again, the Brahman presence and activity are dense in these temples. For instance, there is always a Brahman in the sanctum of the Kālī temple. On the other hand, the sancta of many minor temples where only a few pilgrims go are often left unguarded throughout the day. In some minor temples which are not visited by many pilgrims the daily worship is not regularly performed.

The present situation at the Kāmākhyā temple complex is in many regards similar to that which Fuller (2003, chapter 2) describes in his ethnographic research at the Mīnākṣi Temple in Madurai (Tamil Nadu). It is their rights over the Mīnākṣi Temple that entitle the Brahmans to perform the private worship. According to the author “although the priests consistently aver that public worship is far more important, only private worship is paid (ibidem: 33)”. The Brahmans of the Mīnākṣi Temple concentrate their energies on serving well-off patrons who mainly belong to
the Madurai middle class and sponsor expensive, ostentatious forms of worship, which the administration of the Temple has wisely introduced in the 1980s. At the same time, some priests have been smart enough to move to the U.S., where they work in Hindu temples, delegating their tasks in the public worship to their relatives back in Madurai. The sharply different fortunes existing among the priests of the Mīnākṣi Temple result in strident debates.

In both the cases observed by Fuller and by myself, the pilgrim influx and the consequent circulation of money contribute to resetting the relationships among the priests and result in the enrichment of some of them, with predictable resulting frictions among priests. However, one main difference between the two cases needs to be highlighted. Fuller stresses that it is the middle class of Madurai (and nearby areas) that is mainly responsible for the uplift of the Brahmans’ economic conditions. By contrast, as shown in chapter 5, § 2, the catchment area of the Kāmākhyā temple complex is comparatively wider and more diverse.

The flux of pilgrims, however, is not the only element which stimulates the Kamakhyan Brahmans’ activity. The latter, in fact, are strongly devoted to the Goddess and the other deities inhabiting the Nilachal; they frequently undertake the role of the yajāmana (patron of the rite) and sponsor rites in the temples of the complex. For instance, Himangshu Sarma, a Bardeuri, has been sponsoring the preparation of prasāda (food presented to the deities and then distributed to people) at the Koṭiliṅga temple (one of the five Śiva temples of the complex) for many years (chapter 6, § 6). In this thesis, by stressing the importance of the pilgrim influx in shaping the Brahmans’ activity, I do not want to underplay the Brahmans’ sincere devotion to the Goddess and the other deities inhabiting the Nilachal. It is difficult (and probably useless) to disentangle the contented feeling of a pāṇḍā after a rite demanded by his pilgrims has been performed in a way that he and they consider proper, from the fact that he is aware that the relationship with these pilgrims will result in an economic benefit for him. The Brahmans feel very much linked to the Goddess Kāmākhyā, their Divine Mother. An
expression a Brahman is inclined to use for himself is Kāmākhyā rora (son of Kāmākhyā). The relationship with the Goddess is crucial in the make up of their identity; thus, the fact that pilgrims worship the Goddess Kāmākhyā adds to their self-esteem.

This work has also highlighted another phenomenon related to the large pilgrim numbers, that is, the presence of Brahmans from outside the Nilachal in the Kāmākhyā temple complex. The outsider Brahmans undertake various activities which result in various relationships with the Kamakhyan Brahmans: some of the outsider Brahmans are freelance, so to speak, while others are the employees of a particular Brahman (chapter 6, § 6). The Brahman cooks employed on a permanent basis by specific Brahman households and the pāṇḍās’ helpers are part of the second category. By contrast, the outsider Brahmans who perform the saṁskāras (rites of passage) for pilgrims interact with Kamakhyan pāṇḍās, who supervise the rites, but are not at the service of any specific pāṇḍās. The same applies to the Brahman cooks who are summoned by different Kamakhyan households when the latter perform a pūjā or a saṁskāra. Nevertheless, these two classes of people maintain quite stable relationships with the temple complex.

The pilgrim influx does not only shape the Brahmans’ internal organisation and their activities connected to the private worship. It also results in the fact that the Brahmans (and Kamakhyans in general) are becoming day by day more ready to satisfy the pilgrims’ this-worldly needs and desires. Many Kamakhyan Brahmans venture into entrepreneurial activities: they run guesthouses, restaurants and shops for pilgrims (chapter 6, § 5). Providing pilgrims with various facilities results in the need for manpower: young uneducated boys from Assamese villages and from Koch Bihar are employed as helpers in the restaurants and as shop-keepers; others are employed by Kamakhyans who own photographic laboratories to take photos for pilgrims. The skinny labourers transporting piles of bricks for the new constructions are a recurrent image in my memories, just as much as the pāṇḍās carrying brass plates of freshly cut fruits to be offered to the deities.
In the Introduction I clarified that my concern is not only the analysis of the Brahmans' activities and of their position in the society they live in; I chose to focus my attention on their discourses regarding these activities and on the way they interpret the circumstances they live in too. Kamakhyan Brahmans interpret the current pilgrimage revolving around the temple complex in diverging ways and make comparison with what they understand the past to have been like. Many of them (but not all) often say that beforehand powerful ascetics used to visit the temple complex to engage in demanding spiritual practices. “Today”, some of my interlocutors concluded, “the way is blocked for them [the ascetics]”. And they unanimously state that in the past a smaller number of pilgrims used to visit the temple complex.

Like many Hindu Goddesses, Kāmākhyā is strongly connected to motherhood and is benign and, at the same time, has a dangerous side. In the Kāmākhyā temple complex, as in other tantric contexts, a strong link is established between power and danger. The Goddess Kāmākhyā is powerful and that power circulates between Her and the people who serve Her. The relation is dynamic: the priests who devote their energies to the worship end up participating in the divine energy of the Goddess; that, in turn, contributes to the power of the place where they undertake their practices. Wholehearted dedication is needed on the part of the priests. Worshipping the powerful Goddess is demanding and dangerous for the priests involved in that worship. Kamakhyan stress how difficult it is to learn the correct procedure to worship the Goddess and insist that no one should dare to do it unless his seniors permit him to do so (chapter 2).

A creeping idea among Kamakhyan (and long-term pilgrims) is that the power of the Goddess, of Her servants and of the temple complex in general is slowly fading away (chapter 6, § 5). Humans are defective. They do not devote themselves to the Goddess. I heard incredible stories about Ramani Kanta Sarma, a famed Kamakhyan pujārī: while meditating he would float on water, I was told. Those Kamakhyan who extolled him with eyes full of vibrant emotion, often concluded: “Where are men like him today?”
The conversations between the pāṇḍās and their pilgrims contribute to shaping the image of the Goddess Kāmākhyā. The discourses I heard from Kamakhyans and pilgrims generally tend to stress Her benevolence. The pāṇḍās talking to their householder middle-class pilgrims portray a caring, generous Goddess and tend to ignore Her potentially destructive side.

The fact that the Kāmākhyā Temple is the main one of the complex assigns ritual superiority to the Bardeuris who alone are entitled to worship the Goddess Kāmākhyā (this is consistent with the fact that the Bardeuri pujārī is entitled to worship not only the Goddess Kāmākhyā, but any other deity inhabiting the Nilachal). This thesis, however, has shown that hierarchy is not something on which people agree; rather, diverging interpretations of it circulate among Brahmins (Bardeuris and Nanabardeuris) and between Brahmins and the non-Brahmans. The analysis has been carried out considering people’s discourses (chapter 4) as well as an ongoing dispute concerning the administration of the temple complex (chapter 7). It is thanks to this approach that I managed to analyse people’s diverging opinions regarding the relationship between ritual ranking and the political sphere.

The Bardeuris and the Nanabardeuris mutually acknowledge that they are all Brahmins and regularly intermarry. However, the mutual ranking of the two groups is far from being unanimously accepted. The Bardeuris proudly proclaim their exclusive rights to worship the Goddess Kāmākhyā and back up their rights with a discourse regarding their alleged origin in Kannauj (chapter 4, § 1).

For their part, Nanabardeuris never rank themselves second to the Bardeuris. They avoid doing so through several distinct stances: claiming their origin to be in North India, as the Bardeuris do; or conversely, devaluing any claim about the Brahmins’ alleged origins in North India, including the Bardeuris’ claims; emphasising the power and standing of the minor deities they serve (chapter 4, § 2, similarly some non-Brahmans stress the significance of their ritual tasks); highlighting the interrelatedness of Bardeuris and Nanabardeuris on the basis of the fact that they intermarry; stressing the significance of the fact that Nanabardeuris are pāṇḍās in order
to connect them to the Kāmākhyā Temple, smoothing the gap between the rules regulating the worship of the Goddess Kāmākhyā and that of minor deities (chapter 7, § 5).

Clearly, the Bardeuris’ stance is far more cohesive than those of the Nananbardeuris. A ranking exists among Bardeuri subgroups which is currently operative in the way ritual tasks are allotted to the subgroups in the festive rites as well as in the daily ones. And Bardeuris discharge their ritual tasks in accordance with this ranking (chapter 3, § 1, 2 and 3). In their discourses, however, they form a uniform group and anonymously state that it is their exclusive right to elect the Dalais (heads of the temple complex) among themselves. They are driven to do so because the significance of the position of Dalai and control over the temple complex are at stake in a seventeen-year-old dispute which, at the time of writing, is pending in the Supreme Court of India. The beginning of the dispute is closely interconnected with the emergence in 1996-1998 of the Kamakhya Debutter Board (KDB), namely the committee which presently exerts the most significant control over the Kāmākhyā Temple. Unlike the Bardeuris’ stance, which is founded on what they understand to be “tradition” and on their claimed prestigious past, the stance of the KDB is orientated towards the future. KDB, which includes among its members Bardeuris, Nananbardeuris and non-Brahmans, claims to be rooted in “democracy” because it aims at forming a mixed committee including the Dalais (elected by the Bardeuris) as well as the representatives of the Nananbardeuris and of the non-Brahmans. KDB’s stance operates a distinction between the ritual sphere (Bardeuris’ exclusive rights over the Kāmākhyā Temple are not questioned) and the political sphere, where all servants of the temple complex are considered equal. KDB’s stance is shared, with different nuances, by some Bardeuris, Nananbardeuris and non-Brahmans who support it. These people see in KDB a modern, up-to-date body and dismiss the Bardeuris’ claims as obsolete.

On the reverse, the stance of the Kamakhya Bardeuri Samaj (the association of the Bardeuris) is orchestrated upon the overlap between the ritual and political spheres: in their own eyes, the Bardeuris are ritually
superior and therefore they should be at the head of the temple complex, through the Dalais.

To sum up, this work has taken into consideration the internal functioning of the two Brahman groups of the Kāmākhyā temple complex and their mutual ranking; the diverse relationships between Brahmans and pilgrims and the influence exercised by the pilgrim influx on the lives of the Brahmans; and the place of the two Brahman groups in the administration of the temple complex. All in all, I have tried to embrace all the spheres of activity of the Brahmans and the social relations arising from these activities. In discussing these issues I combined the analysis of my observations with that of the discourses through which the Brahmans interpret and judge their activities and standing and those of others and, in general terms, the circumstances in which they live and the changing dynamics they see before their eyes. I hope this work can contribute to enrich further anthropological analysis of Brahman communities and the contemporary dynamics around pilgrimage places, not only in Assam but in South Asia as well.
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Key to the map of the Kāmākhyā Temple.

Idols in the sanctum:

1. Kāmākhyā
2. Kamalā and Mātaṅgi

Idols in the calantā:

3. Kāmesvara and Kāmesvari
4. Maṅgala Caṇḍī
5. Kali Avatāra
6. Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhira
7. Rāmā Candra
8. Baṭuka Bhairava
9. Nārāyaṇa
10. King Naranārāyana
11. Annapūrṇā
12. Gurū Dronācārya
13. King Cilārāy
14. Nilakaṇṭha Mahādeva
15. Nandi
16. Bhṛṅgi
17. Kapila (or Jalatkāra) Muni and Manasā

Idols in the pañcaratna:

18. Manasā
19. Cāmuṇḍā
Idols in the nāṭa-mandira:

20. Durgā
21. Durgā

I. sanctum
II. calantā
III. pañcaratna
IV. nāṭa-mandira
V. bhoaga-ghar
VI. pilgrims’ shade
Photos