ALLUSIONS to erotic excess and magical prowess of the Assamese women were commonplace in British India, particularly in British Bengal. That the voluptuous and sexually insatiable women in the perilous frontier could — and in many instances actually did — turn male strangers into sheep was a widely shared belief. Stories circulated, images were drawn, and in fact, even now the colloquial expression “Kāmākhyā’s sheep” continues in the quotidian conversations to excite the image of an enchanted, docile male who is entirely under the control of a seductive woman. The strikingly long career of this expression — wavering between metaphor and literality — is unevenly dispersed across various registers of nineteenth and twentieth century vernacular imagination. ¹ Reading around some of these scattered records, this chapter wishes to chase the strange destinies of untutored

¹ Sushil Kumar De, bānglā prabād: charā o caltī kathā (1945; Calcutta: A. Mukherjee & Co., 2002) provides eight instances of the expression in Bengali literary usage: one from Gopal Ure’s song, two from Pearichand Mitra’s ālāler gharer dulāl, one each from Dinabandhu Mitra’s sadhabār ekāḍaśī and nīl darpan, one each from Amritalal Basu’s bāhabā bātik and grāmya bibhrāt, and one from Sarat Chandra Chatterjee’s śrīkānta. Nos. 1710, 2543, 6333.
imaginations in a historicist environment where sincere efforts were made to glean history from every tradition.

In one sense, this chapter is about the translative process of historicist rationalization and its scandals. What happens to the elements “that cannot enter history ever as belonging to the historian’s own position”, to exploit Dipesh Chakrabarty’s well-known formulation of “subaltern pasts”? How do these recalcitrant, disenfranchised elements strain and reconfigure the “hierarchies of credibility” structuring the expert discourse and the “common sense”? Where does the realm of the plausible end? Actually, in another sense, this chapter too is about borders and geographies: the realm of the plausible and the place of the absurd, the surface of the literal and the depth of the allegorical, the provincial landscape of British Assam and the dispersed geographies we give the name of vernacular. At this point, we must clarify what we intend to carry by the word vernacular. In our usage, vernacular is not another addition to the long litany of irreducible identities: it is not a stand-in for the native, the primal, the indigenous and the uncontaminated. Vernacular, for us, is the promise of full translatability which necessarily fails itself. It occurs at the moment of translation when it is forced to an act of exchange. It remains exchangeable to the extent the master language remains prepared to be shortchanged. We hope to illustrate this formulation in the pages that follow, but now it is time for stories.

_Circe’s Cousins?_

The “stories” are many, and we do not know which one is not ours. In the case of Circe, who of course will come to mind when we are thinking in terms of a seductive shape-shifter enchantress, it has been pointed out that the schematic nature of the relevant Odyssey episode “takes it for granted that you know a fuller story of which this is an abbreviated version.” We wish we knew what the “fuller story” was. Indeed, as the following paragraphs will recall for the readers, 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

---

3 This phrase is from Ann Laura Stoler, “In Cold Blood”: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives”, *Representations* 37 (1992): 151-189
circulation. But is the “fuller story” a cumulative aggregate of these tales? Or are they versions with no originals? Frankly, it is not possible to determine, particularly because they come to us through a long fractal history of remembrance, textualization, compilation, editing and translation over three centuries. Therefore, it is not fruitful either to attempt a model of “literary evolution”, as has been done by Charles Segal in his nice and neat essay on the literary representations of the “Circean temptations” successively in Homer, Virgil and Ovid.5 Sources are scattered. But there is another difficulty too: What should be taken as the essential and indispensable elements of our stories, without which we shall cease to recognize them? Is it the turning-into-sheep part? Is it the connection between magical charms and erotic might? Is it the mention of Kāmarūpa, the name by which apparently Assam was known in the pre-British textual world of South Asia? Or, is it the reference to an exclusive land of women? Not everything is present everywhere. To complicate the matter further, unlike Circe, there is no single figure into which the forces of magic, enchantment and carnal pleasure could be condensed. Women are often present in the stories, but in some versions they too disappear to give the impression that the stories are more about a country of magic and miracles than about the women residing in it.

Even for the most unforgiving postcolonial avenger, it is difficult to presume that the magical women caught up in these stories were completely “new symbols for new times”, as Luise White has argued for the loosely comparable vampire stories current in East and Central Africa in the 1910s and 1920s.6 Rather, almost all the nineteenth-century collectors of the stories claimed that they were simply recording a longstanding tradition in the country and the subsequent exposures of precolonial manuscripts to a wider public have not seriously challenged their claims. Our regular whipping boy, it seems, needs some rest: the land of magic that these stories mention was not what Anne McClintock calls “a pornotropics for the European imagination – a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which

Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears. Metropolis is not a racial enclosure.

However, to save the specificities of the stories from the indiscriminate onslaught against “Enlightenment metaphysics” is not to keep to the more conventional secular explanations which naggingly insist that these are not completely unparalleled stories. Predominantly male anxieties about “a land of women, where men lose their customary position of dominance and live, when they live at all, as slaves or victims of magic” constitute almost an anthropological universal. Thus, Verrier Elwin, the only trained anthropologist to my knowledge who has devoted some time to examine these Assam stories, explains away their peculiarity citing multiple analogous traditions from areas as varied as Greece, Arabia, New Guinea and China. While this homespun structuralism still fails to answer the simple question, “but why Assam?”, it can indeed be nicely combined with a more historically sensitive rationalization. One may think of Mary Douglas’s classic work, for instance, which seeks to demonstrate that the vulnerability of societies at their margins is greatest since the contrast between form and non-form is strikingly visible: “one is at the edge of organized reality and can feel the anomic terror of uncertainty and confusion.” Assam, we are told, was anyway removed from the major theater of Indian history and, therefore, as an ill-connected frontier constituted a kind of terra incognita mirroring the ignorance and psychosis of the neighboring people and states. That is how most of the nineteenth-century enlightened responses explained these stories, and that is how it continues to be understood today.

Such explanations do little more than eternalizing the issue of Assam’s marginality. Moreover, it hypostatizes “anxiety.” Undefined worries (of a sedentary population?, of a self-conscious masculinity?, of a stabilized state?) seem to be the only running thread connecting these diverse stories dispersed in time and space. How can we think of a history of that anxiety which keeps itself impervious to the multiple historical practices? One of the more articulate samples of these precolonial narratives, as recorded by Briggs in his Garakhnath and the Kamakhya Yogis, is as follows:

---

7 McClintock, Imperial Leather, 22-25
8 Verrier Elwin, Myths of the North-Eastern Frontier of India (Shillong: North East Frontier Agency, 1958), 199-202
Once he [Gorakhnāth] took the form of a fly in order to avoid guards on the border of a certain king's country; at another time he changed himself into iron, and again into a frog. He transformed certain of his disciples so that half of their bodies became gold and the other half iron. He turned himself into a leper before Vāchāl. The disciples who were sent by Gorakhnāth to Kāru to get the thread with which to draw Puran [another disciple] from the well, were turned by magic into bullocks. This was reported to him and he took ashes from his bag, charmed them and tossed them into the air. Thereupon the bullocks came to him and he patted them and changed them back into man. In return, being angry, he dried up all the wells, bringing their water into the near himself. When the women came, all together, at his request to draw water, he took charmed ashes and, in the name of Matsyendranāth [the first guru of the cult], turned the women into asses. Long ears, small hoofs (had they, and) grazed on the dung heaps.10

We are tempted to remember similar stories from other, overlapping narrative networks. One among them comes from the seventeenth-century janamsākhīs or biographies of Nānak, the first guru of Sikhism. It almost repeats the situation. But of course the saint here is not Gorakhnāth but Nānak, and the disciple is not Puran, but Mardānā, and the country is not Kāru but Kaurī or Kāvarī. Nānak's disciple was turned not into a bullock, but into a sheep and in his retaliatory move, the guru turned these women into bitches. McLeod observes, Sākhī 23 is set in a land called Kaurī, or Kāvarī, a land ruled by female magicians. The queen's name is given as Nūr Shāh. Mardānā [Nānak’s disciple] went ahead to beg for food and was turned into a lamb by one of the enchantresses. Gurū Nānak, following him, caused a pot to adhere to the woman's head, and told Mardānā to restore himself by saying Vahīgurū and bowing down. The female magicians all converged on Gurū Nānak when they heard what he had done, some riding on trees, some on deerskins, some on the moon, several on a wall, and some on a whole grove of trees. When their efforts to enchant him failed Nūr Shāh herself came and tried magic and various sexual temptations. All failed and the women finally submitted.

This is the more popular Purātan janam-sākhī version. In the older Bālā sākhī version, which is “much simpler and briefer”, McLeod says,

---

[There is no reference to a queen called Nur Shāh, and the miracles described differ from those of the Purātan account. According to the Bālā story, two women who seek to seduce the Gūrū are changed, one into a ewe and the other into a bitch (Oriental and India Office Library, Punjabi Manuscript B41, folio 71a). In the earliest of the Bālā printed editions most of the manuscript version has been dropped and the Purātan version substituted in its place.\footnote{W. H. McLeod, Gūrū Nānak and the Sikh Religion (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41.}

In the broadly shared narrative network in the precolonial lower Gangetic Valley usually classed as Bengali Nath Literature, a comparable tale seems to have been very popular. Till date, seventeen such adaptations of the story are said to be extant in manuscript-form in Bengal although only three of these manuscripts have been edited and published: 12

According to this story, commonly known as Goraksa-Viśay, the first guru of the Nath order, Mīnanāth or Matsyendranāth, was punished by the goddess Gaurī to the Kadali country which was purely a land of women. Forsaking his ascetic obligations, the yogi there “got enamoured with six[teen?] hundred women and was passing his days with them in erotic dalliances.”\footnote{They are Nalini Kanta Bhattashali (ed.), Minacetan (Dacca: Dacca Sahitya Parishat, c. 1915); Abdul Karim (ed.), Goraksa-Viśay (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, c. 1917); Panchanan Mandal (ed.), Gorkha-Viśay (Shantiniketan: Visva-bharati, copy undated).} But his worthy disciple, Gorakhaṇāth, entered the city of Kadali posing as a dancing girl and in the course of musical performance reminded the preceptor of his duties. Rescuing the guru from the hands of the magical enchantresses, Gorakhaṇāth with a curse changed the women into bats. 14 (It might be interesting to note that the account of Matsyendranāth's trip to Kadali is rather different in the Marwari manuscript of Nathacaritra, collected and edited during the early nineteenth century in Jodhpur. According to this thread, it was Matsyendranāth who secretively entered the dead body of the deceased king to enjoy sexual relationship with the queens and to pursue luxurious life. The queens however soon discovered the trick, and Matsyendranāth was in trouble.\footnote{Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta, Obscure Religious Cults as Background of Bengali Literature (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946), 378}

As there is very little space to discuss, we shall briefly raise a few issues about these stories from the male ascetic tradition. To put it simply: it is not a whimper of anxiety but the laughter of mastery that organizes these narratives. The Kāru, Kaurī, or Kāvarī women are certainly in possession of some supernatural powers — they turn the gurus’ disciples into animals; but their power exists only in a subordinate relation to the overpowering might of

\footnote{Bhattashali (ed.), Minacetan; Karim (ed.), Goraksa-Viśay.}

\footnote{Hazariprasad Dwivedi, nāṭh-sampraṇādy (Allahabad: Hindustan Academy, Uttar Pradesh, 1950), 51}
the gurus. And it is not exclusively feminine: Gorakh and Nānak play the same tricks with them—turn them into asses, bitches and bats. Magical prowess is not necessarily a feminine attribute within these narratives; neither is *siddhi* or the attainment of the supernatural power is split into two moral halves of white and black magic. Gorakh turns himself to other forms as well. In fact, as the last set of stories demonstrates, the Kadali women do not display any remarkably miraculous power as such; instead they are the precise opposition to any magical operation, because such powers can derive, as Gorakh reminded his guru, only from a strict adherence to the rules of asceticism and yoga. The Kadali women manage to wean away Matsyendranāth from these rules, in consequence of which he loses his own magical potency and falls victim to the carnal and worldly temptations.

Can we skip a couple of couple of centuries and bring all this to the following extract? This was collected in the late nineteenth century by a Christian missionary, P. O. Bodding, from the Santals in Chhotanagpur which by then was forced to grow into a major recruiting area for the Assam tea garden laborers.

The [Kāmrū] country is very rich and fertile, and there are only women living there, or else the women predominate, and no one is able to go there and stay. Another report is that there are men also, but they are not liked by the women (definite reasons that cannot be recorded are given). Once a Santal had gone there and was at once caught by a woman. He told that he had come to learn their ‘science’, and was kept for five years by the Kāmrū woman who during daytime had him covered by a *dimri*, a large bamboo basket, and instructed him during the night. At last he got his *sid* (‘science’); the woman turned him into a kite [sic] and he flew back into his own country.

Another story tells of a Santal child who was caught by a vulture and carried to Kāmrū country; here he grew up and ultimately married. He wanted to get back to his own country and with much difficulty persuaded someone to help him. But every time having started to go in the morning, when it became evening he found himself coming back to the place he started from. At last a woman told him that he must leave everything behind, not take anything of that country along; else he would never succeed. On doing this he got away.

And so on. The traditional Kāmrū country is a country of strange people with strange powers; the inhabitants can at will turn a man into a dog or any other animal. In those parts of the world the fabulous *ekṣatā* and *gromhā* are found, with one leg and heads like that of horses, otherwise like human beings, who buy and eat people.
All in all, Kāmrū country is a land full of magic and witchcraft; but the stories told seem to imply that it is the women who are so dangerous and powerful. 16

The painful gathering of a belongingness disrupted by programmed migration is only too evident in these stories. Even Bodding noticed how in these stories the experience of “many … living Santals [who had] been in Assam as labourers in tea gardens and otherwise” was contributing to

the tales current about the Kāmrū country, e.g., telling how they had been caught and kept for years by women who during daytime kept them hidden or made them into rams or the like and let them out at night, who taught them sorcery, and so on, and from whom they only escaped with the greatest difficulty, risking their lives.

Even the most literalist of the historians would not say that Matsyendranāth had returned as the Santals in these stories. If there is an anxiety here, it is more about being deprived than about overconsuming. The sense of displacement, which is expectably less acute in the accounts of the wandering ascetics, invents a sign of escapability not in the might of the redeemer Yogi but in the science of the Kāmrū women. At the end of the day it is always a Kāmrū woman who tells the Santal his way home. When Odysseus sails away, Greece sends him a favorable breeze.

It is this continual dispersal of the received unity of the story along the incessant interjections of disjunctive temporality that we must engage. It will always spill over an evolutionist paradigm, we know, and yet we must make it speak to the master language of linear time. That is our trade. We are ready to be shortchanged. But we proceed with the understanding that the figure of the sheep-converting women did not arise at a pristine moment of the primitive precolonial and since then evolved smoothly through the ignorance and folly of the people, as the modernist accounts would have it. Nor was it the “successive configurations of an essentially identical meaning”, to borrow a phrase from Foucault, 17 a slow but gradual exposure of the hidden transhistorical “anxiety.” On the contrary, irreconcilable elements emerge and disappear in dense, heterogeneous time, leaving the myth of the origin scattered and challenged. The challenge is, as Ann Laura Stoler urges us to

---

16 P. O. Bodding, Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore (1925-40; Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1986), 126

Kāmākhya’s Sheep 436
remember, “How do we represent that incoherence rather than write over it with a neater story we wish to tell?”18

*Mixed-Up Geographies*

In a passing remark, Bodding alleged that the Santals were just “mix[ing] up the present Kamrup district [in Assam] with the traditional Kāmru country.”19 This chapter wishes to chase this idea of *mix-up* seriously – beyond its accusative ring. The ambiguous line between the geographies experienced from the geographies fabled not only confounded the colonial ethnographer, it produced contestation over the very spatial strategy along which the whole edifice of Indian history was erected. As we have argued in Chapter Four, by the beginning of the twentieth century, place name identification was considered a major, almost foundational, step towards constructing an authentic history of India and its regions. Experts, writing usually in English, started publishing thickly footnoted volumes to prove or disprove particular identifications of locations mentioned in the Purānas and other Sanskrit texts with existing localities on the British Indian map. Translated into the new language of history, the epic-purānic geographies energized interesting dynamics. On the one hand, as Chapter Four insists, the disciplinary exigency acted as a constraint: what Sheldon Pollock has called the “open-endedness of ... spatializations” in the precolonial textual economy was increasingly threatened with a historicist closure. Sites that had been arguably “infinitely reproducible” across the vast “uncentered world of Sanskrit”20 were now incarcerated in specific, exclusive and delimited territorialities. There was only one Ganga, only one Mount Meru, and more ominously for us today, only one Ayodhya. This, on the other hand, also structured the scope of local responses to some extent, at least among a section of the educated middle class. To repeat, the increasing access to print and the unpretentious dependence of etymology on aural semblances encouraged many a local educated, well versed in the village and district traditions and broadly acquainted with the identificatory methodology of indology, to debate

18 Stoler, *In Cold Blood*, 154
and discuss the possible locations of a scripted territory. As the focus gradually expanded from the high Sanskrit texts to the more popular colloquial narratives, the promise of earning a place of repute for one's own locality – understood variously as region, province, district, or village – in the national tradition seemed even more tempting. Diverse traditions were mobilized, pitted against one another, and with a little help from flexible etymology, contenders often passionately tried to inscribe their preferred places into the organic core of the nation-space. 21

The remarkable sense of urgency and angst that animated many of the vernacular histories in colonial Assam over this issue appears particularly sharp in the context of Assam's belated emergence in the map of British India and the lack of what the historians perceived as a clear Aryan ancestry. It was in this context that the epic-purānic references to Kāmarūpa and Prāgjyotisapura were taken as Assam's passport to the eternal space of the essential nation. Working through the scattered references in the Sanskrit texts the early historians of colonial Assam tried to negotiate a coherence of history which could not be otherwise guaranteed. Although cast aside by Edward Gait in 1905 as "dubious and fragmentary references" 22, the local and nationalist scholarship clung to these allusions as indispensable proofs of Assam's Aryan nucleus. We have discussed all these points in Chapter Four.

However, this chapter wishes to point at the other, less classicized careers of Kāmarūpa – careers which had little to do with the epic glory. Indeed, Kāmarūpa featured very frequently in the "large and highly diverse body of texts and traditions" collectively understood as the tantras. 23 Among the early Indologists, the tantras were considered the "worst and most corrupt stage" of Hinduism – the farthest point from its pure Aryan core. 24 Consisting of coded chants and ritualistic diagrams – what appeared to the baffled colonial commentators as "silly mummary of unmeaning jargon and gibberish" 25 – these texts, unlike the epic-purānic narratives, frequently posed positive resistance to literal-historicist reading. Not every allusion to Kāmarūpa in the tantras could be reduced to a simple notion of mappable territoriality. In fact, some tantras categorically denied that there could be any earthly place.

21 For a discussion of the fabrication of the organic core of the nation-space see Goswami, Producing India, ch. 6
22 Gait, History of Assam, 1
24 H. M. Monier Williams, quoted in Kathleen Taylor, Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: 'An Indian Soul in a European Body?' (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 124
25 L. A. Waddell, quoted in Taylor, Sir John Woodroffe, 119
called Kāmarūpa. 26 Many of the Sanskrit texts which were slotted into the category of the tantras (and many other texts which were not) incessantly and creatively played with the word Kāmarūpa, maintaining a purposeful polyvalence which could alternatively or simultaneously refer to a place in the world, women’s genitalia, profile of a god, and forces of passion. 27

Although Kāmarūpa was not so much an object of poetic skill in the popular vernacular ballads, and although its geographicality was never explicitly contested in these narratives, they posed another set of problems to the historicist truth-seeker. Richard Temple, while collecting the materials for his Legends of the Panjab in the middle of the nineteenth century, recorded a song from an Ambala gathering where the hero, Gūgā the Raja of Bāgar, relates his sorrow to Tatīg Nāg after his marriage was suddenly broken off:

My friend, I command thee: do this.
It is across seven rivers: its name is Dhūpnagar.
Its name is Dhūpnagar: the king’s daughter is Siriyal.
She was betrothed (to me) and then he drew back. This is what I want.
This is all I want: I have told the whole facts.
The country is Kārū; the Goddess Kamachhya; (the people) are great sorcerers.

An incredulous Temple was particularly amused by the last two lines—“Ye iñā hi kām hamirā; kahi haqiqat sārī / Kam Des, Kamadhya Deśī, ’ilmehazab hai thārī’—and exclaimed but it never seems that the king who broke the marriage (Rāja Sanjā) or his daughter (Sīryal Rājaṁāwār) are from Kamrup etc. Rather throughout the text their place has been called Dhūpnagar and Tatīg Nāg, who helps Gūgā, goes to that place and performs charms; not people thereof. The lone line seems to be more like an expression of faith than a geographical location. 28

Temple ironed out this doubt in his brief introduction to the tale by explicitly identifying Gūgā’s wife as “a princess of what appears to be the line of the Aham rulers of Kāmrūp in Assam.” 29 As we shall continue to see, the nineteenth and twentieth century collectors and historians unfailingly identified these wondrous countries—Kārū, Kaurū, Kāvarū, Kāmrū,
Kadali, Kāmrūp-Kāmākhya— with the secular geography of Assam. But the logics of the vernacular geographies were different. As in the case of the Ambala song, so in the Songs of Gopichand collected in northern Bengal, the territorialities were not always locatable on maps. Let us follow the trajectory of Kānupha, for instance, when he widely travels in the world in search of the Guru Jalandhar. He starts from Udayagiri, "the place of the rising sun," goes to Kiskindhyā, the famous den of the Rāmāyana monkeys, and then to Devapuri the paradise, via Ayodhyā, Brindāvana, Kailāśa, Astagīri, and Sumeru, all canonical landmarks in the epic world of Sanskritic culture. From the paradise Kānupha moves through the Ekthengiyā country, via Gayā and Pātnā, to Strī Rājya, Kadali and Kāmarūpā. Similarly, when the birds set out to look for Gopichand, they pass through the countries of Ekthengiyā (where the people “cook, serve and eat food while standing on one leg”), Kānparā (where “one ear rolls on the ground and the other ear flies”), Maśārājā (where “mosquitoes comparable to crows and eagles in size fly around”), Mechpārā (where everybody is strong and stout, and eat too much), Tripātan (where “the men cook rice and the women sit and eat/ and even beat the men when they bring the meal late”), along with Gayā, Kāśī and Vrindāvana, the more known sites of pilgrimage in the Gangetic Valley.

The classicized places, the familiar places and the incredible places followed each other in a rapid succession which was at best confusing to the historicist. Which of the names were transparent, and which others were not? Which place names should be translated and etymologically reduced to produce a historically defensible meaning, and which place names should be treated as proper names, as inalienable and non-transferable properties of the nation? In 1922, while working on an early nineteenth-century manuscript of “barphukanar gīt”, the eminent Assamese historian Suryya Kumar Bhuyan was particularly intrigued by a number of geographical allusions in the text. Bhuyan published a series of questions in a local periodical asking help and clarifications from the readers.

I suppose Dhaka is being referred to as the Mogul Country. But which countries are being called Ghorāmūrī and Ethengiyā? In Mr. Scott O’Conner’s book on Burma called Silken

---


31 Ibid, vol. 1 (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1922), 265-8
East, there is a description of the Chindwin river, a tributary of the Irrawaddy. By this river, there is a country called Ayaung Thamya. Is it the same as the Ethengia country? Evidently, Bhuyan had already decided against translating “Ghorāmurā and Ethengiya” as “horse-headed and one-legged”, which some of us might be tempted to try today. The reference to “the Mogul Country” probably added up to his faith in the accuracy of treating every place listed in the text as “a real place.” The proper names of Ghoramurā and Ethengia, for Bhuyan, were not alienable through language. Two years later, confronted with the Ekthengiya country in Gopīcandrer Gān, Dineshchandra Sen and Basantaraj Sen decided otherwise. They made no attempt to spatialize the countries of Ekthengiya, Kānpaṇi, Māśāruṇja, and Tripātaṇ. These were, for them, unreal countries, imaginary places. Meχpāṇi, on which the information was not absolutely incredible, they connected with the Meχ-dominated regions in Koch Bihār. But the really interesting maneuver happened around the vernacular geographies of Strī Rājya and Kadāli. These were poised, so to speak, between the realm of the plausible and the domain of the absurd.

Nalini Kanta Bhattashali in his 1915 introduction to Mīnāttan had glossed Kadāli as “the land of women’s liberty”, which he thought could be located broadly in Assam, Manipur or Burma. In 1917, Abdul Karim had declared in his introduction to Gorakṣa-Vījay: “while it is true that the places mentioned in the relevant manuscripts have still not been all determined, but none of these places appear as imaginary.” His contention was that Kadāli, Strī Rājya and Kāmarūpa were one and the same place. He referred to the “popular proverbs” about the magical and enchanting powers ("māhini tīḍaṭ") of Kāmarūpa and to the striking public visibility of the women in Koch Bihār and Assam which he read as a token of “women’s liberty.” Karim further conjectured that

In those days men must have been numerically less in that country. Why else would the women assume so much predominance? ... Even now the common people believe that the men who enter Kāmarūpa are turned into sheep. Probably Mīnanāṭh suffered the same fate.

It appears that this proverb became well-known only after his fall.33

Dineshchandra Sen and Basantaraj Sen went by Abdul Karim’s identification. Kadāli and Strī Rājya were “Kāmarūpa and the adjacent territory.”34 The description of these geographies in the manuscript was as follows:

32 Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, “mānar dinar kathā”, arghā, 1: 3 (c. 1922), 33
33 Karim (ed.), Gorakṣa-Vījay, xxvi, xxxi-xxxii
34 Sen and Ray (eds.), gopīcandrer gān, vol. 2, 101
Chapter Nine

The norms of that country is strange
There is no trace of man, there are only women
King is woman, subjects are women, minister is woman too
Woman becomes the king and takes care of the kingdom

According to the Song, for sexual intercourse the women go to the city of Kāmarūpa, “where men stay.” The women who give birth to male children are beheaded along with their babies. “There is no respite for men in the law of women/ and therefore there is not a single male in the country.”35 Was the country on the side of the irredeemably incredible? — Like the countries of the one-legged and of the Mosquito King? Or, with a little explanatory pull, could it be brought back on the side of the plausible and the mappable? Our Indologists, as we have already seen, went for the second option. Kāmarūpa, as we have argued previously, was becoming a frozen archive of pre-British traditions for the belated entrants into the British Indian state space.

It is in the context of the arresting interplay, we suggest, between the literalist fixing of Kāmarūpa as one irreproducible historical space and the unmanageable mobility of Kadali, Kānū, Kaurū, Kāmru, and the similar vernacular versions of Kāmarūpa in the scattered registers of unsanctioned imaginations that the status of Assam as a land of magic and witchcraft came to be discussed in the new cultural histories. These acts of translation were expected to transfer one condition of reading — let us say, a temporary suspension of disbelief in fictive narratives — to another — a permanent abolition of disbelief in nonfictive histories. The idea of multiple localizations could not be entertained in these transferential operations. The truth of tradition could only be expressed through the truth of unequivocal location. Such literalist readings, such assumptions of direct correspondence between the name and the place, logically had an unshakeable “faith in the power of etymological thought to recuperate an original order of the world.”36 It will not be irrelevant to situate this etymological thought in the context of early British discourses on Assam.

While traveling in the last decade of the eighteenth century through Ava, Assam and Arakan, Francis Buchanan prepared the manuscript of his General View of the History and Manners of Kamrup consulting a locally produced Sanskrit text Yogini Tantra. Trying to understand the

36 Bloch, Etymologies and Genealogies, 146
categories that this Sanskrit text offered, Buchanan suggested a connection between the discourses of toponymy and ethics:

Kamrup is said to have been then divided into four *Pithas* or portions which may naturally be expected to have appellation suitable to its name and tutelary deity. They are accordingly called *Kam*, *Ratna*, *Mori* and *Yora* alluding to desire, beauty, and some circumstances not unconnected with these qualities, which our customs do not admit to be mentioned with the plainness that is allowed in the sacred languages of the east. In fact the country by the natives is considered as the principal seat of amorous delight, and a great indulgence is considered allowable.37

The discovery of the officials that the very name Kāmarūpa could be translated as “form of desire” excited much colonial fancy. An article in the 1853 *Calcutta Review* in fact chose to translate it as the “Land of Lust.”38 In 1841, Robinson rendered it as “the region of desire.”39 In the earlier and more influential *Topography of Assam*, McCosh conjectured, “Kamroop, as its name implied, was in ancient times a sort of Idalian Grove – a privileged region for mirth and dance and revelry and all manner of licentiousness.”40 The magic of translation which promised to render a territory interpretable within the language of masters’ morality refused to perform the translation of magic:

The Assamese are by the inhabitants of most provinces looked upon as enchanters; and hence the universal dread they have at exposing themselves to be spellbound in the vale of the Brahmaputra. The women come in for a large share of suspicion; indeed they are believed to be all enchantresses, and the influences of their physical beauty is very unfairly attributed to their skill in the magic art.

Evidently, McCosh was skeptical about the magical power of the Assamese women. He acknowledged that the Assamese women were indeed beautiful – they “have a form and features closely approaching the European.” However, this beauty was not related to their abracadabra, but to their morals:

Unfortunately their morality is at a very low ebb. … It is a very common thing for them to break the bond of celibacy; nor is the giving birth to a child or two considered any disgrace

38 “Assam since the Expulsion of the Burmese”, *Calcutta Review*, vol. XIX (1853) 436
39 Robinson, *Descriptive Account of Assam*, 147
40 McCosh, *Topography of Assam*, 84. Robinson repeats this paragraph in his book, *Descriptive Account*, 258
to them, or any impediment to their marriage. The Assamese women are not remarkable for their fecundity; indeed they are rather the reverse.\footnote{M'Cosh, \textit{Topography of Assam}, 23. Emphasis added.}

The nineteenth-century archive abounds in such descriptions and judgments. Locked in a closed economy of etymology and anthropology, where one set of data could only refer back to the other, the new discursive regime fastened the forces of magic and immorality in the figure of the Assamese woman. This understanding continued to vibrate in and through the metropolitan retellings of the stories.

\textit{Market of the Mysterious}

One can hardly miss the oppressive persistence of the particular story-form in the colonial epicenter of Calcutta since the late nineteenth century where the event of magical metamorphosis by the Kāmākhyā women was unfailingly invested with an unmistakable evilness, where the sheep-maker was neither a saint nor a liberator, but wickedness incarnate, a pure mixture of immorality, criminality and oppression. And it was on these grounds that the credibility of these stories now came to be negotiated in the educated vernacular world of Calcutta.

Judhishthir asked me, "What have we come to do in Kamrup? This is the country of the witches. All the women here are witches – that's what we hear in our country, but I haven't seen a single witch here. Then where do the witches stay? If males from other countries come to Kamikhye, they become sheep; where are those sheep? There's no trace of men in the sheep ranging on the ground; then where do those men-sheep graze?"

Belief, disbelief: these two are matters of opinion. I do not believe, many people believe: how can this problem be resolved? The women of Kamrup induce alien males into enthrallment; the enchanted men do not go back to their own country, they cannot go back: this proposition seems rather plausible. The \textit{pandit}s say that the situation now is not what it used to be. They also say, even now those male outlanders, who are greatly driven by sexual passion, end up being captivated by the good-looking women of Kamrup. I have been mulling over these things. Suddenly I remembered a Sanskrit couplet which I heard from a court clerk in Kashi. I cannot say whether this couplet is ancient or modern, a work of a
truth-seeking poet or an ill-meaning fabrication of a fun-loving mudslinger. But many people do enjoy this couplet. It is:

‘Neither married, nor widow, nor loyal to husband

The women residing in Kamrupa relish duck and pigeon’

Relying on this couplet I answered to Judhishthir, “There can be many stories. One can see magic with one’s own eyes and be amazed. But nothing [in magic] is true. It can be true that the women of Kamrup know the art of magic. It can also be true that with the help of the illusion of magic the passion-driven males can be kept mesmerized. But it can never be true that a two-legged man would become a four-legged sheep. I have heard from some people that adultery is quite strongly prevalent in Kamrup. Here loyal wives are very few in numbers. The married women as well as the widows indulge in adultery. Most probably it is true that these licentious women try to trap the good-looking men among the pilgrims. It is impossible that there are real witches or real sheep. Men become animals, birds and trees, or animals talk like human beings: I have no faith in these miraculous things.”

Coming from the 1903 edition of Haridiser Guptakathā, this rationalization of the “impossible” plebian beliefs adequately reflects the broad contours of the moral cosmos of the middle class men in colonial Calcutta. The explanation of the strange tales of Kāmakhya women in terms of moral depravity and licentiousness was something we did not find in the vernacular traditions. The stories, it is interesting to note, were not completely set aside as baseless and spurious; on the contrary, rationales for their circulation and persistence – defensible in the logics of the historicist culture – were formulated. This helped their selective appropriation and abrupt reconfiguration in the new metropolitan space of cultural productions. The major characteristic of this reconfiguration seems to have been the increasing allegorization of the stories from the early twentieth century. Haridas explains to Judhishthir here that what can continue to exist in the landscape of the modern are not the “real sheep” but only the coded allusions to naughty seduction. This was the precise irony of the situation: the more the literalist reading in history foreclosed the non-historical-

---

42 Bhuvanchandra Mukhopadhyay, ār ek nūtan! haridāser guptakathā (nūtan likhita: ādhunik banger samāj-chitra) (Calcutta: Basu & Co., c. 1903), 185

43 In the following pages we use the word “allegorization” to broadly indicate an active expansion of the metaphorical field. “Thus generalized, allegory rapidly acquires the status of trope of tropes, representative of the figurality of all language, the distance between signifier and signified, and, corollatively, the response to allegory becomes representative of critical activity per se.” Joel Fineman, “The Structure of Allegorical Desire”, October, vol. 12 (1989), 49. As Umberto Eco recognizes, “the boundaries between metaphor, allegory and symbol can be very imprecise.” Umberto Eco, “The Scandal of Metaphor: Metaphorology and Semiotics”, Poetics Today, 4: 2 (1983), 252

Kāmakhya’s Sheep 445
geographical possibilities of Kāmarūpa-Kāmākhyā, the less trust could be put on the literalities of the stories current about that geography.

In order to illustrate the issue further, we propose to proceed through two excerpts. The first comes from Manorami by Pachkari De, constitutes the second volume of the first detective trilogy in Bengali. It was first published in 1896, but the only edition we could avail of is that of 1902.44 To follow the lead of the story, Phulsaheb, the original villain, is guilty of “innumerable murders”, robberies, frauds, and conversion to Islam. An “immoral”, sexually attractive woman called Jumelia accompanies him in all his crimes. Although the detective, Debendra Bijoy Ghosh, manages to put Phulsaheb behind the bars, Jumelia takes charge of the underworld empire. However, after many evasions she is also captured. The detective firmly resists her attempts to “seduce” him and the conversation follows:

Debendra: Do you want to say anything before death?
Jumelia: Yes. I am married to Phulsaheb. Phulsaheb is a Muslim. Therefore I am a Muslim too. I would prefer to be buried.
Debendra: That’s all right. Jumelia, what is your birth-place?
Jumelia: Kamrup. There is one Kacim country in the north-east of Kamrup. I was born there. We are Mishmis by race (jatt). Beauty of the Mishmi women is unparalleled in the whole world.
Debendra: Yes, I know. I have heard about that. Jumelia, how old are you?
Jumelia: As old as you are.
Debendra: I am thirty-six.
Jumelia: So am I.
Debendra: Thirty-six! How can it be so?
Debendra: This is unbelievable! You look, at most, twenty. You are still in the full bloom of your youth.
Jumelia: Debendra, women from our country don’t sag at the age of twenty, as the women from your country do. Our women know how to preserve their youth forever. … If you get to see me even after ten years, you’ll find me the same: this callow face like a

44 The extract here is from this edition and we are not sure if this particular section had appeared in the earlier editions as well Why we are stressing this fact is because this used to happen quite frequently in the late-nineteenth century popular literary circuit of Calcutta where the authors/publishers quickly responded to the changing mood or shifting concern of the readership by adding or deleting substantial portions in subsequent editions. haridāser guptakathā, which contains a very extensive narrative treatment of the Kāmākhyā sheep story (a whole chapter) in its 1903 version, does not even mention the place in its first edition of 1872.
green palm-fruit, this pleasant sweet voice, this playful stare in my eyes, the
seductive smile on these red rosy lips, this golden color of skin, everything will
remain the same. There won't be a little difference. We know [magic] medicines.

Debendra: How do you get them?
Jumelia: I knew them. Phulsheb also taught me a few.
Debendra: Why have you come here [in Calcutta]?
Jumelia: ... For love.

[Then Jumelia narrates how Phulsheb went to her country to collect “medicines”, and both
of them felt attracted to each other.]

Jumelia: ... Had it been any other male, I would have turned him into a sheep and tied the
sheep to my bed’s leg. But what a smart fellow he was! I couldn’t keep him spell-bound in
my country; instead he tricked me out of that country. This is no joke Debendra. It is not
easy to come back from our hands. You must have heard about this. 45

It is too easy to read this extract as a conversation between a male detective and a female
criminal, between rationality and magic, between metropolis and frontier, framed quite
significantly in a situation of confession before forced death. Let us be a little attentive not
only to the fantasies and fears about an abnormal land of eternal youth, but also to the
curious mishmash of geographies whereby the women of a community pushed beyond the
Inner Line were invested with the traditional magical attributes of Kâmarûpa. 46 Writing in
the shadow of the violent massacres of the Mishmi villages (the major “punitive expeditions”
of 1888 and 1899), De — whose epigrams in Maxmam came from the canonical texts of
Shakespeare, Dodd, Byron and Litton — was creatively fusing the imperial codes of
criminality and eroticity on a new register of Kâmarûpa.

The inflections of new concerns and sensibilities that entered the stories by the middle of the
nineteenth century were related to the contemporary growth of the so-called fake tantras in
the city of Calcutta, accompanied by the expansion of the interdependent market of
aphrodisiacs and amulets. Apart from directives for sex-acts and medicinal preparations,
almost all these texts, which pretended a solemn ancientness, simply contained a limited
collection of chants, magic charms and incantations written in interesting hybrid languages

45 Pachkari De, Manorama (1902 edn.; Reprint Calcutta: Banipith, 1953), 197-200
46 It might be of interest to note here that in 1873 T. T. Cooper, a European traveler in the Mishmi country,
wrote that the Mishmi women, “when young, are pretty.” On the other hand, the Assamese women,
“[t]aken altogether ... are not bad-looking” although “after the marriage they sadly disfigure themselves by
their dyeing their teeth black, which has a very disgusting appearance.” Cooper, Mishmee Hills, 183, 101.
(Sanskrit, Santali, Bengali, Hindi, Assamese, and even English in at least one case) that did not render any ready unified meaning beyond the ritualistic. Majority of these tantras—which often included short fictions and promotional propaganda—claimed that they, and only they, contained the authentic secrets of the women from Kāmākhyā. An early example of this literature forms my second example:

MEANS FOR PROSTITUTES TO CAPTIVATE PARAMOURS

Assam is the Kāmrūp country which is famous as Kāmākhyā. Prevalence of mantras, magical movements, cultivation of the art of enchantment, discussion of magical arts and Goddess Kāmākhyā's abode: these are all in that place. Everybody knows in Bengal that those who go to Kāmākhyā do not return. The women from Kāmākhyā cast their spell over these people and keep them enthralled.

Once upon a time a famous and well-read trader in Gaur [in Bengal] set off for Kāmākhyā with good amount of money to pay offerings to the Goddess. His wife's character was stainless although the two often used to end up in quarrels. The very news that the trader is going to Kāmākhyā was a bolt from the blue for this woman. She could not bear the shock and fell senseless.

The trader went to Kāmākhyā, visited the temple, paid his offerings, and hired a house. Every morning after the bath he would go to visit the temple. This was noticed by an elderly ugly prostitute who first took pains to find out, without allowing herself to be seen, whether the man has enough money or not. After she was assured that he was indeed a rich man, then she clandestinely followed the trader and spotted his house. The trader was young and that elderly woman was ugly, so it was absurd to think that they could be together.

Then on one Monday, taking a bath in the morning and keeping a fast for the whole day, she took a charmed article along with her to bed. (We shall not name this article here. This charmed article is available with us.) On Tuesday she avoided seeing faces of any other male and went straight to the trader's house. She threw that charmed article through the window on the body of the trader who was lying on the bed. As the trader was surprised at this and gave her a startled look, she began to laugh and collected that article to keep it fastened to her cloth. Immediately all feelings of religious devotion vanished. The man began to stay with the prostitute and after some day became penniless but still could not leave Kāmākhyā.47

47 Bhuvanchandra Basak, digvijay vā āścarya candrikā, corrected by Jagannath Shukul, Pundit of Fort William College (Calcutta: Author, 1869), 42-43

Kāmākhyā's Sheep

448
This text, originally written in Hindi, comes from a curious collection compiled in Calcutta in 1869. This particular narrative, partly fictional and partly promotional, is stitched with a story of an Italian chemist who apparently discovered methods to identify false diamond, a history of German lithography, an account of a local holy-man who could easily dip his hand into a bowl full of hot oil, guidelines for chewing glass, and instructions for preparing French burnish. Let us not miss the fact that amidst this enormous demand for the novel and the strange, the Kāmākhyā story was being inscribed in two overlapping registers of economics and ethics. As in the detective story, the suggestion that there is something morally wrong in spellbinding dominates this narrative as well. However, the moral message, which works through the all-too-familiar indissociable binary of the prostitute and the housewife, is enmeshed in a relation of money and commodity. The prostitute’s motive is neither carnal pleasure (“The trader was young and that elderly woman was ugly...”) nor display of supernatural power. It is the trader’s money. And there is no getting away from the promotional parenthesis of the text too: “We shall not name this article here. This charmed article is available with us.” In the emergent horizon of the market, the secret of Kāmākhyā could appear only as a purchasable fact. Things became the repository of the magical power: ‘medicines’ for Jumelia and the unnamed article for the prostitute.48 Things came to form the grounds of credibility. Things could be bought, sold, and possessed. The polyvalent geographies were united under the sign of univalent money – the ultimate metaphor in the world of the modern. In the early twentieth century, the radical nationalist leader Ambikagiri Raychaudhuri named his circus party after Śankaradeva, beauty lotion after the mythicized Ahom heroine Jayamati and his Chemical Works after the popular figure of the Kamrup Enchantress (Kamrup Maγabini).49

The reader might remember that other locations of the Kāmākhyā pīṭha were known to different audiences. But, as we have been arguing for some time now, multiplicity or polyvalence of locations was posited in the historicist culture as an object of rectification. Kāmākhyā was not in the Punjab or in Benares. Nor was it, as Gorakeshātādeam or Gopīcandra Gām categorically mentioned, in the human body. It was a place on the map of Assam. When

48 One can be referred to the short story “miśmider kabach” published by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay in 1942. Here, Janakinath Barua, a merchant, became possessed by an amulet which he had stolen from a Mishmi temple. The uncanny power of the amulet to excite the warring, bloodthirsty, and mean qualities in an otherwise normal human being is the main focus of the story. Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, “miśmider kabach”, in bibhūti racanāhali, vol. 4 (Calcutta: Mitra Ghosh, 1996), 511-548

49 Nanda Talukdar, cira cenehi mor bhāṣā jananī (Guwahati: Barua Agency, 1976), 56
Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, a sheristadar in the Gauhati Collectorate in the early nineteenth century, published his *Asām Buranji* from Calcutta in 1829 (which is regarded as the first modern vernacular history of Assam), he justified his novel project saying, “Many are vaguely aware that there is a country called Assam Kāmarūpa etc. But leave alone proper information or news, the people from other countries hardly know how that country is or even where it is located.”

Throughout the book Dhekiyal Phukan referred to this sorry state of knowledge about Assam and in fact promised to come up with a Sanskrit *Kāmākhya Yātra Paddhati* (‘Ways to Go to Kāmākhya’) shortly, so that disputes and ignorance about the location of Kāmākhya could be resolved:

Kāmākhya of Kāmarūpa is famous in all countries. But nobody actually possesses the proper knowledge about it. Everywhere there are numerous stories about making the trees walk and turning the males into sheep, casting magic charms etc. That is why persons willing to visit Kāmākhya shy away.

Dhekiyal Phukan summarily dismissed the stories as “mere legends”, and eagerly implored the prospective jobseekers and pilgrims to pay a visit to the latest British Indian acquisition on the eastern frontier.

Even if banished from the new world of professional history, the unauthorized geographies of Kāmarūpa did not disappear into obscurity and silence. They crept back into the modern vernacular fictions in apologetic scare quotes. Nor were the stories about the magical land of Kāmarūpa things of the past, as another early Assamese historian, Goonabhiram Borooah, chose to write in his *Asām Buranji* in 1884. Borooah, somewhat like Dhekiyal Phukan before him, considered the origin of such “sayings” as an upshot of the poor communications between the Aryans and the non-Aryans. In 1885, an article in *Asām Bandhu*, a monthly journal in Assamese, echoed the same idea: “the reason why in Bengal the proverb of

---

50 Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, *āsām buranji*, ed. Jatindramohan Bhattacharya (1829; Guwahati: Mokshada Pustakalaya, 1962), Anushānpatra or prefatory page
51 Which apparently he did in 1830. But though published only within a year’s gap, the two volumes have received distinctly different treatment from posterity. While the Bengali volume is still paraded as an unmistakable token of the modern genius of Assam, the Sanskrit book is long out of circulation and is considered quite an unremarkable piece of work today, despite evidences that the book was fairly well received in the contemporary Calcutta gentry circuit, the targeted addressee of the author. We have been unable to locate this work.
52 Dhekiyal Phukan, *āsām buranji*, 79
53 Dhekiyal Phukan, *āsām buranji*, 84. It is interesting to note that Dhekiyal Phukan also rejected the Ahom kings’ claim for divine origin as “extremely unbelievable”, 24.
54 Gunaviram Barua, *āsām buranji* (1884; Reprint. Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 2001), 8
Kāmarūpa being a land of lion-riding witches is popular is lack of communications.” In 1887, an article in Mau similarly argued, “Till now, the belief was current in Bengal that the Bengalis turn into goats and sheep when they come to Assam. The belief might be true or false, but it is ingrained in the mind of the Bengalis that Assam is an out-of-the-way place.”

This was an agreeable explanation for the unhappy historicist consciousness. By 1899 two routes were opened for the pilgrims to the Guwahati Kāmākhya temple from Calcutta: one was from Sealdah to Goalundo by rail and from Goalundo to Guwahati by steamer; the other from Sealdah to Jatrapur by rail and from Jatrapur to Guwahati by steamer. Very shortly Dhubri was also connected to Guwahati by rail, and from the number of the vernacular travelogues published in the early twentieth century, it becomes clear that a large number of travelers were now able to visit Guwahati. Almost all these travelogues referred to the current “proverbs” to dismiss them. A pilgrim from Rajshahi, Anukulchandra Bhattacharya, opened his journal saying:

Hardly anybody from our country goes to visit Kāmākhya. As a result, no true account thereof is available in any book or oral report. Even when the common people come across the very few travelers who had indeed visited the place, they feel quite discouraged after hearing some baseless and exaggerated descriptions instead of any authentic information. Particularly, [the stories are] that the men lose their potency in Kāmākhya at the roars of the lions, that the women are very beautiful there and the men are few and ugly, therefore the Kāmākhya women cast their magic charms on the male visitors, turn them into sheep and do not allow them to return to their own country. Most people suffer from this illusion and do not dare to visit the residence of the Mother [Kāmākhya].

Similarly, Mahimchandra Gupta categorically denied the truth of the four kinds of stories in circulation (that men do not return home from there, that women keep them enthralled by magical means, that lions speak like men thanks to the “power of mantra”, and that men can assume forms of animals or birds “at will”). Mrs. Nalini Dasi assured her readers that rail visit to Kāmākhya with family was safe and rewarding. The author of the popular travelogue Giri-kahini Priyakumar Chattopadhyay made fun of his friends who had feared that before reaching Shillong the author would be turned into a sheep. Such incredible

55 A. B., ‘śāmīr mānuha’, āsām bandhu, 1: 4 (1885), 131
56 “ucca śikkhā”, Mau, No. 2 (January 1887), 54
58 Anukulchandra Bhattacharya, kāmākhya bhraman (Calcutta: Author, c. 1899), 1
59 Gupta, kāmākhya, 54
60 Nalini Dasi, kāmākhya-yātra (Calcutta: Ashokshri Ghosh, c. 1924)
stories as “lions roaring in the daylight and a foreign man being turned into sheep as soon as he keeps his foot in Kamrup”, said Chattopadhyay, came from the “ignorance of geographical knowledge”\textsuperscript{61}

But as the multiple retellings in the colonial epicenter continued to indicate, the relation between the state of communications and the growth of the stories could not be mechanical and simple. The stories were not residues of medieval insularity which could be progressively dispelled with the growth of travel, commerce and interaction. Rather as active elements within the world of imperial modernity, they continued to travel and proliferate along the axis of modern communications – if no more with the udāśī sādhus and the Khatri traders, then probably with the migrating tea garden workers, agricultural hands, jobseekers, and lower division clerks. After all, it was common for the tea garden \textit{ārkāthīs} to feign as religious recruiters (\textit{pāndas}) of the Kāmākhyā temple in the distant villages of Bengal and send off the villagers as coolies before the latter could realize that they had been duped into a different kind of pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{62} Improvement of communications did not herald the end of lies. People continued to be lost to the incredible cause of tea production.

\textit{The Abstract and the Absurd}

In an untranslatably playful prose, Panchkari Ghosh wrote about the sheep stories after he described the various “types of beauties” one could see in Assam: the Assamese women, he remarked, were all beautiful but in very different ways. Their locations, dresses, and sentiments were varied, but there was some commonality too:

The beauties are very hospitable, generous and caring. Moreover they are free. They do not bother much about the male injunctions. Nor are they entirely behind veils. To act as a good host, they do not even desist from massaging the feet of an unknown male guest. Previously a number of Bengali youths came to Assam to stay as “sheep” to avail of such hospitality and care. Then the road to Assam was difficult, and the people did not feel like traveling all the way back; owing to the difficulties of communication no one dared to come with his family. Moreover, the unadulterated affection of the ‘Assamese beauty’ [apostrophes signify a deliberate pun on the word \textit{asamī} to simultaneously mean unequalled beauty and Assamese

\textsuperscript{61} Priyakumar Chattopadhyay, \textit{giri-ka\-hīnī} (Shillong: Author, c. 1911), 74 n.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{kulika\-hīnī} (\textit{Sketches from Cooly Life}) (Calcutta: G. C. Home, 1888), 8

Kāmākhyā’s Sheep 452
beauty), the extraordinary care-giving! Which heartless man would not be a “sheep” in such a situation? Now there is no such fear anymore. Road is easy, and care is less. Now the Bengal beauties can send their husbands to this foreign country without fear.

Written in a witty and humorous Bengali, much of which we might find politically offensive today, this excerpt provides yet another explanation in terms of distance and communication difficulties, while consciously insinuating about the “objectionable moral character” of the Assamese women. Ghosh also quoted “a Manipuri proverb” (as well as the same Sanskrit couplet which we found Haridas reciting to Judishthir) to conclude that “we politely submit that some must be true of all that is in circulation.” Like Haridas, Ghosh also considers sheep is a metaphor for the trapped male stranger. But that was not true for everybody.

There was a legend in Calcutta that men turn into sheep if they go to Assam. The lawyers studying with me in the [Calcutta] Law College asked me about it. I joked, “Yes, the Assamese know magic. If some charmed water on kadu leaves is sprinkled on somebody, he becomes a sheep and begins eating grass.” A friend of mine became very scared after hearing it and he would not come near me anymore. He would greet me only from a distance and beseech “Brother, don’t make me a sheep.” We Assamese boys really had a lot of fun over this incident. 64

Inversely, this little snippet from Krishnanath Sharma’s autobiography, describing a scene of 1915-16 Calcutta, confirms the power of allegorization. To be able to read an expression as a metaphor is to muster that sense of distance without which a joke ceases to function as a joke. Without metaphor we hardly have any other means to assuage the horror of metamorphosis. Metropolitan understandings do not set aside the incredible stories, “the subaltern pasts” and the plebian presents — but treat them, as is said of a commodity, “like a character on stage, as something representing something further.” 65 Transactions between the ideology of value and the culture of allegorization are not exactly our focus here. But it is a helpful parallel, particularly because we argue that the literalization of Kāmarūpa-Kāmākhya and the allegorization of the stories connected with them are not matters of purely stylistic and linguistic conventions. The twin strategies contribute to the larger, almost disciplinary, project of enframing.

64 Shanna, krisna sarma diary, 59
We deliberately invoke the Heideggerian jargon to suggest a parallel between the rendering of nature as “standing-reserve” and the translation of the supernatural as allegorical. The very splitting of the popular imagination into a surface of representations and a depth of hidden truths enables such translations to safely pass through “the trial of the untranslatable.” With the codebook of the allegories, it becomes possible to traverse the distance set up between the superficial and the deep, between the said and the meant, between the represented and the real. The historicist truth machine must make the most of the imaginings beyond the boundary of formal reason, just as capital requires to utilize all the caoutchouc outside the Inner Line. The new historicist culture took it upon itself to determine what was to be understood as happening on the register of the literal and what was not. This differentiation was not only integral to that culture of verification; it was also a condition of its possibility.

The relationship between the historicist-literalist translations of vernacular geographies and the allegorization of the stories is best represented in the works of Rajmohan Nath dealing with Kadali, published in Assamese, Bengali and English intermittently between 1941 and 1964. Dissatisfied with both Bhattasali’s indistinct identification with “the land of women’s liberty – Kamrup, Manipur, Burma” and Shahidullah’s identification of Kadali with Cachar, based on pure etymological push, Nath’s 1941 Bengali book argued that Kandali of Nagaon was the true Kadali, the simplest proof coming from the fact that the area is still full of banana (kadali) trees. Thoroughly skeptical about the lore of magical strangeness of Kāmarūpa (“Even in the modern times many believe that men are turned into sheep here!”), Nath tried to explain the Gorakhnath curse (which changed the kadali women into bats) in a matter-of-fact manner:

Three miles northeast to the Kandali tea-estate there is a cave in the hill called Badulikurung. .... Within this cave stay millions of bats. ... The local inhabitants honor the cave as a divine place and believe that those bats are Kamaladevi’s [local deity] protected consorts. .... The

68 Rajmohan Nath, kadali rājya (Gauhati: Trio Store, 1941), 23
Miracles or marvels, in other words, were inadmissible for this serious amateur (an engineer by profession). In order to prove that the Oddiyāna Pitha was within Assam (which was seriously contested by Kanak Lal Baruah), he diligently gathered the scattered references of magical arts in Kāmarūpa from the tantras, but never tried to cross the literalist border he drew around his own work. However, perhaps owing to his increasing entanglement with the Nath community movement, in a later note on Kadali, our literalist historian deliberately switched to fashion an allegorized version of his earlier literal rendition:

Although the country—kadali vana [banana garden], kadali ksetra [banana site] or kadali rājya [banana kingdom]—was named after banana trees, metaphysical theories lie in its foundation: “tvaksāraḥ kadali-kāntāḥ tvaci vyādānadyutim.” Banana tree consists only of covers [vākāla], one cover after another, and finally there is the essence [vaiṣṇava]: fruits and flowers grow out of that essence. This world is like that: enveloped only by covers. But there is Munjanāth [the Lord of Essence] in the deepest cell. The human body is like that too: cells of anna, pṛāṇa, manāḥ, vijnāna.

And hence, “Everything is the play of the woman principle [paśkriti], the men [paṃsa] are spellbound.” The spell could now be explained in terms of the cosmic principles; the image of the trapped male stranger could now be crossmapped onto the idea of the inert paṃsa. The mode of allegory redrew the boundaries of credibility beyond which “the historical sense” registered trespass. It was the mode of allegory, again, which enabled the continual reproduction of the story in widely separated contexts, pursuing completely different agendas and adding invisibly but surely to the “common sense.” We shall not dwell on the well-known and extensive literary deployments of these stories in Abanindranath Thakur’s Buro Arja or Rajshekhar Basu’s Kamrupin, but rather table two relatively under-discussed examples.

In 1911, a little-known theosophist Surendramohan Bhattacharya published an account of mesmerism and theosophy in Bengali. Largely given to explain the esoteric details of the

---

69 Nath, kadali rājya, 36-38
71 Nath, kadali rājya, 23-24
hypnotism, the book also contained a long historical introduction which opened with these lines:

In ancient time nymph-like beautiful women used to reside on the top of the hills or inside deep forests in the Kāmarūpa-Kāmākhya region in our country. They possessed miraculous powers after obtaining siddhi in the restraint test. Probably they did not get entangled in marriage – maybe because marriage would have been a hindrance to their mantras, tantras, and modes of worship. This community used to call its own members dākinīs. The dākinīs and yājinīs are companions of the Goddess Kāmākhya. Most probably these beautiful women were originally born in Kāmākhya and its adjacent areas, and then joined this community to learn those arts. Many strange stories are current about these women. They did not marry, but they were no celibates. When the passion of youth made them yearn for the sweet moment ["maihunuhmta"], then they used to wait for the whole night with their soft, flower-like bodies for a man to arrive. If any man who had lost his way or who was on a pilgrimage happened to face them, then they used to attract the man as a flame attracts the insects and kept him enthralled forever. Thanks to the mesmeric art of the dākinīs, the hypnotized man forgot his country, his family, his wife and children, and became almost like a sheep. And until favored by another dākinī, he was there – lying prostrate at the dākinī's feet. Perhaps many could not receive the favor of another dākinī in the whole life; so, the sheep could not be unfettered.

Now, what is the use of propagating the darkness of superstitious tales of yesteryears in this well-lit age of western knowledge? Many so-called educated Bengali youth may raise this question. Before stating the justification that we have, we wish to give you another piece of information. .... Recently everywhere in Europe a little hint of the art of those ignorant women hiding in the hilltop has created a great sensation.73

This vernacular history of hypnotism, shot through an obvious and inescapable orientalism, creatively conceived in the figure of the magical women of Kāmarūpa-Kāmākhya the prehistory of modern European science. Repeatedly referring to the Kāmākhya dākinīs throughout the text, Bhattacharya claimed that dākinīvidyā or "tantric witchcraft" had not been some irrational mumbo-jumbo but a well-learned art – indeed, "science." As any reader of Gyan Prakash will readily recognize, this was a fairly commonplace narrative strategy of the Hindu intellectuals of the time who untiringly “projected science as the true heritage of [their] religion and culture” and never gave up discovering allusions to steam engines and

73 Surendramohan Bhattacharya, dākinīvidyā (Calcutta: Bengal Medical Library, 1911), i-iii
aircrafts in the Vedas. Prakash argues, with much reason and subtlety, that it was “in the disturbing intimacy with myths and metaphysics, that the modern nation loom[ed] out of nowhere in the conditional and uncertain image of archaic Hindu science.” Prakash’s insistence on the interruptive effect of the consequent temporality, however, should not guide us away from the integrative functions of the spatial fantasies that such archaicization came to generate. Rather than acting as “stubborn knots that stand out and break up the otherwise evenly woven surface of the [historicist] fabric,” the recognitions of the incredible enabled the early twentieth-century historicists to invent a depth, a “standing-reserve”, an inexhaustible stock of rationally defensible explanations. It was this fantasy of interiority, this invention of a distance downward, which helped expertise to emerge as a science of the deep. The absurd was not an inaccessible outside to a reason that took pride in its abstractive power. The absurd became a stock, a supply store, an incitement to further intensifications of disciplines: Foucault’s infamous “counterstroke.”

The pun that enlivens the word discipline allows us to end this chapter with an excerpt, without comment, from a famous nationalist speech. This was the welcome address of Tarunram Phukan, Gandhi’s lieutenant in the province, to the delegates to the 1926 session of the rift-ridden All India Congress Committee in Guwahati. Remember that it was the first one to be held in Assam, and that Phukan was terribly self-conscious of what he perceived as his historical responsibility at that moment: introducing the old glory of Kamarupa to the representatives of the nation. In a predictably emotional speech, utterly infused with a strong historicist spirit, he went over the details of the historical contribution of Kamarupa to the nation from time immemorial only to swoop down, somewhat abruptly, at the end on our rambling storyline:

The magic land of Kamarupa has an old tradition that people staying over three nights here are converted into sheep, and we all know that the sheep have the peculiarity of following the leader faithfully. Let us hope, therefore, the magic influence of this land shall enable the fighting groups to settle their differences and make the Hindus and Muhammadens united in

---

75 Cf. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 106
love and brotherhood and follow the Congress like innocent lambs tended by the gentle shepherd of Sabarmati.76

76 The full text of Tarunaram Phukan’s speech is available in Kakati (ed), Discovery of Assam. Mahendra Mohan Chaudhuri, “desbhakta tarunrām phukan”, in tarunrām phukan: smritisigrantha (Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 1977), 14 mentions that Phukan’s allusion to the legend “particularly drew attention of the audience and the delegates.”